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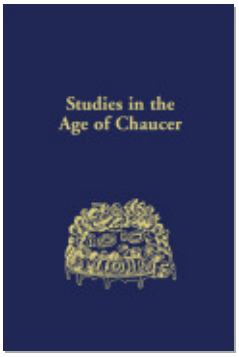

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Marie de France and Her Middle English Adapters

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OF THE DOZEN or more short romances in English that are described as Breton lays, only three derive from *lais* by Marie de France. *Lai le Freine*, dating probably from the early fourteenth century and surviving only in the Auchinleck manuscript, is a translation of Marie's *Le Fresne*; *Sir Landevale*, also probably from the early fourteenth century, and surviving in five texts, the best of which is in manuscript Rawlinson C 86, is a translation of *Lanval*; and Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal*, dating from the late fourteenth century and preserved only in manuscript Cotton Caligula A.II, is another version of the same *lai*, based, however, not primarily on Marie's French but on *Sir Landevale* and on consultation or recollection of other sources including the anonymous French lay *Graelent*.[1] In this article my aim is to examine the three Middle English lays alongside *Le Fresne* and *Lanval* in such a way as to consider what the comparison reveals about Marie de France's poems as well as about the English versions of them. There is an earlier comparison of these five poems by Theo Stemmler,[2] from which I

[1] For information about *Lai le Freine*, see Margaret Wattie, ed., *The Middle English* Lai le Freine, Smith College Studies in Modern Languages, vol. 10, no. 3 (Northampton, Mass., 1929), from which I quote its text. For information about *Sir Landevale* and *Sir Launfal*, see A. J. Bliss, ed., *Sir Launfal* (London: Nelson, 1960), from which I quote the texts of both poems; also M. Mills, review of Bliss's edition, *MÆ* 31 (1962):75–78, for a different opinion on the sources of *Sir Launfal*. To avoid unnecessary complication I do not attempt any detailed consideration of *Sir Launfal*'s indebtedness to sources other than *Sir Landevale*, nor do I discuss variant readings in texts of *Sir Landevale* other than Rawlinson (some of these variants are discussed by Elizabeth Williams, "*Lanval* and *Sir Landevale*: A Medieval Translator and His Methods," *Leeds SE*, n.s., 3 [1969]:85–99). Where any doubt might arise about whether a passage referred to but not quoted is from a Middle English lay or its French original, I precede the relevant line numbers with E or F.

[2] Theo Stemmler, "Die mittelenglischen Bearbeitungen zweier Lais der Marie de France," *Anglia* 80 (1962):243–63; subsequent references to this work are indicated in the text by author and page number. I must also acknowledge an important debt to an unpublished paper on the Old French and Middle English versions of *Le Fresne* by Richard Axton read to the Medieval Graduate Seminar of the Cambridge English Faculty in 1979.

have learned much and to which I refer from time to time. Stemmler was chiefly concerned with the narrative and representational techniques of the poems, and, while I shall sometimes add to what he has to say on this score, my goal—inevitably more speculative—is an interpretation of the meanings of these poems.

By good fortune, as we shall see, the two *lais* by Marie of which Middle English translations have survived represent two of her most characteristic junctures of narrative and meaning—the focusing of meaning in a symbolic object and an encounter between the human and fairy worlds. In *Le Fresne*, my contention is that the meaning of Marie's poem is inward and unfixed, being focused in her characters' consciousnesses as well as crystallized in private symbols, while her Middle English translator systematically shifts the meaning outward into the realm of the public and the concrete. In *Lanval* I find a different kind of inward meaning, having to do with paranoid and wish-fulfilling fantasies; in *Sir Landevale* something of this is retained, though in a form attenuated by the characteristic externality of Middle English, while in *Sir Launfal*, by a strange paradox, Chestre destroys the meaning of *Lanval* precisely by identifying totally with the very fantasies that it represents.

