

"Literary Terms and Definitions"

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LAI (plural *lais*, also spelled **lay**): A short narrative or lyrical poem, usually in octosyllabic couplets, intended to be sung. Helen Cooper called the **genre** the "mini-Romance" since the typical theme and content deals with **courtly love** and the other concerns of medieval romance. Unlike the medieval romance, however, the *lais* are not designed in an **episodic** manner, i.e., they are not meant to be told in a series of short tales that can be combined and stacked in a single sequential narrative. The main traits individual *lais* have in common with each other is a particular geographic origin and self-identification as being a *lai*. Geographically, they are based on older Celtic legends imported to northwestern France by the **Bretons**. The oldest narrative *lais*, usually referred to as the *contes* or *les lais de Marie de France*, were composed by an Anglo-Norman woman named Marie. (In spite of her common scholarly epithet, she appears to have lived in England.) Her exact identity is a matter of much scholarly discussion. The oldest Old French *lais* outside of **Provençal** were written by Gautier de Dargiès (early 1200s). The term "Breton lay" was applied to English poems in the 1300s that were set in Brittany and were similar to those of Marie de France. A dozen or so examples of the Breton lays survive in English, the best known examples being *Sir Orfeo*, *Havelok the Dane*, *Sir Launfal*, and Chaucer's "Franklin's Tale" and "Wife of Bath's Tale." In the last 400 years, poets have used the term *lay* more generally as a loose term for any historical ballad or any narrative poem focusing on adventure and the supernatural. See also **Bretons**, **romance**, and **courtly love**.