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ENGL - 3230

13 April 2026

The Relocation of the Monstrous: Klaus Mikaelson, Bisclavret,
and the Medieval Logic of Loyalty in *The Originals*.

The Originals, though it disguise as contemporary tv show, reconstructs with remarkable fidelity the ethical and social logic of the medieval lai, specifically the framework established by Marie de France's *Bisclavret*, in which the werewolf is not a figure of horror but of aristocratic virtue. Monstrosity is located not in the beast but in the betrayal of loyalty. So this essay will argue that *The Originals* does not simply borrow the aesthetic trappings of medieval supernatural fiction but performs what Umberto Eco, in "Dreaming of the Middle Ages," calls a process of bricolage to serve the needs of a new cultural moment. Klaus Mikaelson is cursed, dynastic, and consumed by the tension between loyalty and betrayal in ways that echo Bisclavret with precision. The shift from twelfth-century Brittany to nineteenth-century New Orleans is not a transformation of the medieval perspective but a relocation of it. The feudal court becomes the Mikaelson compound, the king becomes a vampire patriarch, and the central question of what makes a creature monstrous, its body or its community's failure to honor it, remains structurally unchanged across eight centuries of storytelling.

To understand how fully *The Originals* inherits this logic, it is necessary to begin with what Marie de France actually establishes in *Bisclavret*. The lai is one of the most striking treatments of lycanthropy in medieval literature precisely because it refuses to make the werewolf a monster. The knight transforms into a wolf three days each week, but Marie

emphasizes from the outset that Bisclavret is “A handsome knight, an able man, / He was, and acted like, a noble man,” (Marie de France, *Bisclavret*, ll.17-18) beloved by his lord and his peers. His transformation is not presented as a curse or a punishment; it is simply a condition, one that his wife’s betrayal by stealing his clothes and her consequent denial of his means of return to human form transformed into a kind of imprisonment.”It’s true /More than all the world I love you. /You should hide nothing from me, nor /Ever doubt I’m loyal in any affair. [...] Do what’s right! Now tell me, do!” (Marie de France, *Bisclavret*, ll.78-85). The lai’s moral logic is unambiguous: the wolf is noble; the wife is the true monster because she left. When Bisclavret, still in wolf form, runs to meet the king and takes hold of his stirrup, performing the gestures of feudal submission from within a body that cannot speak, the king responds with sensitivity rather than fear and grants the wolf protection. “But then he picked out the King/ And ran there for mercy./ To beg, He seizes the King’s stirrup-ring, /And kisses his foot and leg.”(Marie de France, *Bisclavret*, ll.145-147)

Loyalty, Marie argues, is legible even across the boundary of species. For instance in *The Originals* in Season 1, Episode 22, titled “From a Cradle to a Grave” Hayley Marshall, Klaus’ baby mama becomes a hybrid after giving birth to their daughter. Still after having a part vampire she still remains loyal to the wolves and her pack. She does not want to embrace the second nature she’s been given. What Marie establishes is a framework in which monstrosity is relational rather than essential. The werewolf’s nature is not the problem; the problem is the severing of the social and emotional bonds, marriage, loyalty, feudal trust around. It’s not about what they are. It’s about whether the people around them honor them or betray them. . The wolf’s violence in *Bisclavret*, including his attack on his wife and his tearing off of her nose, is presented not as evidence of essential monstrosity but as a proportionate and intelligible response

to her betrayal. Marie goes to some lengths to make clear that this violence is meaningful, that it communicates a truth about the wife's guilt that the courtly social world requires a wise interpreter to decode. The violence is not random; it is judicial. Literally, this is what Klaus tries to justify during the whole show. His violence is this way because people betray him and he needs to be respected.

