AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women Podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Dr. Beth Hubble, Director of the Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies Program at the University of Montana. Regular listeners may recall that Beth previously joined us to talk about transgender histories, but her first love is French medieval literature. If you have listened to her first episode, she mentioned that she has a tattoo of a quote in Old French, which she reads, and that is quite possibly the biggest nerd flex I've ever heard. And I've talked to a lot of nerds. So today she's here to regale us with a more in-depth conversation about 12th century poet Marie de France, the first named poet in Old French, originator of her tattoo quote, and the reason Beth has a crocheted werewolf wearing trans pants on her desk. So normally I like to start off with a bit of biographical info, but tell us why that's not really an option.

Listen to our conversation on trans history or read the transcript.

BH: What we have here is, evidently sometime in the 12th century in the part of England that spoke Anglo-Norman, a dialect of Old French, there was a woman named Mary. And maybe she must have come from France. And so you can think of common names in Catholic countries that here's a woman named Mary from France. And so just on its base level, it's a name that can't, there are so many Marys it could have been when people go and look for her. And actually a book that came out in 2005 by a really important French medieval scholar, Howard Bloch, is actually the title of the book is *The Anonymous Marie*, I say Marie de France, and then I try to Americanize it when I'm teaching her, but *The Anonymous Marie de France*. Because, and Bloch says in his book, she comes as closest to anonymous as any named author could. I would give Chrétien de Troyes, her counterpart in France, somewhat similar because his name may just mean a Christian guy from Croix. So did he convert? And so these names that we put on these early texts, right when names start getting put on French texts, where there's no biographical information. Marie is mentioned by one outside author. Chrétien is as well, he gives us, they both kind of come together, but Chrétien is largely credited with Arthurian stuff, although there's pre-existing, Chrétien at least gives us Lancelot and there's pre-existing stuff from England. But these two figures in this mid to late 12th century who are seen as named authors about whom we just know nothing. A really amazing thing that Marie does, she names herself in a couple of her works. That's cool, that she's owning. Because a named author wasn't necessarily a thing at the time to take ownership and put yourself in the text like that. So I've just always thought she was really cool. And the fun part with her is, is that her lais, her short poems - not short, but they're not 10,000 lines like Chrétien de Troyes - is that because they're short stories, they're really easy to teach in intro French literature classes, because it's not going to take you all semester to finish the book. You can assign them and students can read them fairly quickly.

AT: And one of them is about a werewolf, just to bring it back to that. So for anyone who hasn't already listened to your last episode, can you tell us about her writing and the werewolf? Because you were so cranky that they weren't focusing on the one you wanted to focus on because everybody was distracted by the werewolf.

BH: Yes. And so a year ago, I was team-teaching a class called trans identities across Western cultures. And I'd written an abstract to publish an article about teaching Marie in a trans studies classroom. And I call her Marie. I usually push back really hard on people using women authors' first names. I'm not sure that “from France” counts as a last name here. So I had to say Marie with her. So I'm teaching Marie. I have this idea that we can use her prologue as this theory of reading that echoes with some trans studies theories of reading and other theories of reading. And it's going to be this awesome article. We're going to look at two of her lais, *Lanval* and *Guigemar*, that show these strange constructions of gender. But every time I've ever taught Marie, I always assign this lai that's called *Bisclavret*, which is about a werewolf, just because it's such a weird story. And so I go in to teach this class and we always broke up into groups on Thursdays and they had to share something they brought into class. And so I'm with one group, one of my co-instructors is with the other group and all anyone but me wants to talk about is werewolves. And maybe they read the other stories, or maybe

they heard werewolf and only read that one. I actually don't know. We never talked about the other two. But in one of them, there is a doe, a deer, with horns.

AT: So it's a female deer with horns, which female deer are not supposed to have, just for anyone who's not familiar with the song doe-ray-me, doe a deer is a female deer.