I begin with some observations on *Le Fresne*. Stemmler has noted that Marie's *lais* were written for an aristocratic public and are deeply pervaded by the *höfische Wertwelt* of the twelfth century (pp. 259–60). *Le Fresne* is no exception in being thoroughly aristocratic in setting and attitudes. It begins with two knights and their ladies. The maiden who acts as agent in getting rid of one of the twin girls borne by one of the ladies is herself "une meschine / Que mut esteit de franche orine" (lines 99–100),[3] and it is intended that whoever finds the baby should know that "ele est nee de bone gent" (line 134). The abbess who provides for the abandoned child is a woman of power and wealth, and even the ash tree in which it is hidden and after which it is named is seen from the point of view of the owner of an estate: "Pur umbre fere i fu planté" (line 170).[4] Gurun, whom Le Fresne eventually marries, is a *seignur* (line 243) and great landowner—hence his ability to enlarge the abbey and improve its fortunes—and he is of sufficiently high rank to have the wedding conducted by an archbishop. Thus it is natural that the aristocratic concerns of heredity and the honor or shame attached to it should be important motives (though not necessarily admira-

[3] I quote Marie de France from her *Lais*, ed. A. Ewert (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1944), giving line numbers from the relevant *lai*.

[4] I owe this last observation to Richard Axton's paper.

ble ones), especially in connection with the alleged link between twin births and adultery. The relevant terms occur thickly near the beginning of *Le Fresne*: *hunte, deshonur* (line 34), *huniz* (line 36), *honur* (line 74), *Hunie* (line 75), *hunir* (lines 91, 94), *hunie* (line 111). The social elevation of the setting makes all the more striking the kindliness of the abbey porter and his widowed daughter: Marie does not suppose aristocratic birth and charitable disposition to be the same thing. But her work owes its characteristic poise partly, it may be judged, to her complete confidence in her social position. Rank is not her theme, but security of rank is a condition of the steadiness with which she is able to keep her theme in focus.

The story of *Le Fresne*, like the stories of the *lais* in general, and like those of the narrative units from which longer medieval romances are composed, is an *aventure*. This is to say, it is a series of events that apparently happen by chance and that have their meaning only in relation to those to whom they happen, not as part of some objective social or metaphysical structure. At an early stage the birth of twin boys, the starting handle of the whole narrative, is referred to in these terms by Le Fresne's mother—"Ne n'avendrat cel' aventure" (line 39)—and the same pairing of *avenir* and *aventure* is repeated at the very end: "Quant l'aventure fu seüe / Coment ele esteit avenue" (lines 515–16), a *lai* was composed about it. The word *aventure* also occurs several times in the course of the narrative, at lines 78, 214, 347, 492, and 496. For Marie, however, as the closing lines make clear, and as is suggested by several other occurrences of the word, an *aventure* is not merely something that happens; it is something that is narrated. *Le Fresne*, like many of Marie's other *lais*, is a narrative that is full of narration, in the form both of prophecy of what will occur and of repetition of what has already occurred. This aspect of Marie's storytelling technique does not seem to have been much discussed, and it is worth pausing to consider it.

Prophecy or prenarration is comparatively rare in *Le Fresne*. One clear example occurs when Marie tells us that the slanderous words of the first knight's wife are repeated (itself an example of narration) throughout Brittany and that "Mut en fu la dame haïe, / *Pois en dut estre maubailie*" (lines 53–54; italics added). Later, when Le Fresne's mother arranges for tokens to be left with the child, the future course of events is planned and foretold (lines 132–134):

> La u la meschine ert trovee,
> Bien sachent tuit vereiement
> Que ele est nee de bone gent. . . .

Then, when Le Fresne is leaving the abbey to live with Gurun, she takes the tokens with her, and once more the future is glimpsed: "De ceo li pout estre mut bel" (line 294).

