

Marie de France Dreams of Steampunk

E. L. Ridsen*

In two parts, this project demonstrates the creative energy of remix. First, the author creates a fictional remix of medievalism and steampunk, in which medieval author Marie de France, inspired by a “magical” tapestry, envisions a Victorian future of steam-engine trains and lace-collared romance. Then, the author provides a critical reflection on some theoretical aspects of remix and how they suggest productive ways to think about storytelling. Not an idea isolated to music or any other particular art, remix applies to nearly any artistic endeavor: the artistic process by its nature takes up elements from varied sources of inspiration to create something new, remixing the history of influences with the author’s own history of creative work.

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Ffffsst! The wick of the beeswax candle fussed to life as she touched to it the spill she had lit at the fire in the hearth.

Marie could not sleep. She had got up and padded from her bed across the cold floor to the window that looked out over the keep—she could hear from the other side of Dover Castle the sound of the surf hustling, furling, whirling, and withdrawing again.

She could see the darkness gathering itself like a hood, the stars like a thousand eyes beaming from underneath. She had gone from the window to the mantel of the great stone hearth for the solace of candlelight.

But something else was cuddling up to her thoughts and purring with a hum like a hive of working bees, something loud and insistent enough that even after a deep draught of fresh air and a lingering look at the crescent moon in the clear night sky she could not return to her pillow.

A shadow, dark and metallic, surrounded her, embraced her like a wave, and fled, rumbling, leaving her behind.

She felt as if Bisclavret had called her from sleep and cried, “Marie, bring my clothes, please, for my wife has left me cold and hungry in the woods, and I would not travel among noble folk in nothing but a grey pelt, however fine!”

Not a real sound wringing the sensual ear, but a spirit from the world of dreams, some rough beast waiting to be born . . . Not a wolf, not a vampire, not a Christmas ghost, but another voice had called her firmly, irresistibly out of sleep. It called each time she wafted from twilight toward dreams; it called with the voice of the owl—or the call of the kettle on the fire, or the mad flash of the bolt from the arbalest as it pierces the pillar-posted targe as another’s already pulled quick from the quiver. It was a practical sound, not an artful one, a guildsman’s mechanical sound, not the virtuous marksmanship of a yeoman or a knight or of a lady in playful contest.

She did not recognize the sound—she could have said “*like this*,” but could not have said, “Aye, *oui*, it *is* this.”

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Henry II loved holidays there at the castle only a day's ride from Canterbury, and he had summoned Marie to tell his favorite story, "Lanval," after the afternoon banquet. No matter how many times she had told the lai in his presence, he never shied from requesting it again and clapping thunderously with an enormous smile crossing his face like a burst of sunshine when she had finished. Dover Castle had become his particular favorite, a renovation project, and he had called court there for Christmas to inaugurate its nearly completed refurbishment. Of course such an occasion once again demanded his favorite story, the tale of a fine but poor knight rescued from Gwenevere and Arthur by his beautiful beloved faerie princess.

"The resurrection of a castle to celebrate the birth of the Christ-child," Henry had said with another of those beaming smiles and a booming laugh, shaking his red-brown mane like a proud lion. "And the resurrection of a condemned man though love and the magic of Avalanna!"

Henry enjoyed King Arthur stories. He especially liked stories of troublesome women who found themselves silenced by their own folly or by the wisdom of men. But he also loved stories of men and women who crossed boundaries beautiful or bitter into magical lands beyond place and time and of the adventures they had there.

Marie liked the Arthurian tales, too, but she preferred stories of bright and able women who either had or found a way to gain control of their own situations—and Christian stories of course.

She threw a long cloak around her shoulders over her night dress, but let her hair fall free to her shoulders. Night hours away from the convent and free of the habit felt heavenly.

Marie stood still for a moment holding her candle aloft to find her ways to the stairs. She thought she heard a bell clang: once, twice, three times. Its eager clang rose and fell, rose and fell, rose and fell as it echoed through the banquet hall below. It seemed to her more a dull summons than a shriek of fear in the night.

But, no, she had heard no bell. It may have been a phantom, a nervous memory of the habitual calls to prayer on the canonical hours. It may have been something deep below her waking thoughts warning her to go no farther.

As she reached the head of the stairs, faint smells of roast lamb, of braised beef and root soup and pease porridge with herbs, fresh bread brushed with warmed butter wafted up the cascade of steps—does one smell things in dreams?

Yes, she couldn't have heard that sound: she heard no rustling and rushing of anyone else rising from sleep and dashing toward the call of warning or command. The sound had come, like the feeling and the image, from the realm of sleep.

But the smells were real, as real as the steep staircase where she stood, prepared to step down in as near as she could to silence.

Before she descended, she let her thought take fuller shape.

She had first dreamed of "Equitan," the story that always troubled her so much. Many Religious often asked her for that one: a knight with a beautiful wife falls for a more beautiful damsel; the wife grants him release from the marriage so that he may have the damsel and becomes a nun; when the knight and his new wife grow older and tired, they release each other and, well-taught by the first wife, they too retire from the world to end their days in contemplative prayer far from the passions of this transitory life. Her listeners could seldom just let a story be a story. Marie wondered if they saw the allegory as she did, or if they (monks) simply loved to approve of the husband's decision, or if they (nuns) loved to disapprove of the husband and cling to the first wife, or if they (priests) loved to see the progress from sin and attachment to redemption and hermetic prayer.

But Equitan and his loves had passed away in the gossamer of an early-night dream. Another, a fragment, had taken its place, one from the flood-tide of midnight, when dreams take fuller shape and substance in the present, in sense and the pulse of blood rather than in old stories.

Equitan, character and tale, had given way to physical presence, to the heft, the weave, the smell, to the artful, motive, liveliness of the tapestries, the flowing wall-hangings that sat opposite the great leaping and pounding fire of the cavernous banquet-hall of Dover Castle below her. The tapestries—no, *one* of them—summoned her no less insistently than the confessor, the king, or the death-bell.

Henry's improvements to the castle had included not just repairs and structural additions, but also decoration. He had tapestries brought from Firenze and Madrid, and had commissioned French and Flemish weavers for specific designs, and one he had had made in Winchester by his own English craftsmen, the best he could find among the folk he ruled. One of the English master-weavers he had called a mad genius, equally worthy of praise and pensions as of cell safe from the potential to influence Normans or Saxons alike. His figures, Henry said, seemed to come to life before one's eyes, almost to move and speak.

That one had caught Marie's eye, and it had already invaded and placed its banner in her dreams, increasing her pulse and flushing her skin even in sleep.

She remembered a large dun-colored background with three levels: they swept from left to right, turning at the right edge of the tapestry and rising to the second level, then turning again at the left edge and rising again to a conclusion on the right.

At the bottom left stood the figure of a man driving an ox-cart. Whereas most woven figures, except perhaps for churchmen, kings, and of course Christ, looked much the same, this one seemed to take life as one looked at it. It held to the proportions of a man, and it seemed almost sentient, ready to drive its cart up the road ahead.

Marie felt as though she must, must have another look at that tapestry. It drew her like first light to lauds or consecration to the Eucharist—she could hardly shape such thoughts in the privacy of her own mind.

She took a deep breath, smiled—she admitted that a holiday away from the convent, a few short days with family and old friends in a fine castle, telling stories and laughing—felt good, very good indeed, and holding her candle above and before her began carefully, trembling, to descend the long, stone staircase. Her heart galloped as if it would run on ahead of her. She resolved to pray for forgiveness later.

She saw lying by the fire the body of man stretched out among a mound of rough blankets: Arnolf, the man who tended the fires and kept the castle stocked with wood and kindling. He had drunk his share and more of ale after his evening's duties—Henry always permitted him to listen to the storytelling, since he knew how much the servant loved them—and he slept deeply and innocently, not even snoring. He would not wake until morning unless Marie woke him.

The fire in the great hearth still popped and rumbled, tossing flames high and sharp like cathedral spires. Its light spread alternating sunbursts and shadows across the high, broad hall, turning darkened corners into bright morning and high-backed chairs into contorted phantoms. Tall and slim, Marie cast, as she stepped slowly downward, a shadow that stretched and sharpened like the last fingers of daylight, pushing day into waiting dusk.

As she reached the banquet floor, the leonine fire echoed in a quick burst, yet the sound seemed to Marie more a welcome than a warning: it faded into crackles of laughter.

Hastening, she bumped a stray chair and nearly knocked it over, but she caught it with her free hand and set it upright without thinking—her eyes and her thoughts had already locked on the tapestries opposite the fire.

The first, on her left as she turned to face the wall fully, showed the figure of a Florentine maid embracing the neck of a unicorn amidst a lush wood—a favorite device of the Continental tapestries, she knew, which were just beginning to get interesting. The maiden seemed to her surprisingly expressionless, while the unicorn looked quite content with her caresses—obviously the design of a man without consultation with a woman.