BH: Yes. And the part that deer plays in the plot is so connected to the gender of the main character, who's the perfect knight, except he has never loved a woman. And so that's what I wanted to talk about. And they didn't care. I'm not sure if they read it, if they even noticed that part, because what was important to them was this werewolf story. And it's a weird story because the werewolf is the hero. And so it went into this whole discussion about horror film, queer horror, and come to find out that there are already queer, academic queer readings of movies like *The Wolf Man* with Lon Chaney, and things like that, where for them, this was something they were already interested in. And so rather than impose my professorial authority, I thought, because in my mind, I'm going "Oh, no, my abstract has been accepted. What am I going to do now?" I actually shifted the whole focus of the paper and all the students, because I was using student work in a paper and had to go through what's known as the Institutional Review Board, which is a federal thing, because if you use human subject research, you have to pass an ethics test. And they had to take it in order to legally be allowed to be listed as an author. So there are about six co-authors on this article, because I thought it wasn't right for me to take credit. Because I would not know as much about werewolves as I do if it hadn't been for them. And having the luck that my co-instructor, her background is in modern media, and she'd already done research into queer horror. So Charlie, my co-instructor actually wrote part of the article too about werewolves and body horror and in it. So this strange short story by Marie about a werewolf whose name is Bisclavret. So Brittany, Breton, northwestern France, that's their word for werewolf. But that's the only name the hero is given, is Bisclavret. It calls him a loup-garou, which is French for werewolf, but it uses Bisclavret like a proper name, even though it's just the Gaelic word for werewolf.

AT: So what about the other lais? Because there's 12 narrative poems, and mostly they're are a few hundred lines each. So like you were saying, relatively quick reads. But beyond the werewolf, what would you like people to know about her writings?

BH: I don't think a lot of people who aren't French medievalists or feminist medievalists know much of anything about her. I know when I teach her, no one's ever heard of her. And that's not true for people growing up in a French-speaking place, you're going to know her in the same way that in canonical lists of stuff. If you have to throw in a woman author, she will be the one that you throw in because she's kind of the only one, which actually isn't true. And I didn't learn that until shockingly recently, that she's not the only 12th century French woman author with a name. But with Marie, even within the French canon, she gets subordinated to Chrétien de Troyes, who writes longer Arthurian stories, because Marie's lais, they're Arthurian.There's one about Tristan and Isolde, and King Arthur and Guinevere play in the background. They're never the main characters, but they're featured in the background of some of them. And it's all taking place in that landscape. And Marie says in the lais, that rather than copying the ancients, or using them as inspiration, it's not copying. The Middle Ages, that's what you did is you built on, the originality was not what people were going for. She said, rather than relying on the works of the ancients, she was going to look at these stories she'd heard from Brittany. And that's important because she and Chrétien de Troyes are some of the first writers who aren't retelling some of the early, so 10, 15, 20 years before, the 1150s, 1160s, the French texts you get are rewritings of the Aeneid. They're rewritings of the Statius, the Thebaid about Oedipus's sons. Those are these early romances, not epics, romances that feature knights and things like that. And then Chrétien and Marie take it in this direction of this Arthurian courtly world. But now that I've talked about it for that length of time, she authored at least two other genres of writing. She rewrote Aesop's fables, and those are fascinating to see how she represents

animals and things like that. And then we've known this for a long time, she has a saint's life called *The Purgatory of St. Patrick*. And then a French medievalist, June McCash, argues, convincingly that this text called the *Life of St. Audrey* is also by Marie, which is fascinating because Audrey is Etheldreda in Anglo-Norman England. So actually a known saint. And so she's writing saints' lives, she's writing fables, and she's writing these Arthurian stories. And if she's discussed, it's almost always just the lais. And in part, those are easily accessible. They're all translated in English. They're all on that level. But she isn't an author who's just writing these love stories, like you think of with courtly stories, is that what she's doing is broader than that. And even by myself, because I just keep assigning the same three or four lais, including the werewolf one. Trust me, the students would be deeply unhappy if I made them read the Purgatory of St. Patrick. (AT: It doesn't sound like a good time.) No. But I think that part with St. Audrey and St. Patrick, that shows her connection to the British Isles, in a way that the other ones, I know Arthur is from England or Wales, but when you read Chrétien and Marie, it's literally anywhere that has a mystical forest. There's not much about it that says England. But that I think gets missed with her, that she obviously had a knowledge of multiple languages, education, all those things, while understanding we don't have anything from when she was alive. Everything is in later manuscripts. But that she is someone that you just have to think about what would have meant for a woman in that mid- to late 12th century in Anglo-Norman England, you're 100 years from the Conquest, to achieve that level of education. And that's where people start hypothesizing, well, she must have been the abbess of a convent, she must have been so-and-so's noble person's sister Mary, those things. But no one can ever nail it down to a specific person.