These last two instances lend themselves to interpretation less as prenarrations by Marie than as representations of the thought of the characters concerned, first of Le Fresne's mother and perhaps the maiden and then of Le Fresne herself. They may serve to warn us of what is going to happen, or at least to make us speculate about what may happen; but, more important, they reveal the characters' inner motivation. Something analogous is surely true of the far more frequent occurrences of renarration, or repetition as speech of what has already occurred as fictive event. The modern reader's first thought might well be that such renarrations were necessary to remind a medieval listening audience of events they might otherwise have forgotten. Yet *Le Fresne* is so short and the renarrations are so frequent that some further explanation seems required. And indeed it turns out that the effect of such renarrations is almost invariably to place their subject matter in a new perspective, that of the consciousness of the speaker or hearer or both. Examples will make this clear. Once she has herself given birth to twins, Le Fresne's mother recalls her earlier saying about twins as evidence of adultery (lines 81–84):

> Dunc [ne] dis jeo quë unc ne fu
> Ne nus ne l'avïum veü
> Que femme deus enfanz eüst,
> Si deus humes ne coneüst?

Her accusation has a quite different significance for her now that it applies to herself. When Le Fresne goes to live with Gurun and takes the brocade and ring with her, past events are narrated again (lines 295–302):

> L'abeesse li ot rendu,
> Et dist coment est avenu,
> Quant primes li fu enveiee:
> Desus le freisne fu cuchee;
> Le paile et l'anel li bailla
> Cil que primes li enveia;
> Plus de aveir ne receut od li;
> Come sa niece la nuri.

The effect of these lines is in part to explain what we had not previously been told—how Le Fresne comes to know of her mysterious origin and the

significance of the ring and the brocade—but beyond this the lines movingly suggest how the girl thinks back over her past at this turning point, when she is about to exchange the abbess's kindness and the safety of the convent for an unknown life as Gurun's mistress.

Toward the end of the *lai* renarration is more frequent. We are told how Le Fresne, in her love for Gurun, places the brocade on the bed which he is to share with his intended bride (really Le Fresne's twin sister); her mother recognizes it and asks the chamberlain to explain where it came from. The chamberlain repeats to the mother what Marie has just narrated to us:

"Dame," fait il, "vus le savrez:
La dameisele l'aporta
Sur le covertur le geta,
Kar ne li sembla mie bons;
Jeo qui que le pailë est soens."

Here it is particularly clear that Marie's listeners could scarely have forgotten what they have only just been told and that she could perfectly well have chosen to write merely, "The chamberlain repeated what you have just heard." The renarration must surely occur because of the emotional impact its content will have on the mother; we are implicitly invited to hear it again with her ears. The mother then asks Le Fresne how she acquired the brocade, and her daughter replies (lines 436–40):

Dame, m'aunte, ke me nuri,
L'abeesse, kil me bailla,
A garder le me comanda;
Cest e un anel me baillerent
Cil ki a nurir me enveierent.

Again the repetition is needed not to jog the listeners' memory but to enable them to imagine the effect on the mother of what they already know. Finally, the mother repeats the entire story from her slandering of her neighbor's wife onward, in a passage of twenty lines (465–84), for the benefit of her husband. Its impact on him is worth imagining, but perhaps even more important is the stimulus we are offered to construct the new perspective in which she herself now sees it.

The implication of this analysis of narrative repetition in *Le Fresne* is that here (and equally in many other *lais* where the same technique is employed) Marie is writing what might be called a "drama of consciousness."

An analysis such as that of Edgar Sienaert,[5] which sees the characters of *Le Fresne* solely as "narrative functions," lacking all "inner life," while of value in defending the *lai* against naïve novelistic readings, fails to respond to the author's repeated invitations to imagine narrative events from the points of view of the various actants. What is important is not simply the *aventure* which has *avenue*, the apparently chance sequence of events, but what it means to the leading participants—and that meaning is something only partly given by Marie, who leaves us in part to imagine for ourselves the characters' inner states.

Other aspects of Marie's narrative technique may be worth brief comment. *Le Fresne* has her usual simplicity and clarity of style: her manner is quite personal, with the narrator present, addressing her listeners directly yet politely, not as a bard or minstrel but as if they were face to face and on the same social level. This is true from the very beginning—"Le lai del Freisne vus dirai / Sulunc le cunte que jeo sai" (lines 1–2) and continues throughout. Even when Marie is not referring to "I" and "you," her presence is implied by, for example, the prophecies of what is going to happen as the story unfolds. In other *lais* she offers more in the way of ironically understated narratorial comment[6] (of a kind which again assumes social equality and mutuality of understanding between herself and her audience); in *Le Fresne* I find only two examples of this. Le Fresne's mother, proposing to have her murdered, is reminded by her ladies that "De hummë ocire n'est pas gas" (line 98); and, having told us how generously Gurun gave to the abbey where he found Le Fresne, Marie drily explains, "Mes il ad autrë acheisun / Que de receivre le pardun" (lines 269–70).