The next, from Madrid, showed a boy and a girl playing with a dog, dancing or leaping through what looked like a vegetable garden. The three looked as happy as they could be, and the word *May* appeared above them to show that they were enjoying the coming of Spring. As lively and colorful as was the field of vision, the weaver had not entirely succeeded with the figures: while the colors rose easily to life, the proportions and expressions looked static, the angles not quite correct, the oblong faces almost ghoulish—no one would have dared to say a word about it to Henry, who was fond of its playfulness.

The third tapestry, Parisian, showed a roadway going toward a town. Along it peasants worked in a field, mended fences, and washed clothes in a stream, but at its end the road moved into a town overflowing with guildsmen who were completing the town's wall and drawing in carts full of building materials.

The fourth tapestry she examined came from Flanders, but it had been made for Norman lords. It had two parts, side by side: scenes from the life of the blessed Christ, speaking the Beatitudes from the mount, turning water into wine, sharing a final supper with his Disciples; Norman soldiers celebrating victory on the battleground of Hastings. The Christian scenes came to life for her, partly because they had shaped so much of her own life; the battle scenes stirred at once a sense of horror and a twinge of pride.

Then, finally, Marie turned to the largest tapestry of all of them, the one that Henry had brought from Winchester. It stood nearest the corner and rose to nearly twice the height of the others, and the fire from the great hearth cast light and shadow over the scene as it unfolded in three rising tiers.

Once she had seen it, this tapestry would not let go of her imagination.

It had brought her from sleep to the flickering light of the banquet room to see for herself its magic.

Its narrative rose in boustrophedon fashion from left to right, and began with a young man beside an ox-cart that had begun laboring its way up a path that curled along a hillside. The man looked directly at the viewer and pointed in the direction the ox-cart was heading. He had a hint of a smile on his clean-shaven face. He wore a shirt and trousers rather than hose and a tunic, and he had a piece of cloth around his neck, perhaps to shield his skin from the sun.

The eye following the direction in which he pointed would see a lively world unfolding scene by scene as he rode rose up the hill. Pursuing quickly one would see, on the first level with the carter, laborers of all sorts, and farmers taking their wares to market, kicking up clouds of dust; on the second level monks and nuns, palmers, traveled, some as if on pilgrimage, some returning home, and craftsmen of all sorts strode ahead to barns and shops with their arms laden with tools and materials and drawings—they faced both eager customers and dubious merchants to hawk their wares; again the narrative turned back, and on the third level, leading at the top to a small castle with a church and a keep, knights and ladies sat on a lawn singing to the accompaniment of musical instruments, a lyre, a shawm, and a small drum, while an open field stood prepared for a

tournament, and tables, spread for a banquet, awaited the hungry participants. Near the very top, ambassadors had come from a far land to dine with the lord and lady of the castle: they looked out from a high window in the keep and waved hello to the newcoming visitors.

She heard a low sound like pleasant laughter.

The young man's hair looked tousled, as though a breeze had blown it.

"Listen," said a voice. "And watch."

The young man's mouth had moved. Marie was sure of it.

His face had turned. He was looking ahead, in the direction of the ox-cart's movement, and again he was laughing, a pleasant, tinkling sound. Marie's eyes followed his glance. The ox's legs struggled to life to pull the cart, and the ox let out a snort. She returned her eyes to the young man, and his whole arm, extended to full length, now pointed to Marie's right, ahead in his narrative. Again she heard a sound of laughter, and she could still see, even in profile, a broad smile on his face. Again she let her eyes move to the right.

From the stillness of tightly woven fibers, the tapestry was coming to life before her eyes, and it made her spine tingle and her skin run cold. A tear came to her eye, one such as a sudden fear will bring, but she could not take her gaze from the scene on the wall, as it creaked and groaned into sense and activity.

How could dead fibers move? And how could they laugh? Was she seeing witchcraft, or just the deceiving shadows of the leaping tongues of fire, or a truer magic, that of the artisan artist whose creation stepped through the plane of creation into time and space beyond?

Did her stories do that, Marie wondered?

But the tapestry images were certainly moving! It jerked her out of thought and out of self-consciousness into its story, into its people.

The ox on the young man's cart grunted, and his feet shuffled back clouds of dust as the cart surged up the road. "Hi!" the man yelled to encourage the beast on its way. The cart wavered for an instant, and then pulled ahead up the road.

The dust rolled on in a wave that for an instant obscured two fence menders. As they came into full view again, one roughly pulled and cut the thorn-bushes, and the second finely shaped their ends to keep the sheep in—and sheep thieves out. They both turned their heads to look at her: one doffed his cap, while the other bowed and smiled.

Next walked three farmers and a fisherman. One of the farmers pulled a cart full of raw barley. Two had axles over their shoulders with large baskets on either side. One had baskets full of onions and turnips, while the other had cabbages and pease. The fisherman had a large covered basket on his shoulder with the tail of fish just sticking out of the top beneath the lid. Sweating with labor, they didn't smile or pause, but nodded politely if formally as they caught Marie's eye. They passed a small stream where poor girls washed and thrashed laundry and hung it on lines draped between wooden poles.

As the road curved up and back to the right, a round-faced and round-bodied man dressed in loose pantaloons and a long, beige tunic sat on a barrel at the corner just off the road, offering ladles full of water from another large barrel to passersby. He held up the ladle to Marie, and she watched some water drip off and splash onto the dust of the road below. The man shook his head wryly and winked at Marie. Image that: he winked! Then he handed the ladle to the fisherman, who had just reached the point where he was sitting at the turn of the road. The fisherman upturned the ladle and took a long drink, then brushed his chin with his sleeve. He heaved a long sigh—he actually sighed aloud—and nodded to waterman and handed him a small coin.

“*Non nobis nomine, Domine*”: ahead on the second level brown-robed monks and black-cloaked nuns chanted together as they walked with their heads bowed. One of the monks, a tall, reedy older man with a wispy grey beard and a toothy smile stopped and looked kindly at Marie and made the sign of the Cross. Without thinking that she was doing so, Marie signed too, in reply, and the monk nodded vigorously and continued on his way. Ahead of them a wheelwright had stopped by the side of the road to mend a wheel for a carter. Three carpenters with their tools in open-topped wooden boxes strode up the hill for their work at the castle, a cooper and a carver were talking shop, and a man in high boots had stopped at a wooden shed to talk with another man who was sitting there mending fishing nets. Two men in long cloaks and tall hats talked closely about the current cost of wines from France and Italy and the difficulty of shipping them safely. A group of five young women, just at the far edge of girlhood, stopped in a small apple orchard to fill their baskets with fruit. They smiled and sang a folk song about a young man who had died for love of a beautiful girl.

Near the corner of the second level stood several outbuildings or barns: among them one housed a blacksmith, one a tanner, one a dyer. Their skin had darkened, stained with their trades, and their hands and forearms were well muscled, sleeves rolled up to their elbows for work. The smith’s harmer fell with an insistent, resounding, rhythmic ring as he pounded thin metal straps to wrap around barrels to hold the wooden slats together. Marie saw a barn for work-horses, but there she saw also a young nobleman dressed in blue, probably a second son, who was talking with one of the ostlers about getting a fresh shoe for his stallion.

Just beyond the turn now stood a number of shops—a butcher, candlers, bakers, brewers, two sewing shops and a haberdasher, a hatter, and a shoemaker—the whole of the array seemed to have shifted forward along the road and up the hill, as if the whole world were changing shape and order. The shops had buyers and sellers arguing, haggling prices, or just stopping in their work to tell jokes and stories. As Marie tried to make out what some of them were saying, they all turned around at once and smiled and waved to her! She found herself waving back unconsciously.

Then something ahead caught her attention, and she saw where men and women were sitting together in a lovely field of flowers and mown grass listening to a minstrel who had just tuned his rebec and begun to sing a love song: clean-shaven, he wore a wide, floppy hat with a tall feather sticking up from it, and beside him sat three village girls who sang or hummed along softly with counterpoints to his tune. When they had finished, the nobles, intent on his song, for the voices were youthful and fine, all called out their appreciation, and some few tossed small coins into sack the minstrel had left open at his feet. The noble ladies called for another song, so he began, though this time he looked directly at Marie as though he was singing for her.

Westren wind, when wilt thou blow,
that the small rain down can rain?
Christ, that my love were in my arms
and I in my bed again. . . .

Marie blushed at the words, and a muted “Oh!” just escaped her lips, and she hurried her glance ahead to where the gates opened to the town, where tournament and banquet fields stretched up toward the castle keep. There knights were checking their gear and helping one another to tighten their armor, and squires were helping them prepare their horses and weapons. But something looked different about them: to her eye they did not look so much like soldiers as like sportsmen, not men trained to kill in pitched combat, but men eager to win in sport and game. And at the far end of the field ladies had gathered to test their skills in archery! She noticed again at the very top of castle the lord and lady looking out the window. They had changed their clothing: the lady wore

lace and frills around the cuffs and neck of her red gown decorated with bright stones, and she wore her hair fanned out broadly, with a wide black hat with a white silk flourish atop it. The lord wore a thick black and white jacket, his pointed beard falling down to his chest, and he had black otter-skin gloves and a wide-brimmed white hat with a very large black feather to top it off. The two of them looked at Marie, seemed to have been looking at her for some time, and they both nodded as if to confirm her thought: sportsmen, and sportswomen, who have not seen battle—they compete for the pleasure of it and to remember the old times.