To connect Marie de France's medieval text to the 2013 TV show, this paper is using Umberto Eco's essay "Dreaming of the Middle Ages." Through it, Eco argues that modern culture keeps returning to the medieval period not for historical accuracy, but because the Middle Ages gives a grammar of power and morality that the modern world struggles to express directly. Things like blood, lineage, honor, loyalty, the legitimate use of violence. This framework helps explain characters like Klaus Mikaelson, whom the scale of his violence would be difficult to justify in a contemporary moral framework, yet the fact that he is a thousand-year-old vampire who came of age in medieval brutality renders it historically and narratively legible. The show further anchors this logic by structuring his entire arc around the possibility of redemption. In this sense, the concept of bricolage becomes useful: it describes how texts reassemble fragments of older cultural structures without consciously citing them, drawing on medieval perception to make modern stories of power and moral transformation possible. The big shift from *Bisclavret* to *The Originals* isn't a transformation, it's a relocation. The bricoleur does not create from nothing; he works with what is already available, recombining fragments of prior systems to address new problems. When contemporary culture needs to think about what it means to be born into a nature you did not choose, obligated to a lineage you did not ask for, and judged by a community that cannot or will not read you correctly, it reaches for the Middle Ages and *The Originals* is the example of it.

Klaus Mikaelson is first introduced in *The Vampire Diaries*. He is the most powerful and most isolated figure in the supernatural world: an Original vampire who is also a werewolf, the product of a secret his mother kept from him for a thousand years. In Season 2, Episode 6 of *The Originals*, titled “Wheel Inside the Wheel” it is revealed that his werewolf nature was suppressed by a binding spell cast by Esther Mikaelson in order to conceal his biological father’s identity and keep Klaus within the social structure of the Original vampire family. He is, from the beginning, a figure characterized by a concealment that was performed against him rather than by him, an inversion, but also a deepening, of Dracula’s structural situation. Where Dracula concealed his wolf nature from his wife in order to protect himself, Klaus’s wolf nature was concealed from him by the people who should have protected him to protect him. The result is structurally the same: a creature whose truest self has been suppressed by those closest to him, and whose monstrosity, his reputation for violence, his instability, his centuries of cruelty, is in significant part the consequence of that betrayal rather than its cause.

Moreover the show features several flashbacks introducing the original vampires in medieval times establishing Klaus’s most destructive behaviors postdate his father Mikael’s abuse and Esther’s magical suppression. One of the reasons why Klaus left New Orleans in the first place is because Rebekah Mikaelson called Mikael to kill Klaus in 1919. In season 1, episode 16, titled “Farewell to Storyville” during a tense confrontation in the cemetery, she admits she summoned their father out of hatred for Klaus, to stay with the love of her life Marcel. Knowing that before 1919, Mikael hunted his son across the globe for nearly 1,000 years, destroying several cities in his pursuit. Thus, Klaus became a monster because monstrosity was imposed upon him as a condition of belonging to a family that could not accept what he was. Klaus states this truth in season 2 episode 3: “You turned me into the weakling he hated. [...] You are the

author of everything I am.” (00:30:16 - 00:30:35) This is not a modern psychological argument about trauma, though it borrows some of that language. It is, more fundamentally, a medieval argument about the consequences of broken loyalty: when the people who owe you fidelity betray you, the damage is not merely personal but ontological, a distortion of the social order that produces violence as its natural result.

The show’s frequent use of medieval-period flashbacks reinforces this point in ways that go beyond production design. These sequences, which take Klaus and his siblings, Elijah, Rebekah, and the other Originals back to tenth- and eleventh-century Europe, establish that the Mikaelson family’s internal dynamics, their alliances, betrayals, and negotiations of power and loyalty were formed in and by a feudal social order. The codes they operate under in present-day New Orleans are not modern codes that happen to be articulated in the language of family; they are medieval codes of fealty and lineage that have survived intact across a millennium because the people who hold them have survived intact across a millennium. When Klaus, Elijah or any Mikaelson invokes “always and forever,” the family oath, that is repeated numerous times throughout the series, they are not speaking metaphorically. They are invoking a feudal logic of binding obligation that was forged, literally, in the Middle Ages, even though they do not follow it everytime. The flashbacks seem like the show’s acknowledgment that the story it is telling is not a new one. The wolf has been waiting for a very long time to be portrayed.