In describing her fictive persons, Marie is typical of French courtly poetry in her reliance on general terms—*riche*, *bel*, *bon*, *orguilluse*, *dolente*—and she rarely attempts to evoke the sensory reality of her fictive world with any specificity. On the other hand, within this largely generalizing style, the rare occurrences of the specific and the concrete stand out in striking relief.

[5] Edgar Sienaert, *Les Lais de Marie de France: Du conte merveilleux à la nouvelle psychologique* (Paris: Champion, 1978), pp. 79–86. By contrast, Ruth Morse, "The '*Granz Biens*' Again," *NM* 81 (1980):361–65, refers tellingly to "Marie's consistent concern with the inner life, to a unique degree outside the literature of mysticism" (p. 365). Philippe Ménard, *Les Lais de Marie de France: Contes d'amour et d'aventure du Moyen Âge* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1979), seems to me to exaggerate somewhat "la progression linéaire du récit" (p. 80) in the *lais* and to underplay the importance of renarration.

[6] Cf. Emanuel J. Mickel, "Marie de France's Use of Irony as a Stylistic and Narrative Device," *SP* 71 (1974):265–90, an article which is, however, seriously disabled by its confusion of several different meanings of "irony."

This is true, for example, of those objects of special significance, such as the ash tree, the brocade, and the ring, concerning which more material detail is supplied. Another example of how powerful the occasional evocation of sensory detail can be in a style from which such evocation is largely absent occurs in the description of the maiden's nighttime journey with the baby. The forest through which she travels is left as a completely blank space, and then suddenly, "Bien loinz sur destre aveit oï / Chiens abaier et coks chanter" (lines 144–45). We are surely as surprised as she when these noises, indicating a human settlement and the imminence of dawn, break on the silence of the night. For a moment, too, the usual transparency of the verse is thickened as a chiastic pattern of alliteration is counterpointed against the noun-verb-noun-verb syntactical pattern. The strict economy of such an effect adds to its power.

It has been noted by critics that Marie's "great talent is to concentrate, to crystallize emotion is a single image" and indeed that

> the most recognizable "signature" of her work is the symbolic creature or artifact around which a *lai* is organized for maximum intensity and suggestiveness within the least possible narrative duration.[7]

In this respect Marie's work may be no more than a specially clear instance of a general truth, for it has been suggested that

> Any serious medieval artist sought to help his audience discover in his fiction—and hold in their memories—a residue of ideas and feelings more complex than the encapsulated truth of *fabliau* proverb, of Augustinian distinctions concerning cupidity and charity stated at their most general, or even an accurate summary of the action itself,

and that such "residues" were most likely to be conveyed through "images essential to the action, which . . . become central to the action's meaning as

[7] John Stevens, "The *granz biens* of Marie de France," in John Lawlor, ed., *Patterns of Love and Courtesy* (London: Edward Arnold, 1966), pp. 1–25, quotation from p. 21; Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante, trans., *The Lais of Marie de France* (New York: Dutton, 1978), p. 2. For earlier suggestions to the same effect see Leo Spitzer, "Marie de France—Dichterin von Problemmärchen," *ZRP* 50 (1930):29–67; Anna Granville Hatcher, "Lai du Chievrefueil, 61–78 and 107–13," *Romania* 71 (1950):330–44. As Stevens has pointed out, such symbolic objects can play important parts in longer medieval romances; see John Stevens, *Medieval Romance* (London: Hutchinson, 1973) chap. 7; and also Robert Hanning, "Poetic Emblems in Medieval Narrative Texts," in Lois Ebin, ed., *Vernacular Poetics in the Middle Ages* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 1984), pp. 1–32.