Marie believed she had heard them say those words: “to remember the old times.”

Then she heard that sound again: that high-pitched mechanical, metallic wail. Hoo—oot, hoot, hoot, hoo—oot, hoot! And she turned her glance from the castle back to the bottom left of the tapestry.

There stood the young man again, looking at her and smiling, but he looked very different this time. His dress had changed: Marie had never seen or imagined such clothing. He wore sturdy black leather boots and black trousers that went all the way down to his feet. Over a white shirt he had a grey wool vest that fit tightly to his torso and came just below his waist. Draped from one pocket of the vest to another lay a silver chain. Around his neck he had a band of dark red cloth that tucked into his vest, and he had a black jacket, open in front, that fell just down to his hips. In one hand he held a tall, black cylindrical device with a short brim, which he then placed on his head, giving it a quick tap downward with his hand—a strange sort of hat indeed, and hardly practical looking for the height it stood above his head.

He smiled broadly at Marie and tugged one end of the silver chain across his middle, drawing a round, silver, metallic object from one of the pockets. He looked intently at one side of it, then looked up with an expression of surprise.

“Time!” he said, and he motioned for Marie to follow him.

The scene ahead had changed. A long, grey walkway led to short building of what looked like smooth stone. Then she heard that strange howl again: a ghostly hooting that slid from one pitch to another, but this time a loud chugging sound followed, and then a high-pitched metallic whine, and a sound of heavy metal grinding and dropping to halt, and then a loud puff. Waves of white smoke billowed to Marie’s left and briefly covered the young man who walked through and motioned to her again to join him near the strangest contraption she had ever seen: a huge, heavy cylindrical compartment leading back to a high window with a man looking out. He had one hand placed on a lever inside the contraption, and with the other hand he waved familiarly to Marie. He tugged down on the lever, and the whistle sung out again, accompanied by another great puff of white smoke that blew away above the compartment.

Unconsciously she draw her hand up to her throat—how familiarly these men treated her! But she couldn’t keep her eyes from following along to the right as the rest of what must have been an enormous infernal war machine tumbled up behind. After the first came several more compartments, rectangular in shape and made apparently of wood and metal, connected serially. These closed compartments had many windows, and inside she could see the silhouettes of men and women seated in rows. The men had mostly round, domish hats and dark suits like the young man at the beginning of the tapestry, and the women had dresses of black or grey or off-white decorated with draped or gathered cloth or lace of various sorts and accented with pins and other jewelry of stones of many bright colors. They did not look up, but seemed to sit in conversations among themselves, though some held before them large sheets something lighter than vellum with pictures and writing, and they perused those objects with critical frowns.

The young man had leaped onto the steps of the second of those carts. With one hand he grasped a bar that allowed him to hang partly out of the cart; with the other he had removed his tall hat and was using it to wave Marie to follow him into the carriage!

From the huge, impossible object came a loud snort, a deep metallic grunt a hiss of steam that nearly enshrouded it in white smoke.

Marie looked above to the upper layers of the tapestry. They stood clothed in a cloud from the great war engine, but from what she could see through the smoke, they too had transformed. She saw rows of buildings, fields, long structures with the sounds of activity coming from them, and lines of people dressed in trousers and half-length coats entering them. The laws had turned into packed masses of cubicle shapes, residences and shops of all sort, most dismal, but some bright and appealing, all encircled in a mist of dun-colored, oily smelling air.

She hesitated just an instant, and once again the young man pulled out the silver circle from his pocket and glanced at it. "Time!" he called to Marie. "Hurry if you want to see!" Forgetting that she had been standing before a tapestry hung from the sturdiest of walls, she stepped as the young man bade her up toward that noisy, frightening carriage.

What an adventure!

He held out his hand, and she reached up and felt the firmness of his flesh. He grasped her palm confidently and drew her up into the carriage.

"All aboard!" he called out loudly behind them as they entered the carriage.

With several more hoots and cloud upon cloud of white smoke, the carriage jolted ahead: Marie grasped an upright bar to steady herself, and the young man held on to her hand to help her brace against the movement.

The magical carriage propelled itself ahead at the pace of a trotting horse, but was gradually increasing its pace. Marie felt dizzy with its movement and the dim world of the carriage, lit only by dull daylight and a smoky haze from several lamps that seemed to burn something slick and oily. She had to stifle a cough.

"Welcome! Come and sit here by these people. Listen! They won't mind. They're glad you've come!" The young man led Marie to a short bench behind several of the other passengers and guided her in to sit down. A few of the others nodded curt greetings, but even they returned to their conversations or the viewing of the manuscripts they had unfolded before them. One man read through two round, glass opticals held to his head by a thin metal band that wrapped around his ears. He read as though he would bore a hole in his manuscript. "Enjoy your travels, Ma'am," the young man said, bowing slightly from the waist. He placed his hat on a rack that ran along the carriage above the passengers, and he passed along the length of the carriage and exited through its back door.

Before Marie could allow a rising glint of fear to overtake her, she found herself caught up in the conversation of two women seated directly in front of her. They sat facing her and spoke in low tones so that no other passengers could hear, but she could follow the words, which they made no effort to conceal from her.

How can I understand them? she wondered. They are not speaking my language. It sounds like the English tongue, but different: sharper, quicker, higher vowels, and hesitating consonants. They wore long, beige dresses with puffed shoulders and with vests pulled tight at the waist and clinging to the bosom, and brown leather gloves and almost conical hats wrapped around with thin, gauzy cloth to hold them on. They had dark brown shoes that tapered to a point at the toes and tall, thin spikes for heels. Before she could complete her thoughts, she was unequivocally listening.

“Mina, what is troubling you? I thought you’d be happy, going to Lucy’s wedding,” said the first lady, touching the wrist of her companion.

“It’s my sister Belle, you know, Effie. I always knew she was headed for trouble in love. She was such a beau’ful baby, and she’s only got more beautiful as she’s grown up. She don’t put on airs, but she has that way of walking with her chin up and firm, as ladylike as anyone. She met Lord”—and here the woman whispered low—“Hampstead when he brought his Intended to the hat shop.”

“Oh, Mina, they say he’s such a handsome man, Lord Hampstead”—Effie also whispered. “Did you get to see him?”

“You’re right, I did,” Mina responded, “and he surely is. Slim and shapely, tall but not too tall, with a sparkle of the devil in those angelic eyes. You can bet I looked up from my work that day.”

The carriage hit a rough spot, rattling and jostling the passengers. Its shook Marie dreadfully, but none of the others seemed the least bit troubled. Away from where she had begun her journey, she looked out the window, and the air had cleared. The carriage, chugging rapidly, seemed to fly past scenes of activity: boys running about and tossing and kicking a ball around a field; a stream with long, low boats pulled along with ropes by equine beasts; sheepfields with long, curving stone fences; farms bejeweling the gently rolling emerald slopes. Then the voices again took hold of her thoughts.

“I don’t think at first he meant anything by it, but he treated Belle kindly and even kissed her hand when she handed over the hat—and it was one fine piece of work, I can tell you. He looked like he did it without thinking, Effie, and then he even blushed—I think he hoped his Intended hadn’t seen him do it, and she hadn’t, as she was talking with Miss Pedigrew about some gloves and kerchiefs that she had about the shop to match.”

“They always start that way, young lords do, Mina, at least the nicer ones. Behavin’ gently, no evil intentions, but that’s not how things always turn out. And not all of them are so nice.”

“Don’t I know it, dear. And what a surprise when he came back a week later, alone: he said he wanted to buy more gloves and kerchiefs and some knick-knacks that Miss Pedigrew keeps about—she’s a smart one and knows how to do business with customers.

“Well, he asked particularly for Belle, said he admired her taste and wanted her for consultation, and so Belle helped him pick out all sorts of things for the Intended, to go with other outfits, and he assured Belle he couldn’t thank her enough for her splendid advice, and might he not just do something for her by way of thanks, but she demurred, saying she was glad to help with gifts for so fine a lady, and she wished they might find every happiness together, and he finally and very reluctantly left the shop, turning for one more glance at Belle as the door closed behind him.

“You can be sure that by then Miss Pedigrew thought Lord Hampstead the finest of gentlemen and dear Belle the finest shopgirl ever. On the lord’s orders she sent arms-full of packages not to the Intended’s home, but to the family villa in Dover, where she would be returning after a month’s stay in France to enjoy the Fall weather there. He had taken particular care to mention that month, and to mention it within Belle’s hearing.

“I daresay that’s not the last time you saw him in the shop,” added Effie knowingly.

“Right again, Effie dear.”

“But things turned out all right, didn’t they, Mina? And what of poor Charley, who was reading law at the Inns of Court? He was always after her, wanting to be her steady beau, weren’t he?”

“That’s as you’ll have to judge for yourself. I think I’ve told you before that Belle is awfully good with gadgets?”