AT: I feel like it's also one of those things where it can be so frustrating for historians and archaeologists when we talk about materials that reference things that everyone would have known, so the writer doesn't feel compelled to explain what they're talking about, because it would have been common knowledge at the time, but because we don't have that context…

BH: Yeah, and I think that's at play in a lot of the work that you get when you're reading stuff from that time and trying to somehow interpret it or somehow find the historical context from something that is so separate from us, which then I can circle back to her prologue to her lais, because that's where my tattoo comes from. Because what she does in her prologue is she basically says she expects the readers that come after her to add their own interpretations to the text, that she's making them obscure on purpose, so that you have to, my tattoo translates to "whoever can gloss the writing and add something from their own intelligence or knowledge," which is how I came up with this queer trans theory of reading that she offers for these students, which is what they did with, I thought they would do it with the story of the knight who appears to be asexual until the arrow bounces off the haunch of the deer with horns and then stabs him in the groin, which in medieval literature is a metaphor for in the genitals. And then all of a sudden he gets on a magic ship and the next woman he sees he falls in love with. And so I thought that's where they would take my theory of reading was into the interpretation of that. But instead what they added into it was that they really resonated with this man who, for however many days a month, would go out into the forest and take his clothes off and turn into a wolf whose wife rejects him, so his family rejects him and things like that, where once I saw it through their eyes, you can see a trans storyline of feeling like your body doesn't fit in, feeling like your family doesn't accept you, and things like that. Once they said that to me, I went, "oh, I'm going to stop talking and start listening to how this resonates with you," because I was always just stuck on, "boy is it weird that the werewolf is the hero."

AT: To me, that's one of the best parts of storytelling of any kind is that you have what the author originally intended, you have the text itself, and then you have whatever individual people get out of it. When I was in high school, we were reading something and I raised my hand and I said, "I think the author is saying this because X, Y, Z," and my teacher was this little old southern lady and she scrunches up her face and says, "well, yes, but no." So she did the opposite of what you're talking about, where I made a point, I supported it

with evidence from the book and said, “this is what I'm getting out of it.” And she couldn't actually deny it because I had provided support for it, but it wasn't her version. And therefore in her mind, it was wrong. And so I think it's really interesting when we're getting into different themes and what she may have meant by this, but then how it's being read, not just through a modern lens, but through each individual person's interpretations and based on their own experiences and knowledge.

BH: There's a possibility that in the past, I may have been someone that might have done something like that. I hope that I didn't because now it makes me angry because I think to myself now I would, I think the article and it's going to be published in the next year in a whole collection of essays called *Marie de Trans*, that's the name of the collection of essays. I think it's the best thing that I've ever written. But one of the things that I had in my mind when this happened to me in that class is one of the other required texts for that class was an Indigenous authored book. So the scholar is Marie Lang, who is Indigenous and queer, and the book is *Urban Indigenous Youth Reframing Two-Spirit*. And it's Lang's master's thesis. You know how often those get published as books, my sarcasm there. But what happened to me is what happened to Marie Lang. And I also mentioned in the article how funny it is that they're both named Marie, is that Lang had her whole sociology master set up, the questions were ready, it was IRB-approved, it was all those things, went into these two-spirit youth groups in Toronto to get the qualitative research done, and the kids in the youth groups were like, “no, we don't want to talk about that. We're tired of explaining to academics, writing for white people, what we're like.” And so that's what her book is about. And so redirection as refusal is an Indigenous theory that she explores, when Indigenous people get questioned about their lives and things like that, what are some of the ways that they use to reply to academics. And so I had that in my head already of going, and I say this in the article, what was happening to me was what had happened to Marie Lang, was I knew what I wanted them to talk about. But I, the white cishet feminist with her own agenda around it, I might not should have been, that's some good English, the person deciding what questions were important, especially in a trans identities class, and trying to be a student-centered classroom as well.

AT: So what do you think are the important themes that people should know about in Marie's writing?