well."[8] *Le Fresne* is certainly one of the *lais* that focus their meaning in a symbolic object:[9] the ash tree after which both the *lai* and its heroine are named. The tree symbolizes not just the heroine but more generally the idea of loving protection, given first by the literal ash tree to the girl hidden in it as a baby and then by the girl to the man she loves:

> This impulse to protect and nurture runs through the *lai*, exemplified not only by Fresne and the *meschine*, but by the abbess, and even by the old porter of the abbey.... All these instances of nurture find their central symbol in the great shade tree that gives Fresne her name.[10]

Forms of the verb *nurir* are frequently used in *Le Fresne* (see lines 101, 223, 234, 302, 436, 440), but it is the ash tree that chiefly helps us grasp and remember this central idea. Perhaps too the tree, like a family tree, suggests the important idea of heredity and further integrates the story by symbolizing twinship, for "En quatre fors esteit quarré" (line 169).[11] Moreover, when Gurun's vassals wish him to replace his mistress, Le Fresne, with a bride on whom he may beget a legitimate heir, they propose a symbolic opposition between ash and hazel, Le Fresne and La Codre (lines 337–40):

> Pur le Freisne, que vus larrez,
> En eschange le Codre av[r]ez.

[8] V. A. Kolve, "Chaucer and the Visual Arts," in Derek Brewer, ed., *Geoffrey Chaucer* (London: Bell, 1974), pp. 290–320, quotations from pp. 297, 308. For more detailed study of the importance of such images in some of the *Canterbury Tales* see V. A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1984); for an illustration of the functioning of a central image in a Middle English romance, see Mortimer J. Donovan, "Middle English *Emaré* and the Cloth Worthily Wrought," in Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Learned and the Lewed: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 337–42.

[9] Glyn S. Burgess, "Symbolism in Marie de France's *Laustic* and *Le Fresne*," *BBSIA* 33 (1981):258–68, suggests that it may have been while writing *Le Fresne* that "Marie discovered the symbolic possibilities of names and objects" (p. 268).

[10] Hanning and Ferrante, trans., *The Lais of Marie de France*, pp. 89–90.

[11] I owe the last suggestion to Axton's paper. Michelle Freeman, "The Power of Sisterhood: Marie de France's 'Le Fresne,'" in Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowalewski, eds., *Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), pp. 250–64, notes that Marie's enterprise "emphasizes twinness at every turn" (p. 263 n. 9). Sarah Kay has suggested to me that the four branches of the ash tree might assimilate it momentarily to the cross, and this would certainly be relevant to the following discussion of the fruitfulness that accompanies its alleged sterility.

En la Codre ad noiz e deduiz;
Freisne ne portë unke fruiz.

This interpretation turns out to be quite wrong; the ash may literally bear no fruit, but Le Fresne bears the fruit of charity, selfless concern for others. Marie's prologue to her collection of *lais* testifies to her interest in interpretation; given the constantly repeated medieval metaphors of nut and shell, fruit and chaff, for inner and outer meaning, she seems likely to have had in mind that it will be not the hazel but the ash that will bear the *noiz* and *fruiz* of meaning. As a contemporary of Marie's put it (not referring to her *lais*), "L'estoire est paille, le sens est grains; le sen est fruit, l'estorie raims."[12] The significance focused in the symbol is rich beyond the possibility of exhaustion. The symbolic object helps us remember the story, but it also provokes further interpretation. This is indeed a work requiring of its readers to "gloser la lettre / Et de lur sen le surplus mettre" (Prologue 15–16).

Finally it must be added that, though the ash tree is unquestionably the central focus of the poem's organization, it is not the only symbolic object the poem contains. The ring and the brocade that accompany the baby and that are given emphasis by being described in lavish detail are intended precisely as indications of aristocratic origin (lines 132–34):

La u la meschine ert trovee,
Bien sachent tuit vereiement
Que ele est nee de bone gent.