“Gadgets?” Effie asked.

“Inventions, you know: she makes things, things no one’s ever seen or thought of before. She’s been doing it since she was just a lass, out in her father’s tool shed—he’s a good craftsman himself, and Belle seems to have inherited it. Well here’s what happened—I think I have just enough time to tell you the whole thing before the train reaches London.”

Train, Marie thought. Yes, one might call it that. She thought of the engine in the front and the companion seating cars streaming along behind.

Marie had turned her face to the window, not wanting to intrude on her fellow passengers’ conversation but desperate to hear what had happened with Belle. She watched the landscape change from rural to small town to the unimaginable filth and grandeur of London as the story unfolded.

Just as Belle had always been a beautiful girl, so had Charles Wright always loved her. They both came from the rising Middle Class, the energy and bolster that held together the stark and now unsteady social gulf between England’s landed, hereditary elite and its shiftless grossly poor. Belle had confidence, but not born alone of beauty: she had an easy kindness with people, wit to stay clear of dangers, and a willingness to work in a trade that would neither enrich nor demean her. Charles’ family came from the old guild class, but his father had wanted his hard-working son to move beyond the limitations of his caste and upbringing. He had by means of good business relations with influential clients of his carriage making and repair business argued eager young Charles into a law readership in the Temple district of London. Charles was a good-hearted lad with the wit to succeed, but he had always suffered from a defect in confidence. He had gravitated to Belle from early childhood, but had never managed to express his feelings for her beyond tokens of his admiration and friendship. He hoped—and his father hoped, knowing the lad’s heart—that a proper legal career might put him in a professional place and stoke his courage sufficiently that he might finally approach Belle with a declaration of love.

Nearing the end of his studies, and with a position promised him—not in London, but in Canterbury, not so bad a place to start—Charles had nearly arrived at the courage to tell Belle how he felt about her.

Now Belle did not lack sensitivity, and she knew, had known, Charles’ feelings since they were children. She had never spoken of it herself, partly because she didn’t want to shock the poor boy, but also partly because she didn’t feel certain of her own feelings: she had always *liked* Charles, but didn’t know if she could say that she *loved* him. She knew him as an honorable but sometimes precipitous young man and feared he might propose marriage without the two of them carefully considering the preliminaries. She wanted first to talk with him as, she thought, Lord Hampstead must have talked with his Intended—she was sure a man like that must know how to court a girl officially and at a proper pace, with families and friends approving. Such a man would neither submit to a match that family had arranged, nor would he assume the girl would accept his proposal without working up to it in stages.

Lord Hampstead was quite a catch for Miss Pedigrew as a client. Among the most dashing bachelors-soon-to-be-wed among London’s socialites, he had a reputation for good looks, for generosity bordering on excess, and as a sportsman: he had won awards at Oxford for crew, archery, and shooting, having been the top pistol shot in his class.

Sadly, Charles, dressed in his best suit, appeared at Miss Pedigrew’s haberdashery just as Lord Hampstead had come to call on Belle to take her to lunch. *She* assumed that Lord Hampstead must have come *just* to consult her further about additional presents for the Intended, while *he* assumed that by now she must have more than an inkling of his growing affections. The two then stepped out into the street, Belle looking very tall with her hair dressed high on her head and a grey-blue

hat sitting atop like a crown, and Hampstead looked dashing, rich, and very self-assured. Charles assumed that Belle had allowed her affections to fall upon Hampstead, and the thought troubled him deeply. He nearly determined to follow them, then nearly decided out of despair to return to work, and then finally turned on his heels, pulled his wide-brimmed American-style hat down over his eyes, and indeed followed them about half a block behind.

“Where shall we go?” Belle asked.

“The Georgian,” Hampstead replied, “best restaurant in this part of town.”

Lord Hampstead had tried to circle Belle’s arm around his, but she deftly brushed his arm away and plunged ahead walking at a great pace so that he had to make an effort to keep up. She felt glad that she had remained cautious. The Georgian was well known for its food, but also as a place for lovers’ trysts. Belle had tipped Robin, the dustman at Miss Pedigrew’s, to follow her to wherever Lord Hampstead should take her and to bring with him a device she had made in the tool shed. While she found the man charming, and he might well have in mind no more than he had said, she distrusted his impulses just enough to take precautions.

She had taken the smallest Daguerreotype camera she could find, a cast-off from a local photographer, and attached beneath it an expandable device made of strips of metal bolted at angles to a hand-sized crank. One could raise or lower the camera by about three and a half feet, and so hide behind a barrier, raise the camera above it, and take a picture of someone beyond the partition without being seen—as long as one could disguise the flash and sound the camera made with the photograph. Belle smiled, thinking that while The Georgian must seem a safe place to Hampstead and other men of his class, it was also famous as a place for couples to have their pictures taken by photographers to have as keepsakes. She would have a camera there, but not for any purpose Lord Hampstead might have in mind.

At the Georgian Lord Hampstead had reserved with the Maître’d to seat them at a table away from the front windows and toward the back of the dining room in an area partitioned with plants and decorated Shoji screens. Fortunately for Belle, one of the screens was both opaque and sturdy enough to be perfect for Robin: Belle had given him money to tip the waiter, and Robin told him that the couple had asked him to take a photograph to celebrate their engagement, but to do so without disturbing the other diners. Robin stood hidden and quietly cranked up the camera so that it sat just above with a view downward toward the table.

Lord Hampstead ordered for the two of them: caviar and champagne, oysters and chardonnay, and a cutlet on greens accompanied by a Corton Renardes from the Côtes de Beaune.

Charles, following unobtrusively and arriving at The Georgian just after Belle and Hampstead, tipped the Maître d’ and asked if he might not go into the dining room to look for his mother, who he was sure was dining there and might have forgotten her physician’s appointment. He positioned himself between two large ferns and watched as Lord Hampstead plied Belle with rich wines and tried repeatedly to take her hand. Belle repeatedly withdrew her hand and sat straight-backed, blushing, eating enough to be polite and only sipping at her wine glass—she had had very little experience with alcohol. Charles felt sure that he heard Hampstead whispering his love and devotion to Belle, and he felt equally sure that he had heard Belle repeatedly reminding him of his lovely and faithful Intended.

Before he could draw attention to himself, Charles decided on his course of action and left, thanking the Maître d’ on his way out, protesting that his mother must have remembered her appointment and so not have appeared as scheduled for lunch.

Just then, with a brief thump and puff of smoke Robin got a picture of Belle with her hands raised before her deflecting Hampstead’s expression of affection. Robin quickly withdrew the

camera and, with the waiter's help, exited out the back door of The Georgian into an alley and hurried back to the haberdashery.

"What was that?" Hampstead asked

"A photograph," Belle said, "over there. See the couple sitting there—you can just see them through the break in the screens. They have had a photograph done, probably to celebrate a birthday or anniversary. I hear that happens quite commonly at The Georgian."

He believed her. To speak fairly of Lord Hampstead, who was seldom so gullible, he did indeed seem smitten with Belle, and he vigorously professed that he had fallen in love with her, would communicate the same to the previous Intended immediately upon her return to England, and would remain loving and faithful to Belle all his days. He may well have meant all he said, but Belle could hardly trust such a rapid change in his affections. She assured him that, while she admired him and felt honored that he should bestow such manly feelings upon her, she did also hold his Intended in great respect and affections, and that her own affections had but lately settled on another young man. She had accompanied him to lunch only to help Hampstead with the selection of such items as might best please that lovely lady. Lord Hampstead finally sat back in his chair, rubbed his chin, and sighed. He betrayed anger only once: when Belle spooned out the last of the caviar and delicately licked her lips with its savor—the caviar had been very expensive indeed.

After lunch Belle insisted on taking a Hackney cab back to Miss Pedigrew's, for which Lord Hampstead gallantly paid after one more failed attempt to take her hand. She assured him that Miss Pedigrew deeply valued his condescension to do business at her shop and would be glad to help him again any time, and he assured her that he held nothing against Miss Pedigrew or her and would certainly return despite his broken heart.

"Think on your Intended," Belle assured him, "whom I'm certain you truly love, and all will be well with you again. I wish you both the best of happiness!" She did permit him to shake her hand formally, and he said good-bye, she felt from beneath his sleeve an uncharacteristic touch distinctly identifiable as lace. Off she rode with the intention of completing her afternoon's designs and then developing Robin's film in the back room at Miss Pedigrew's.

Meanwhile, Charles had walked hard to the closest train station and had taken an Underground past St. Paul's over to the east end of Whitechapel. In the dark, mildewed, fog-hidden alleys below street level the informed person undaunted by personal danger could find any number of odd shops stocked with curiosities and specialty items. One could find humans, too, or something like them, of all shapes and desires and in all sorts of phantasmagorical dress and speaking any sort of language. At a military pawn shop he purchased a used Webley-Pryse revolver along with only two rounds and slipped them into his jacket pockets. The proprietor made no inquiries about his training or purposes, because Charles paid full price in cash.