Furthermore, the choice of New Orleans as the show setting also strengthens the medieval parallel. As Eco observed, the medieval world offers a framework for understanding power that modernity cannot easily replicate. New Orleans is not an arbitrary backdrop. It is a city whose own history is structured by the kinds of hierarchies. The producer, Julie Plec, shared that she set *The Originals* in New Orleans to embrace a darker, more mature tone than *The*

Vampire Diaries, using the city's rich history of supernatural folklore, vampires, witches, and werewolves, as a “character” in itself. She considered the French Quarter a “small town” with intense political conflict, perfect for the Mikaelsons to reclaim their power and ownership displacements. It is a place founded on the relocation of peoples, defined by the violent imposition of social structures upon those who did not choose them, and organized around persistent questions of who controls the city’s political and cultural territory. The city depends on the maintenance of a feudal-style compact between these groups. In Season 1, episode 1 Klaus arrives to discover, after leaving in 1919, that Marcel, his pupil he once mentored, has seized control of the city in his absence. The conflict that follows is not a modern story of urban power politics; it is a medieval story of usurpation, legitimate lordship, and the question of what claims blood and history give a ruler over a territory he has not physically occupied. “Marcel: This is my business. I control the witches in my town. Klaus: That’s funny because when I left a hundred years ago you were still a pathetic little scraper [...] Marcel: I’m not the prince of the Quarter, friend. I’m the king. Show me some respect!” (00:26:09 - 00:27:34). The feudal court has moved, but its logic has not. The structural echo is present and pressing: the question of whose blood determines whose belonging, and whose monstrous nature justifies their dispossession, is a medieval question.

The most precise structural parallel between *Bisclavret* and *The Originals* lies in the figure who makes Klaus’s redemption imaginable. Elijah Mikaelson, Klaus oldest brother and “savior,” functions in the show as something very close to the king in Marie de France’s lai: the figure of aristocratic discernment who can read the wolf’s behavior correctly, who insists on his brother’s fundamental nobility against the evidence of his conduct, and whose sustained loyalty is the primary mechanism through which redemption becomes possible. Elijah’s commitment to

Klaus, repeated across centuries and at considerable personal cost, is a formulation of feudal loyalty in the register of fraternal love. It is, structurally, the king, the oldest brother figure, granting the wolf protection: a recognition that the creature's nature, however frightening, does not disqualify it from belonging to the human community. The show's central dramatic question is really; can Klaus become what Elijah believes him capable of being? Does he have a Hope to be saved? Does his daughter Hope will save him? This reflection is also *Bisclavret's* central dramatic question: can the wolf, once recognized, come home? And like Marie de France, *The Originals* locates the answer not in the wolf's own transformation but in the quality of the recognition offered. Bisclavret is restored to human form not because he changes but because the king sees him correctly. Klaus's redemption, when it finally comes, is similarly contingent on the recognition of those around him rather than on any internal metamorphosis. His nature does not change; what changes is whether the people who owe him loyalty are capable of honoring it.

Using Eco's framework to ask not only what *The Originals* preserves from Bisclavret but what it transforms and what it loses reveals both the power and the limits of the bricolage operation. What is preserved is the structural logic of monstrosity as relational rather than essential. Both texts use the werewolf's curse as a figure for the condition of being fundamentally misread by those who should know you best. What is transformed is the social register in which these structures operate. Marie de France's lai operates within a courtly world in which the king's judgment is the final arbiter of social meaning. *The Originals* operates within a world in which institutional authority has been replaced by family, and in which the question of legitimate recognition is answered not by a monarch but by a chosen or unchosen inner circle. The bricolage preserves the structure, but the new material does not leave it unchanged.

Therefore, to conclude *The Originals* does not invent the figure of the noble werewolf; it relocates him. Klaus Mikaelson is Bisclavret's heir not because the show's creators read Marie de France but because the ethical and social logic that Marie de France articulated so precisely in the late twelfth century has never stopped being culturally operative. The questions it raises, where does monstrosity reside, what does loyalty require, who has the authority to grant or withhold recognition? *The Originals* addresses them in the terms available to twenty-first-century American television: a New Orleans setting thick with its own histories of displacement and hierarchy, a family structure that doubles as a feudal court, a protagonist whose thousand-year lifespan makes him literally, not metaphorically, a figure from the Middle Ages. The medieval flashbacks that are in the series are the show's acknowledgment, maybe half-conscious, that the story it is telling is not a new one. The feudal court has moved. The candles are still lit. And the wolf, stripped of what would allow him to come home, is still waiting at the king's stirrup, performing the gestures of a loyalty that the world around him has not yet learned to read.

Works Cited

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