That is exactly what happens, for when the tokens are found by the porter and his daughter, "Bien surent cil tut a scïent / Que ele est nee de haute gent" (lines 209–10). Yet, as we have seen, for Le Fresne herself the tokens take on a meaning beyond this, concentrating her memories of her kindly upbringing and mysterious origin—as mysterious as the origin of the brocade itself, brought by her father "De Costentinoble, u il fu" (line 125). And the brocade eventually shows the selfless love of this "most passive of Marie's heroines"[13] (when she uses it to cover what is intended to be Gurun's

[12] This passage, from a twelfth-century *Livre des rois*, is cited by Stevens, *Medieval Romance*, p. 153, from *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. Eugène Vinaver, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 1:lxxvi.

[13] Glyn S. Burgess, *The Lais of Marie de France: Text and Context* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), p. 131.

marriage bed) and then identifies her to her mother and thus unravels the whole story. Whether the ring becomes her wedding ring we are left to imagine.

The Middle English *Lai le Freine* is likely to have been composed some century and a half after Marie wrote her *lais*. The one manuscript version is unfortunately imperfect, lacking the lines corresponding to Marie's lines 99–116 and from line 363 to the end, so that a complete comparison is impossible.[14] The English poet is very conscious of writing a translation. He adds a prologue explaining what Breton *lais* are (lines 1–18); this is also found in two of the three manuscript versions of *Sir Orfeo*, though not in the version occurring in the same manuscript as *Lai le Freine*. It is thus evidently an all-purpose *lai* prologue; going through the various kinds of material found in Breton *lais*, it says rather emphatically "& mani þer beþ of fairy" (line 10), which does not apply to *Le Freine* at all, though it does to *Sir Orfeo*. Then the poet explains the title for the benefit of an English-speaking audience (lines 23–26):

> Bifel a cas in Breteyne,
> whereof was made Lay le Frain;
> In Ingliche for to tellen ywis
> of an asche for soþe it is. . . .

This is not unlike what Marie herself does at the end of *Chevrefoil* or the beginning of *Bisclavret*, where she explains the title in Breton and Norman, or in *Laüstic*, where she explains it in Breton, French, and English. The English poet, though, repeats his explanation later (lines 231–34):

> Þe Freyns of þe asche is a freyn
> after þe language of Breteyn;
> forþe Le Frein men clepeþ þis lay
> more þan asche in ich cuntray.

I suspect that he could not assume a multilingual culture as confidently as Marie could. Thus he completely omits Marie's passage (F 335–42), explain-

[14] When *Lai le Freine* was first edited, by Henry Weber in his *Metrical Romances of the XIII, XIV and XV Centuries*, vol. I (Edinburgh: A. Constable, 1810), Weber filled the lacunae with his own pastiche of Middle English verse. The additions are so skillful that they have continued to appear in modern editions, and it is not unknown for modern scholars to overlook their inauthenticity; see, e.g., John Finlayson, "The Form of the Middle English *Lay*," *ChauR* 19 (1984–85):352–68 (p. 360).

ing the name of Le Fresne's sister and giving the play on ash and hazel. (That omission is also connected with his lack of interest in symbolism, to which I shall return). And he transfers the whole story from Brittany to Britain; it is convenient that in Old French and Middle English they have the same name, so that Marie's "En Bretaine" (line 3) can become his "in Bretayne" (line 23) without change. He goes on to say that his two knights lived "In þe west cuntre" (line 29), which might well mean Cornwall, another Celtic area.

Various other changes, closely interconnected and therefore difficult to set down in any but an arbitrary order, go along with the change in language. One change, discussed by Stemmler (pp. 259ff.) and commonly found in Middle English romances with French sources, is a move down the social scale. The characters of Marie's *lais* are almost exclusively aristocratic, and her rare references to those of lower rank are generally unfavorable.[15] In *Lai le Freine*, the characters are still described as knights and ladies, but their social status is less exclusive than in the French version. The English poet leaves out nearly all Marie's references to high birth; thus when Guroun's knights describe the maiden they want him to marry (E 311ff.) they do not say that her father "per est a vus" (F 332). Earlier, when Le Fresne herself is described, as seen by Gurun, Marie emphasizes her aristocratic manners: she is *curteise* and "Franche esteit e de bone escole / [E] en semblant e en parole" (lines 239–40), and later not only "Mut . . . bele" but "Mut . . . enseignee, / Sage, curteise e afeitee" (lines 253–54). But the English poet just says that "in al Inglond þer nas non / a fairer maiden þan hye was on" (lines 238–39), and in the later passage he adds details of a highly conventional kind about her physical beauty but again says little of her manners: ". . . her semblaunt & hir gentrise, / her louesum eiȝen, her rode so briȝt" (lines 268–69).