Not by nature or practice a violent man, Charles had grown up around men who had military experience and did not mind talking about it. His grandfather had campaigned in China in the First Opium War in 1839, and his father had fought in Crimea in the mid '50s. Charles himself had spent six months in the Transvaal as a medic during the Boer War; there he had learned to shoot but also the consequences of shooting and had resolved to return home to read law instead of studying medicine. He felt that he had one last use for his knowledge of firearms.

The next day just before noon Lord Hampstead appeared again at Miss Pedigrew's. He was carrying a basket of flowers and fruit which he asked one of the clerks to deliver to Belle, and he bought a few scented handkerchiefs and a hatpin in addition to all the items on a list that Belle had prepared for him the day before

Miss Pedigrew beamed.

Belle came out from the workshop in back and shook Lord Hampstead's hand and assured him that his Intended would feel very pleased with the gifts and that she hoped the two of them would find extraordinary happiness together.

Lord Hampstead looked a little deflated, but he remained gracious, thanking Belle and Miss Pedigrew and all the clerks in the showroom.

Belle felt sure that she would not see him again except perhaps as a customer or just in passing, but London was a very large city with very many people, and human events do take odd courses. She had in her bag in the back room a photograph of herself rejecting Lord Hampstead's affections and also a finely sharpened and especially sturdy letter opener, which she now felt sure she wouldn't need, but planned to keep them just in case.

Belle watched through the front window as Lord Hampstead left and turned to wave one final good-bye when she saw a man wearing a formal black suit and a wide-brimmed American-style hat come up to him. Of all persons, it was Charles! She couldn't hear their conversation, but it went like this.

"I beg your pardon: Lord Hampstead?"

"Yes. Have we met? I don't believe I recognize you." The nobleman puffed his just chest out just a bit and met Charles eye to eye.

"No, sir, I don't think there's any reason why you would know me. I greet you cordially but seriously and will take only a moment of your time. My name is Charles Wright, and I read law at the Temple. I know that you have a loving fiancée, though I met her only once when I wrote some papers legal papers for her father as an apprentice to my master. I would not do her such a discourtesy as to speak of her except to say that I regard her as an admirable women. I speak also as a friend of Belle Holmwood: respectfully I tell you that I saw you yesterday professing love to her, and I would not have her or your Intended hurt in any way for the whole world in exchange. Here is my card: I request your presence tomorrow morning, at your convenience, for a duel after the old fashion, and I hope you will accomodate me. I have not had the benefit of any training with the sword, but will otherwise accept the weapon of your choice. I must tell you that as a former military man I have some skill with a revolver, but not unusual ability for a man of my station and experience."

It was quite a long speech for Charles to make and for Lord Hampstead to listen to.

Imagine a commoner speaking so to a knight!

"Are you mad, young man?"

"No, sir, I don't believe so. But I am in deadly earnest."

"Do you know that I am a fine shot with a pistol or a rifle?"

"Yes, sir, I have heard that."

"And you would quarrel with me anyway?"

"Quarrel, sir? No. I intend simply to defend the honor of two exceedingly fine ladies—or I should say women. Miss Hampstead may not be noble by birth, but she is every bit a lady to me, if you'll forgive my saying so."

"I say," Lord Hampstead said, rubbing his chin. "Well, if I must, then I must. You have a pistol, do you?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you want to meet tomorrow morning. Where? You know that dueling has been illegal for two hundred years? You know also that you are not of my class, and so I have no obligation to you and could readily have you arrested."

“Yes, sir, I know. I am relying on your honor. Please feel welcome to choose the place. I have no intention to inconvenience you.”

“But you do intend to shoot me? Ah, I’m beginning to understand now. You must be the young man Miss Holmwood spoke fondly of. You and she have an understanding?”

“No, sir. If you will forgive my bluntness, I have had a great affection for her since we were children, but have always considered her above me.”

“You are reading law now.”

“Yes, sir. My father is a carriage maker, but he wanted me to try to better myself.”

“Nothing wrong with carriage-making as a profession.”

“Nothing at all, sir: I quite agree. He wished me to take up an intellectual profession. I served as a medic in the Boer War, and after stitching up wounds decided that law would be better.”

“Yes, I see what you mean. And will you stitch me up after you shoot me?”

“I doubt that shall be necessary.”

“And who will stitch you up if I shoot you?”

“That, too, must go as it shall.”

“*Que sera, sera?*”

“Exactly, sir.”

“Then I agree to meet you tomorrow morning at seven at the north end of the park beyond Highgate. Does that suit you? Let’s make it pistols, since you seem comfortable with that.”

“Very good. Thank you, sir.” Charles dipped his head in a bow and walked on back to the train station to return to the Temple.

“Extraordinary, and on the Heath of all places,” Lord Hampstead said aloud. So this is man upon whom Belle has bestowed her affection, he thought, and he turned to walk to his club.

When Lord Hampstead had appeared, Robin had got an odd itch in his left ear that had left him feeling something was about to go wrong. He slipped out the back door of the haberdashery and was standing just around the corner of the building listening to the conversation between the two men. Fortunately for him Charles had not raised his head when he had walked by, and Lord Hampstead had gone the other way.

Robin went right to Belle and told her everything he had heard.

When Belle left work, she went right to Charles’ family’s home to look for him. They hadn’t seen him, so she went to his rooms near St. Paul’s accompanied by her younger brother and his friends. He wasn’t there, either. Belle went home to wait for news while she sent the boys all over the city looking for Charles, but they couldn’t find him.

Charles spent the whole night walking. Thinking that might be his last night on earth, he had gone to get his Webley-Pryse and then had thrown himself out into the cool, misty London night. He watched people walking, saw them through windows as they dined, watched them board coaches coming from the theatres. He thought of the private, self-propelled coach, the “auto-mobile” his father claimed he would one day design, a carriage not requiring a horse and much smaller than a train, borne about with its own engine. Then he dived into the train tunnels and absorbed their smoke-and-oil perfume, let the sounds of the train cars rattle his bones to help him shake off the cold. Finally he caught the last train to the north of town and got out and walked through Highgate to—he had forgotten the name, how ironic!—Hampstead Heath. He thought he observed a youth on a bicycle who appeared to be following him at a distance. A fine cycle it was, too: lean and quick to maneuver, with low handlebars to keep the rider in a racing position, unlike any he had seen—but he thought passed from his mind as he considered the duel no more than an hour ahead.

Charles crossed the Heath and reached the north end—not a mile from Keats' home, he thought—and got there as he heard the toll of a half-hour bell: six-thirty, he thought. He should be on time.

By six-forty-five he had placed himself in a spot noticeable to someone who was looking for him but otherwise unobtrusive, under some trees. The few casual passers-by didn't notice him as they scurried or lumbered off to work. In a few minutes he heard a voice.

"You chose the spot I was thinking of," said the voice, and Lord Hampstead appeared out of the morning gloom.

"Thank you for coming, sir," Charles said.

"I have no wish to disappoint you, young man, or myself."

"You have brought no second?" Lord Hampstead asked.

"No, I beg your pardon—I didn't think of it."

"I will be his second," said a youthful voice, as the boy whom Charles had seen following him on the bicycle appeared from behind a tree. "If you will permit me." A slim lad, he was dressed in a long dark coat and a floppy hat.

"Of course. Thank you!"

"I have brought only a trusted servant," Hampstead said. "May I see your weapon?"

Charles handed him the revolver.

"Very nice," Hampstead said. "A Webley-Pryse, no? Here is mine, a Lancaster Pistol." He handed it to Charles. "All right with you?"

"Yes, certainly. I have never done this before, but . . ."

"And you must not do it now! Are you mad? Apologize and go home before it is too late!" the youth had grabbed both his arms from behind and hissed in his ear.

"You're very kind, but I have asked for this appointment myself and so must and will go through with it."

"Why, why are you doing this?" the youth was nearly crying.

"For the honor of two ladies."

"Two? Who is the other one?"

"The other one? Which is the *other* one?" Charles asked, beginning to recognize the voice.

"Come on, then," Lord Hampstead said. "How do you prefer to proceed: back to back and pace off?"

"I hadn't thought of that. I assumed we would do what the Americans do: draw and shoot."

"Americans? Do you have a hip-holster for your revolver?"

"No. Won't a pocket do?"

"Probably not easy to draw from that. What say we hold the pistols down facing the ground, and one of our seconds will count, and on the speaking of the number three, we shall raise our weapons and shoot."

"I won't do it!" screamed the youth. The voice now sounded like that of a woman, and a familiar woman at that.

Hampstead's servant stepped forward. "I will do the count."

"That all right with you?" Hampstead asked Charles. "I don't want you to feel as though I have an advantage. Thank you, Theo."

"Quite fair of you, sir," Charles said. "Shall we begin?"

"No!" called the woman's voice.

"Before we draw more attention," Hampstead said. A few passersby had begun to filter toward them from the streets, hearing voices at such an odd time of the morning. "Not quite seven yet."

“On your man’s count, sir,” Charles said.

Charles steadied his feet: the ground was still wet from the past evening’s rain, though the sky had cleared with the first morning light.