BH: So I had been taught back in the day, and so my undergrad was ‘90 to ‘95 because it took me five years, and then grad school ‘96 to 2002. And I was taught that she was fairly conservative in her beliefs about gender and marriage and things like that. And I could see that when I was told that's what she was like, that you can find those themes. The entire prologue is amazing, but those couple of lines from it had always stuck with me, was that I'd never felt like she was saying there was only one reading to be done of her texts. And so when I got that call for papers for this edited volume, *Marie de Trans*, my mind went, “I'm not the only one that thinks that there's something a little subversive about Marie.” She's not just trying to construct this courtly thing of king and knight and lady and those things, it's that there are other people reading her in other ways. And so, I think that would be to not see, especially female authored, courtly literature. So it'd be Marie, and then from the south of France, there are female poets, maybe a little later than her, but in the 12th, early 13th century. And the one I mentioned before, I didn't mention the name, is that really close to Marie's life, an Anglo-Norman woman named Clemence of Barking, Barking Abbey in England, wrote in old French, *The Life of Saint Catherine*. And so that for me to see that even when they're writing in that genre, that these women authors at that time were still setting up the possibility of doing what I would call either resistant readings that were intentional, that Marie's stories are talking to us on more than one level. And you can find that kind of traditional, more conservative point of view about gender and sexuality in the Middle Ages. But if you can shift it a little bit, I think Marie invites the reader to read it from another point of view. And that it's very limiting to just see her as another canonical French author.

AT: One of the issues that often comes up when we're talking about women's history or any marginalized

history, whether that's racially, whether that's queer, disabled, is the lack of documentation. And so I'm curious why her writings, even if we don't know really anything about her life, why did her writing survive when so many others were lost to history?

BH: Yeah, someone thought they were important enough to write down. So one of the earliest manuscripts that still exists, like many medieval manuscripts, it's in the Harleian Collection in the British Library. It's 13th century, so it's early. It has Marie's lais in it and her fables in it. And so that means early on someone thought she was important enough that they copied her works into this manuscript. And that's not the only stuff that's in this manuscript. And so it's in that. Early on, by the 13th century, she's being seen as someone whose stories are important enough to be included in this. Is that because of the popularity of Arthurian stories? Is that because she puts little twists on them? That's all hypothesis in terms of why there. And there's an author called Denis Pyramus, who wrote *The Life of St. Edmund* and something else. And he refers to Dame Mary. And then he says, “but she wrote fiction.” Already, you get later on with, “oh, novels, those are just for women.” But he calls her Lady Mary, Dame Marie, and says that she was highly regarded. But he's writing this *Life of St. Edmund*. And I'm like, but she wrote *A Life of St. Audrey* and *St. Patrick*. What are you talking about? But there's even that kind of hint that there might have been some jealousy by another author. And why he's saying that, because another of his books is a romance. So maybe his wasn't as popular as hers. Like with Chrétien, these Arthurian stories, was she of the moment? To be writing them at the right time, the popularity of Chrétien de Troyes' stories that get rewritten and rewritten in German and in other languages going forward, I think is probably going to be part of that. The expanding literary world after the Norman Conquest. And she's not connected, like Chrétien de Troyes, connected with one of the daughters of Eleanor of Aquitaine, but that is that there're really high-ranking people wanting these literary stories associated with their courts.

AT: It's always hilarious to me when people try to make these distinctions between high and low art, and you often see anything created for women dismissed as low art. And that's a whole other conversation that we could get into.

BH: And so if and when we talk about Christine de Pizan, that is one of the things that she comes to prominence fighting with some male authors and philosophers and theologians, because they won't take her seriously. And that's the exact fight that she's having with them, is she's like, “stop attacking me, read my actual argument and tell me why I'm wrong.” And they're like, “you're just emotional.” And she's like, “no, I just asked you to read it.” This back and forth where one of the guys is obviously so mad at her. He's writing her back within a day in Paris. And she's like, “I think the pot is calling the kettle black.”

AT: I was going to say, it sounds like he's the emotional one.

BH: Oh, I have a whole article about it. I compare it, I call it mansplaining. I have an article, Medieval Trolls, something and Mansplainers: Christine de Pizan. When you read it through that lens, you're like, “oh, wow, they are doing a good Rebecca Solnit on Christine de Pizan.”

AT: So for anyone who's not aware, the term mansplaining originally emanates from a Rebecca Solnit essay called Men Explain Things to Me, which someone later shortened into mansplaining. So just for context, in case anybody wonders what it means to go full Rebecca Solnit. It's also funny that so often things get sort of transcended to high art in these people's minds when they just survive. So something like Shakespeare was the, we're going out drinking on a Saturday night and we're going to go check out the latest comedy. This was not fancy in its day.