The manners actually displayed in the English version are considerably freer than those in the French. This is especially noticeable in the scene where a messenger is sent to tell Le Fresne's future parents of the birth of the twin boys. This lower-class character is a stronger personal presence in the English and is also on easier terms with his superiors. He is addressed in direct speech by his master (E 39–42); then on arrival he greets everyone in the hall, "þe lord, þe leuedi, þe meyne alle" (line 46), *before* kneeling to the lord. It is difficult to be sure, of course, to what extent such changes reflect real differences between aristocratic manners in twelfth-century

[15] Cf. Burgess, *The Lais of Marie de France*, pp. 129–30.

France and fourteenth-century England, rather than different imaginings of aristocratic manners by an aristocratic French poet and a nonaristocratic English poet. What follows, however, makes the latter explanation seem more likely. The messenger engages in a friendly dialogue with the lord (lines 49–54):

> "He bad þat þou schust to him te,
> & for his loue his gossibbe be."
> "Is his leuedi delivered wiþ sounde?"
> "Ȝa, sir, yþonked be God þe stounde."
> "& wheþer a maidenchild oþer a knaue?"
> "Tvay sones, sire, God hem saue."

Not even in England would a messenger really have been likely to address his social superior by the familiar "þou" instead of the respectful "ye": Marie would surely have been shocked by this solecism.[16] As the scene continues, the lady addresses her malicious remarks about her neighbor directly to the messenger (and that of course makes them rather more insulting) (lines 65–69):

> Ich haue wonder, þou messanger,
> who was þi lordis conseiler,
> to teche him about to sende
> & telle schame in iche an ende,
> þat his wiif haþ to childer ybore. . . .

We are then told that "Þe messanger was sore aschamed" (line 73). In Marie's version honor and shame were exclusively aristocratic concerns; in the English version nearly all the references to *honur* and *hunte* are omitted, and those that remain are not associated with any particular rank.

One way in which the sense of an aristocratic setting is conveyed in the French is through the description of material luxury, especially in the account of the tokens intended to mark the baby girl's high birth. Marie says, "En un chief de mut bon chesil / Envolupent l'enfant gentil" (who

[16] It must of course be remembered that where only a single manuscript version survives we can have little certainty whether a particular reading is scribal or authorial; on the other hand, in the absence of evidence to the contrary there is no reason to reject "þou" as scribal. It might be guessed that in using "þou" the poet has in mind the social relation of the messenger's master, rather than of the messenger himself, toward the recipient, but the singular form remains a solecism on the messenger's lips.

incidentally in Middle English [line 139] becomes simply "þe litel maiden") (lines 121–31):

> E desus un paile roé –
> Ses sires l'i ot aporté
> De Costentinoble, u il fu;
> Unques si bon n'orent veü.
> A une pice de sun laz
> Un gros anel li lie al braz.
> De fin or i aveit un' unce;
> El chestun out une jagunce;
> La verge entur esteit lettree. . . .

In the corresponding English passage (lines 137–42) much of this luxurious detail is omitted, and this once more has the effect of making the symbolic objects less prominent and less memorable.

In the messenger scene discussed above, the reduction in aristocratic formality in the English version was partly a consequence of the greater use of direct speech, and Stemmler (pp. 248–49) has rightly stressed this as a general difference between Marie and her English adapters. In *Lai le Freine* the substitution of direct for indirect speech continues throughout. After the twin girls are born, the English poet invents a new character, the midwife,[17] and adds a speech in which the lady tells her to kill one of the infants (E 116–18). Once Le Fresne has been discovered in the ash tree, he gives the porter an eight-line direct speech to the abbess (E 211–18) in place of Marie's two lines of reported speech — "L'aventure li veut cunter / De l'enfant cum il le trovat" (lines 214–15) — and then turns the abbess's reply into direct speech. When Marie reports Gurun's thoughts about his love for Le Fresne and the difficulty of getting to know her (F 255–60), the English poet converts part of them into what might be called *cogitatio recta* (lines 273–76):

> He þouȝt, "ȝif ich com hir to
> more þan ichaue ydo,
> þe abbesse wil souchy gile
> & voide hir in a litel while. . . ."