When Theo spoke three, Charles’ second screamed, and both men without raising their arms fired their pistols into the wet ground at their feet.

“You had no intention of shooting me, Mr. Wright?” Hampstead asked.

“No, sir, I never did. For me it was only a point of honor, though I’m a commoner. I don’t think we should treat the women we love as playthings—forgive me for bluntness. I called you out only to show you how much that point matters to me.”

“Not so common, I think, and you have taught me a good lesson about men as well as women. I thank you for it. I hope you feel that honor is satisfied? Good man. But look to it: I think your second has fainted.”

Charles turned, and the “lad” had indeed fallen to the ground in a faint, his cap beside him. Charles bent over and lifted the head, wet from the turf, from the ground. The morning light was clear enough the he recognized the face of his beloved Belle.

He stroked her cheek lightly.

Hampstead came over and offered Charles his hip flask. “See if you can get a sip of brandy in her. It can sometimes revive—but I’m sure you learned that in the war. Is that who I think it is?” he asked, looking more closely.

“Yes. Thank you.” Charles took the brandy, wet his fingers with it, and touched them to Belle’s lips. Her eyes opened, and at first they showed joy—the joy turned, as she revived, to anger.

“Charles, you are indeed the stupidest of men! You could have been killed. What did you hope to accomplish here?”

“What I did accomplish, I think,” he said, turning to Lord Hampstead.

“Indeed you have, young man. I hope only that you haven’t by teaching me lost the love of someone far more important to you. Did you really believe, Miss Holmwood, that I would shoot him?”

On that day and for many days Belle could express only anger at Charles, but eventually she came around, realizing his devotion, and at their wedding they received a lovely gift from Lord Hampstead: a silver brandy flask and two small, gold drinking bowls. Soon after their wedding, Belle and Charles heard of Lord Hampstead’s marriage to his Intended; they sent specially designed hats from Miss Pedigrew’s shop for the noble couple.

Shortly after they were married, Belle invested her savings from working at Miss Pedigrew’s in Charles’ father’s plans for a self-propelling carriage.

It did not pay off so well for them, but it paid off very well for their children, who managed thereby to do very well for themselves.

* * *

Marie looked up to see that the train had stopped and that once again large billowing clouds of smoke had enveloped it. The wild hoot was calling out its now familiar refrain.

“All aboard, London to Dover!” called the young man. “Mind the stairs.” Entering the carriage, he came straight for Marie. He carried a sack that he handed her. “From a favorite bakery,” he said. “Scones—my mother’s favorites—and in the cup you’ll find a splendid black tea, which I hope is still at least warm. We’ll make Dover in no time today: fine, clear weather and few stops. Please relax and enjoy the ride.” He smiled and tipped his tall hat.

Marie felt the remarkable warmth of the tea, and she bit into one of the scones: buttery and smooth, honey-sweet and chewy, perfectly matched with the warming tea, with tiny hints of lightness and bitter.

“Vanilla and orange icing,” the young man said, “and dried currants inside. Yes, my mother’s favorites!”

The train made a small jolt and began its trek to Dover with a hoot and a chug as Marie savored her scone. She thought of these lines, which came to her from the metallic turning of the train’s enormous wheels:

Adventures come in tales or dreams,
Likewise true or mad, it seems.
The Bretons turned them both to lais,
Some for pay, some just to please.
They share them by a Christmas fire
Or hide them like a deep desire.
How much will the lady tell,
How much assume some evil spell?

From the rear of the carriage Marie heard a woman gently singing “’Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus.” The song pleased her and began to make her feel sleepy.

One must know amethyst from porphyry, she thought, not knowing what she meant by it.

* * *

“Sister. Sister!”

Marie heard the voice beside her and felt a hand on her elbow. Startled, she looked to see Henry there beside her with a smile of uncertainty on his face and a tall, lit taper in his hand.

“Henry! What are you doing here!”

“I? I live here. And you are my guest. And it’s an hour before dawn, and you were standing here asleep on your feet before my tapestries. Look, your tapir’s gone out. What in the world are *you* doing here?”

“Asleep?” Marie said. “Was I in asleep? Henry, I have had the most extraordinary experience.”

“Of what?”

“Of this tapestry. I was examining it in the firelight, and suddenly it . . . it . . .

“It what?” Henry asked.

Then Marie, waking more fully to her senses, wondered what she was going to tell Henry—or even *how* to tell him what she had seen. And she wondered what she had seen: much of it made no sense to her.

“I don’t think I was sleeping. I saw something. Henry, I must tell you—but no one else—about it.”

“What did you see?”

“Hmmm. It is not so easy to describe. But it was extraordinary.”

“I have heard of such things with poets,” Henry said. “Dreaming of stories. Have you a new Romance to tell, given you by the angel of dreams?”

“Yes! No. Maybe—I’m not sure. I must think it through to determine how to tell it, if I can understand it. Oh, Henry, what a frightening, amazing tapestry!”

“This one? It has inspired you, eh? Well, then, it turns out to be worth the great cost and trouble I spent to get it. Quite the temperamental craftsman, and then once he finished it, he didn’t want

to give it up. I had to lean on him, and I paid him extra. Don't know what he'd have done with it if I hadn't paid and had let him keep it—not a wealthy man, you know. But look at you: your skin's white with cold—how long have you been standing here? You could at least have pulled up a chair to sit down. I have heard of soldiers sleeping on their feet in a pinch, but never of a storytelling nun doing so. You must get more diligent in your prayers perhaps, ha?"

"Yes, perhaps I must—a sad fault in a nun."

"If you ask me, you should never have become one, but I know I'm not supposed to talk about that anymore. What's done is done, and I'm glad you're here, and I want nothing more for you than that you are happy. But go along now: up to bed with you before you freeze. Look, the fire's nearly out. I'll box the ears of the fellow sleeping over there. Huh: he's heard me talking, and look how he jumps to his feet to tend it now. I am going for a hot drink, then out for a walk to wait for sun-up—the sky is clear, and it should be beautiful this morning. No, you're not coming along: I won't have you going back ill, or you won't come back for next Christmas with more stories, and I depend on that. Wouldn't be Christmas without one of Marie's *lais* for all the court to hear. Up you go before someone else sees you padding about the castle in the dark. We'll talk later, and you shall tell me a new story."

Henry gave a little shove on Marie's elbow to push her toward the stairway. He grunted a laugh and strode toward the pantry, pulling his cloak up around his neck.

"Chilly indeed this morning. Go on: back to bed!"

Marie shivered, noticed that her candle had in fact gone out—she wondered how long ago. Arnolf was guiltily re-stoking the fire, so that even from a distance it already gave a hint of heat and a burst of light so that she could see her way back up the staircase.

She glanced back at the tapestry. It looked shadowy and dull in the growing firelight, but the figures stood still as an empty fire-grate. There stood the young man in the lower left, unmoving, and there his companions, just as the weaver had shaped them. She heard no horses, no conversations, no trains. She thought she tasted a hint of orange and currants on her tongue.

I must find a story in my memory, Marie thought, one that they have not heard. No one will believe this one, the one I think I saw, if I even can make a *lai* of it.

Sleeping, dreaming—is that all it was?

She yawned, covered her mouth. She shivered again and pulled her cloak tight, and she climbed the steps to return to her room to sleep. As she climbed she thought she heard from the banquet room—or imagined she heard it—a puff of steam. Must have been the fire in the hearth.

--end--

Marie's Dream: An Exercise in Remix Studies

Medievalism, the creative use of medieval materials by later ages, perfectly exemplifies the idea of *remix*: it combines disparate times and media to create new and either familiar or startling images.¹ It necessarily strays linguistically, mixing a contemporary perception of and use of language with a vague sense of what language would have meant in the medieval context. The study of an earlier language requires first its reconstruction: we must work from texts that, as printed rather than spoken texts, would employ a register different from common speech. We may have a few

¹ For an introduction to medievalism see Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz, eds., *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014). See the academic journals *Studies in Medievalism* and *The Year's Work in Medievalism* for ongoing scholarship and discussions.

hand-recorded artifacts of actual speech, but we have no way of knowing how the scribe or the person responsible for the written text would have influenced the actual copy. Our study requires a remix to get anything comprehensible.

Medievalism is growing rapidly in popularity through its exposure in most pop culture media. Inhabitants of the medieval world could hardly have imagined medievalism in its many forms from cinema to gaming to graphic novels any more than we can exactly recreate the mind or experiences of the Middle Ages. Yet the fun comes, at least for me in “Marie de France Dreams of Steampunk,” in trying to do that or at least imagining it, in giving the medieval human, Marie, whom the author imagines, a glimpse into something impossible. We may then imagine for ourselves that we have for an instant captured a mind able if wildly unlikely to imagine us in her future: in imagining her imagining our imaginative creation.