BH: These stories, and that's one of the things with medieval literature and some of the problems with the way

that these medieval manuscripts, not as much today as 100 years ago or even 50 years ago, is that they get these manuscripts that would have fabliaux, they would have saints lives, they would have romances all in one manuscript. And so fabliaux, I always call the South Park of the Middle Ages because it's all excrement and farting and priests having sex. And a famous fabliau is called *Bérangier of the Long Ass*. That's literally the title of it. And so in the manuscripts, they appear to not be making those distinctions when they're copying them. But editors in the 19th and the 20th century century would pull out the courtly stories and then put them all in a book together, and then fabliaux in a book together. And that's not, there are manuscripts that are Chrétien de Troyes in one manuscript, all of his romances are together in one manuscript, even though we know he wrote more stuff because there's lost, obviously always lost stuff. But that's the thing that kind of shocks me with how we view the texts in the Middle Ages is we see, “oh, they're the courtly romances and the epics, and then there're the coarse fabliaux.” But the same people are writing them, copying them into the same manuscripts for the same audiences. And so we impose these genres on these texts and these authors in ways that I don't think would have made sense to them at all. I think the kings and whoever's listening to these stories were laughing just as much at the poor priests in these fabliaux as they were enjoying the Song of Roland. Or Chaucer, look at some of the stuff that's in Chaucer, some of it's horrifying.

AT: Well, speaking of Chaucer, why, when I had to read *Canterbury Tales* in school, have I never heard of Marie de France until you and I started talking?

BH: Because we pick and choose. If you're going to have one, you're going to do *Beowulf*, you're going to do Chaucer, you're going to do Shakespeare.

AT: I hated *Beowulf*. I hated it so much. I would have much rather read about the werewolf. (BH: Right?) I think we're getting to the crux of it, is what we make kids read is what adults think they should be reading for their betterment, like this very serious literature. But I think that's why a lot of people hate reading. And I say that as someone who loved reading and routinely hated what I was forced to read. And it's very lucky that I already loved reading before that happened.

BH: If I did not already love reading when I was forced to read *The Pearl* by John Steinbeck, (AT: Ugh, Steinbeck!) I hated it so much. There is a part of it where a baby dies. That's supposedly heartbreaking. I was so bored and annoyed with the book, I didn't know what happened. And so we're in class. I'm the always the top student and I'm sitting there going and I think I like flunked a quiz. It's like, “how did the mother react?” I'm like, “the baby died? What are you talking about?” And so it's and so when I think here now, we're both and this is one of the things that I emphasize in this trans identities class, but also in this great books by women class that I teach is that often the people deciding what you're reading have a very masculinist and a very cisgenderist point of view on what the important stories are. So you're reading the ones from the Middle Ages that they feel reflects that back to us and not showing us the ones that show that it was a really subversive time and I would push back on any argument that medieval marriage between a man and a woman in any way resembles my marriage today. And so you're saying, “well, look at all this manliness.” Well, my dissertation in 2002 looked deeply at at one whole chapter is about two nights and that rewriting of the Thebaid, the the romance of Thebes. Two nights swear eternal love to each other on an altar before a king. But that's friendship. (AT: “They were roommates.”) Exactly. It's often called in the literature when I was doing my research 20 years ago called “sworn friendship.” When the king says to them afterwards, “well, we should bond this relationship more, you should marry my daughters.” One of the knights says to his friend, “I don't care which one I marry, which one do you want?” And yet when you read earlier stuff about it, it's like this romance, and I'm like, “yeah, between two knights!” But if you read it just through one lens and actually it took me along, I knew that they swore friendship to each other. And I don't remember the time when I'm like, “Jesus Christ, the king just got up on a fancy rock to get them to swear friendship. It's like a church.” And really was saying that in a conference

paper with the man who'd written the book *Sworn Brotherhood in Medieval Literature*, C. Stephen Yeager. And I say his name because he was delightful. I see he's in the front row, nametag. When I'm going to say in my conference paper as a grad student, I might have finished. I don't know. It was really early on. I'm about to say he missed something and got it wrong. He's emeritus professor from the University of Chicago. And he was so sweet. When I was done, he said, “Elizabeth, you are 100 percent right. I missed that.” And so that was really nice. But he had a whole book. There are not that many stories in 12th century French. But if you only have one lens when you're reading it, it's like the movie *300*, where you're like, “if you want to make them all a bunch of bros…” But that's not what was happening.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast. And remember, well behaved women rarely make history.