Similarly, *steampunk* requires a remix—it (if not medievalism) may even be the parent of Remix studies in the way it has circulated through the arts in contemporary culture. Steampunk invades a Sherlockian England with steam-trains, pocket watches, wasp-waists, and evil industrial geniuses while at the same timing calling out or even dis-ing both its self-elaborated fictional culture and the cultural sins of its maker. It remixes fashion and manufacturing and language and grotesques of its choosing from any time or no time, but with preferences for the Victorian, the Modern, and the Medieval remixed. Steampunk ventures a touch of Tolkien with a touch of Kubrick, a wink of Vera Wang with a waft of Dickens, a twist of Art Deco with an angry whisper of Nietzsche, all enveloped in a cloud of steam-engine smoke.² Steampunk is now a recognizable and recognized world of its own, a world that never was in history or in fact that now always will be as a fictional haunt in our imaginations. Though Remix theory may have begun in the technologizing and electronic sharing of music, the practice precedes the theory in many media and many genres and many places.³

So I envisioned “Marie’s Dream of Steampunk” as a kind of double-remix, a mixing of two remixes, a mutual courting between two beloved standards, medievalism and steampunk. The notion of Remix, as David Gunkel defines it, “the practice of recombining pre-existing media content—popular songs, films, television programs, texts, web data—to fabricate a new work,” has so far privileged contemporary media, but it need not.⁴ As painter Kehinde Wiley might cast a young

² For an introduction to steampunk see Jay Strongman, *Steampunk: The Art of Victorian Futurism* (London: Korero Books, 2011). For quick, clear consultations see “What is Steampunk” online at *Steampunk.com*, which defines the term as “a literary genre, or at least a subgenre, of science fiction and fantasy that includes social or technological aspects of the 19th century (the steam) usually with some deconstruction of, or reimagining of, or rebellion against parts of it (the punk).” The author stresses that, while we may associate it with such novels as *The Difference Engine* by William Gibson, Tim Powers’ *The Anubis Gates*, Gail Carriger’s *The Parasol Protectorate* series, S. M. Stirling’s *The Peshawar Lancers*, and *Titus Alone* by Mervyn Peake, all perhaps influenced by Jules Verne’s *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and H. G. Wells’ *The Time Machine*, steampunk has entered so many different genres and media, including television, film, gaming, graphic novels, fashion and accessories, furnishings and even architecture. The essay concludes by suggesting steampunk “is a genre AND a design aesthetic AND a philosophy.” I think it is perhaps closer to an aesthetic complex that has grown into a mode or modality, a flexible and transmissible set of linked motifs. JRRL, “What is Steampunk?” *Steampunk.com*, October 13, 2010, <http://www.steampunk.com/what-is-steampunk/>. See also Jonathan Strickland, “How Steampunk Works,” *How Stuff Works*, 2017, <http://people.howstuffworks.com/steampunk.htm>.

³ Jacques Derrida begins playfully, almost sarcastically, “Genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix genres. I repeat: genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix them. Now suppose I let all utterances resonate by themselves.” The essay presents the notion that we always and necessarily mix genres, that genres themselves are mixtures—remixes of what has influenced the author and reader. Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genres,” (trans. Avital Ronell), *Glyph* 7, (1980): 55.

⁴ David J. Gunkel, *Of Remixology: Ethics and Aesthetics after Remix* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), xvii.

African-American man as Napoleon, so Piero della Francesca included notable men including Byzantine politicians and local Italians in his *Flagellation of Christ*. Remix, as Gunkel concludes, “is both popular and influential,”⁵ and it has long been so, if not always. In our time it creates legal problems—breaches of copyright—but in the past artists have chosen it as a matter of course. John Webster took many if not most of the lines in *The Duchess of Malfi* from works by his contemporaries and remixed them for his own characters. He had a good model for doing so in Shakespeare: Robert Greene infamously called him that “upstart crow who beautifies himself with our feathers,” and despite Greene’s vitriol he was probably right—Renaissance dramatists were copious remixers.⁶ We know for instance that Shakespeare drew repeatedly, readily, obviously from well-known chronicles for passages in his history plays, and he revised or rewrote plays that were already available on the English stage (e.g., *Hamlet* and *King Lear* from older contemporaries and *The Comedy of Errors* from Plautus). Shakespeare probably would not have thought of himself as remixing, just creating successful stage plays, but were he writing now, he would have to proceed in a more circumspect fashion.

Nonetheless, readers and writers in our own time love to go back to our favorite classics to create something new-but-not-so-new. We have turned the plight of Victor Hugo’s miserable folk into a musical and Herodotus’ history of the Spartans at Thermopylae into a comic book and then a comic-bookish movie without blinking an eye at the borrowing—Remix studies is a productive way of looking at something we have always done. With medievalism we have the advantage, at least for original works, of not needing to worry about copyrights; for the most part we can *punk* it if we like. The “steam” in steampunk makes us wary of the reach and duration of copyrights, but the “punk” thrusts a chin if not a fist in the face of external restrictions on the imaginative or creative process or result. We must consider availability, legality, and artistic balance as well as inspiration.⁷

As writers of fantasy, science fiction, mystery, and ghost stories know, we must also permit and nurture the oddest, most sudden, and most frightening moments of inspiration. While formulas and how-to’s exist for writing in those and related areas, a story works because it hits the writer like a bagful of #9 steel shot—sometimes leaving similar scratches and bruises—and one must ride the inspiration to its conclusion, however apt or artless (and then perhaps *remix*). Any given artwork beyond the fascistically formal, as Umberto Eco explores in *The Open Work*, requires in the acts of composition and interpretation at least some level of openness: “the originality of an aesthetic discourse involves to some extent a rupture with (or departure from) the linguistic system of probability, which serves to convey established meanings, to increase the signifying potential of the message.”⁸ The nature of any consciously (or even subconsciously) “open” literary product requires at least some element of remix, something along Coleridge’s scale of primary imagination

⁵ Gunkel, *Of Remixology*, 176. Whereas “remix is often associated . . . with the ‘end of history’ that has been attributed to postmodernism,” scholars of remixology have traced it as a way of thinking at least to the early twentieth century, and one may easily trace its practice *The Odyssey* and *The Hebrew Bible*. Gunkel, *Of Remixology*, 88-89.

⁶ Robert Greene, *A Groat’s-worth of Witte, bought with a million of Repentance* (1592), ed. Risa S. Bear (Renascence Editions, 2000). Available at <http://www.luminarium.org/renascence-editions/greene1.html>.

⁷ Carol Peterson Haviland and Joan A. Mullin raise interesting questions as well as directions for research and ideas for teaching in *Who Owns This Text? Plagiarism, Authorship, and Disciplinary Cultures*. They note the “complexity, flexibility, and plasticity of information sharing” as they consider issues of ownership, collaboration, intellectual property, plagiarism, and how we share information—in a sense any sharing of information through teaching or even storytelling involves use and remix of many, potentially infinitely many, sources. Carol Peterson Haviland and Joan A. Mullin, *Who Owns This Text? Plagiarism, Authorship, and Disciplinary Cultures* (Logan UT: Utah State University Press, 2009), 156.

⁸ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 58.

to secondary imagination to fancy, plus the writer's reactions to whatever she or he has read and experienced.⁹ Even the wildest imagination uses some recombination, remix, some *bricolage*,¹⁰ of what the author has known or seen. "To remix is to compose," writes Eduardo Navas;¹¹ we may say as well that to compose is to remix.¹²

Any medium that does or can lend itself to remix must walk a balance between required form and individual or class creativity. Competitive figure skaters must skate their required figures for the judges and do so well enough to earn the right to present a free-skating composition. Anyone who writes science fiction or fantasy or mystery or romance must know the tradition and either re-create the formula if the publisher requires it for potboilers or stray wildly from it if one prefers more *literary* composition to hack-work.

On either stage or screen directors and actors must necessarily interpret to practice their art and create their product, and writers likewise find inspiration in their texts or productions—writers, actors, directors become critics, and that critique re-creates itself in new media even as the older media reformulate with new technology and a more expansive aesthetic.¹³ The practice is as old as art-making, though now we have begun to theorize it. In *Vita Nuova* (1295) Dante took the role of both writer and critic, assembling a series of poems in the midst of a prose narrative that pauses to describe the circumstances of the poems, how he structured them, and why he wrote each. Dante folded the criticism, a mix of author's and reader's response, right into his "poetic" text. The distinction of writer and critic becomes moot. *Vita Nuova* did not influence many poets in its approach to mixing prose and poetry, but it did point directly to the breakdown of a barrier between author and critic.¹⁴ Every artist has influences; every artist produces art because of exposure to those influences; therefore, to a greater or lesser degree, every artist's work involves if not begins with interpretation or critique. The reader-become-writer can reasonably take up any artistic/meditative form or format that he or she as responder desires. Responding from desire should certainly lead

⁹ Nigel Leask, ed. *Biographia Literaria* (1817) (London: Dent, 1997).

¹⁰ The meanings or implications of this term have shifted over time from discipline to discipline. Claude Lévi-Strauss introduced it in *La Pensée Sauvage* and discussed its implications in *Mythologiques* (published in French in four volumes 1964-71), as a notion of the construction of myths and how they descend to subsequent times assembled from pieces, not as wholes from unspoiled originals. See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée Sauvage* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1962); Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *From Honey to Ashes* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Origin of Table Manners* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Naked Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981).

¹¹ Eduardo Navas, *Remix Theory: The Aesthetics of Sampling* (Wien and New York: Springer, 2012), 61. "Remix culture, as a movement" Navas suggests, "is mainly preoccupied with the free exchange of ideas and their manifestation as specific products, (page 3), but, at the same time, as it applies sampling and repetition it presents a certain level of danger: "sampling within the cultural industry" takes "a bit of music that the listener will recognize" and creates a "basic aesthetic of loops as vehicles of ideology in consumer cultures. . . . This form of mechanical repetition" encourages consumption and regression" that repeats a "favorite recording . . . making it [a] main point of reference in one's understanding of the world." Navas, *Remix Theory*, 28. Commercial Remix can recommodify or re-commoditize commodities indefinitely, creating potentially an oppressive and repressive environment.

¹² Even the unbelievably creative dishes of Chicago's famous Alinea restaurant must begin with proteins, carbohydrates, and fats, and they must come served on a plate, even if that plate is a stone, a sheet of ice, or a piece of birch bark.

¹³ A pertinent idea of Remix from film studies comes in the idea of the film's five-dimensional field: light and color; horizontal and vertical forces in the area encompassed by the screen; depth and volume, and the implied three-dimensional world of the film; time and motion; sound, and integrating sound with visuals. Movie production builds from movie history, and it endlessly recombines elements of the five-dimensional field to create new aesthetic experiences. For a detailed pedagogically oriented discussion that moves from the elementary to the highly technical, see Herbert Zettl, *Sight, Sound, Motion: Applied Media Aesthetics*, 7th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2014).

¹⁴ Dante, *Vita Nuova*, trans. Mark Musa (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992).

to a spirited and interested effort. And art involves remix: reader, critic, artist complete an older text, enliven it with a new text. The new work will in turn generate in response more reading, new creation, more remix.¹⁵

Even the most imaginative work remixes from its inception. Anyone writing by any means other than the use of imposed formulas knows that writing begins with a spark and takes off with a bang (Big or little) in all readily available directions; the writer must then rein in the work and select apt trajectories from a matrix of possibilities, must mix and remix.

I have for some time wanted to write something imaginative about Marie de France or something with her as a character: she was such a wonderful storyteller, apt for dramatic or fictional re-creation. Her *lais* have a brisk directness, seldom a word of waste, and we have only a dozen of them—a good baker must find another to please the customer with generosity. The stories may have happy endings or sad, they may turn realistically or allegorically, they may show noble love or sordid jealousy. Their poetry is almost conversational in its ease and steady movement. To find another medieval story for Marie for Marie to tell, one may reasonably go to Chaucer or Gower, to Boccaccio or French Romances, to saints' lives or fables. But the challenge of Remix doesn't come in selecting from the obvious, but to find patterns and redistrict them, to gerrymander or reapportion or repopulate them. Next: the infamous writer may personalize them, or allow them to unfold in Marie's own manner—how much may one hegemonize a historical greatness without offending an audience or asking too much of them? The medievalism is already there, but for a true Remix is simple medievalism, finding or inventing another *Marie story* enough to do something transgressively creative, outrageous, even punkish, with Marie's work? How far may, will, can an *attitude* go?

For “Marie de France Dreams of Steampunk, with respect to Remix theory the *punk* is perhaps an essential factor, since one must remix boldly as no one has quite done before, especially if one intends to do more than simple commodifying (and commoditizing)—the thievery of literary borrowing has its own punkish quality, but we must avoid plagiarism. So cyberpunk or steampunk, two more standard punks of contemporary Remix: should I computerize Marie, *Neo* her, or place her on a steam-locomotive chugging into a smoky new Romance? My ideas of Marie made her more comfortable in Victorian Neverland than *Warcraft*, with bodices to rip, randy lords to evade, and uppity commoners to dislodge her narratology from its exclusivity among the nobility. We now know that the rest of us, we commoners, love, too, at least as well as the Nobility or anyone else does.

Plot and *style* both imply remix: to plot is to mix and remix, then edit, perhaps remixing again. To select a style requires knowledge of styles, either one's own or others'. From Romances, for instance, we expect adventure, excitement, magical elements, the crossing of liminal boundaries, quests, and often but not always a love story. Romances use those structural pieces but reassemble them from a collection of ready motifs: giants or dragons, knights errant, properly or improperly matched couples, maybe even an Amir's molars. The audience recognizes the pieces, but enjoys the remix.

Lais are short, highly focused versions of Romances, which in more substantial forms tend toward diffuseness and expansiveness. To write a *lai*, for instance, one must have read them, and writing a *lai* for Marie implies knowledge of her *lais* and how she plotted them. She used what later became a recognizable short-story pattern: situation, complication, epiphany. Lanval, a good

¹⁵ Significantly, Remix, especially in the music industry, often implies not creating something new, but trying to restore an original recording to make it available to a new audience as nearly as possible to the way the musicians intended.

but poorly off knight, has no beloved until a fairy princess appears and not only professes love to him, but also becomes his paramour—situation. Once Lanval's circumstance has changed for the better, Gwenevere makes a pass at him, and he rejects her, provoking her wrath and intention for revenge—complication. The fairy princess appears, saving him and spiriting him away to the land of Avalon, free of human cares and betrayals—epiphany. The “twist” comes in the lady's extracting a promise that Lanval must keep or lose her: he must tell no one about her. He does tell—his defense against Gwenevere's claim—but the princess saves him anyway because she loves him. That turn typifies the plot movement in the *lais*: they hinge on a turn of fortune, either good or bad, and on the lovers' fidelity, whether they maintain it or not. And the importance and beauty of fidelity is one of Marie's favorite themes. Her style tends toward the direct and clear, with little ornament but a clear joy in storytelling: she tells her tales of love with verve and brevity and often with hints of humor and nearly always with a strong dose of pathos. Her largely iambic poetic couplets have lines of eight syllables and normally four beats: it makes for a fast-paced musical line that allows for easy, minimally elaborated narrative: she seldom strays from the main narrative, only sometimes at the beginning of a *lai* to give a story its context or at the end to clarify its result or purpose.

I chose to render my own story in prose, except for a very brief passage, just to give a feel for how the verse goes. In contemporary English stories we use prose much as Marie used her poetry, for directness—poets working on longer forms might elaborate more extensively, but the directness and brevity particularly help give the *lais* their emotional effects.¹⁶ Marie's audience wouldn't have been any more startled at her poetic method of presentation than a contemporary audience would at my prose: we apply standards from our time and situation. Seldom does something new in plot or style come along, and when it does, it may take some time (and patience from writers and readers) to catch on. Stream of consciousness, for instance: contemporary readers associate it with the Moderns, probably James Joyce and Virginia Woolf particularly, but it goes back perhaps to Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67) where it appears not so much regularly as on occasion, a part of Tristram's general confusion with language and storytelling.¹⁷ Another more credible source appears in William Blake's prophetic books: there it does not so much result in strained syntax or desultory sentences as in a complete openness to imaginative plot: one character emanates from another, transforms, and finally rejoins other emanations to recreate a whole that may have preceded the poem. Blake's stream-of-narrative took quite a while to have influence on other writers, though it may have changed the subsequent history of imaginative literature more than the work of nearly any other writer. The fact that the poems appear on engraved plates full of similarly imaginative and motive *images* suggests that they even presage movies, which came along nearly a century after him.

In the attached story Marie experiences something like cinema, but something more like what Aldous Huxley described in *Brave New World* as “feelies,” since she not only sees the still figures on the “screen” begin to move and hears them talk: she feels and even smells and tastes the scenes that unfold.¹⁸ Has she dreamed those moving images, or has the tapestry acquired a magic that permits it to leap ahead seven and a half centuries in time and technology? The remix has taken her into a world of cinematic steampunk medievalism.

¹⁶ My story grew rather longer than I had intended, but sometimes one must write the story that the imagination mixes and hope for the best.

¹⁷ Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, ed. Howard Anderson (New York: Norton, 1980).

¹⁸ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932).

The most difficult aspect of writing the story came in determining how much to tell: how much to mix and how much to remix? The medieval Marie would recognize people and landscapes, but not much more of the Victorian/steampunk world. The story must capture what a lai can do in its new setting and make sense to and have an appropriate pace for a contemporary reader. It must present a problematic romance with a resolution that makes sense and makes a point. I resolved to allow Marie her confusion: she has entered a world of science fiction and fantasy for which the wildest of stories available to her would seem tame. And yet her age told stories of miraculous sea voyages, spiritual journeys to other realms of being, accounts of “people” with faces in their chests or single legs upon which they hopped rapidly along. Perhaps anyone who could read and enjoy Ovid could also have taken a train ride into the shadows of steamy Victorian London without feeling impossibly misplaced. Stories must do what we demand of them: take us into different places, different times, different minds, then allow us to return to our own, if with something pleasing or new in our thoughts. The success of the wildest tale depends on both the authors’ willingness to play with new mixes and the readers’ willingness to suspend disbelief and enter those remixed worlds and enjoy them.