[17] Since the midwife is introduced just before the first lacuna in the text, it is impossible to be certain whether or not she is identical with the maiden who abandons Le Fresne.

Then his plan to become a benefactor of the abbey is turned into direct speech to the abbess (lines 279–84). The most obvious effect of this increase in the proportion of direct speech is to make the story more dramatic; another effect is to lessen our sense of the storyteller's controlling presence, for *oratio obliqua* creates at least a subliminal awareness that someone is acting as reporter, turning the first person into the third and pushing tenses further back into the past.

Another difference between the French and English versions of *Le Fresne*, which is also one commonly found between French and English romances, is that the English is more pious. Among the additions indicating piety are the following: Le Fresne's mother gave birth "When God wild" (line 85); the abbess has the child christened (lines 227–28); an added motive for Gurun to marry rather than retain Le Fresne as his mistress is that "holy chirche comandeþ eke" (line 312); and the statement that no one knew Gurun's intended wife to be his mistress's twin sister is qualified by "for soþe y say bot God alon" (line 334). My impression is that these additions do not involve any great depth of meaning: rather than possessing theological or allegorical significance, they simply reveal a stronger sense of religious propriety. Perhaps one of the English poet's omissions might be explained in the same way: he leaves out the lines in which Gurun reminds Le Fresne that if she stayed in the abbey and became pregnant her aunt would be very angry (F 280–84). And again, when Le Fresne has moved in with him, the English poet adds, "& þus sche lad wiþ him hir liif / riȝt as sche hadde ben his wedded wiif" (lines 309–10), almost as though "mistress" were a French category the validity of which he did not recognize.

I now turn to a different kind of change made by the English poet – not, I suspect, a conscious change, but one arising from deep-rooted and long-lasting differences between the two languages. Here are some more recent remarks about French and English. The French poet St.-John Perse reports as follows on a conversation he had with André Gide in 1909:

> He told me of the attraction that an exhaustive study of the English language was beginning to exert over him. I, for my part, deplored the denseness of such a concrete language, the excessive richness of its vocabulary and its pleasure in trying to reincarnate the thing itself, as in ideographic writing; whereas French, a more abstract language, which tries to signify rather than represent the meaning, uses words only as fiduciary symbols like coins as values of monetary exchange. English for me was still at the swapping stage.

There was some nodding and shaking of the head. That was precisely, if he was to be believed, just what he most needed at the moment: to take on weight and mass in the language of Newton.[18]

The mathematical abstraction of French, which separates words from things; the "weight and mass" of English: the languages already possessed something of these characteristics long before English was "the language of Newton" (or French that of Descartes). This can be seen most clearly in the two poets' treatments of the maiden's nighttime journey with the baby girl. We saw what a startling effect Marie created with the sudden sensory detail of the dogs barking and roosters crowing, and it was startling precisely because nothing else about the journey was imagined in concrete terms. The English poet seems impelled to imagine it concretely.[19] For him a journey must take place at some time of year, so he imagines it as a winter night, and this brings with it much further sensory detail. If it is winter, the night must be long, so he has the maiden traveling "al þe winterlong niȝt" (line 149). And, having traveled at length, then naturally "sche wax al weri & gan abide" (line 152), and it is while she is resting that she hears the dogs and the roosters. The English poet exactly reproduces Marie's elegant line (though in reverse order)—"cokkes crowe & houndes berk" (line 154)—as though he too was struck by its effectiveness, but it must be admitted that it is less striking in the English version because it is no longer an isolated concrete detail in a field of abstraction.

The English poet further imagines the night as clear, crisp, and moonlit—"Þe weder was clere, þe mone was liȝt" (line 150)—and that explains why the maiden is able to see details not visible in the French version: "Walles & hous fele hye seiȝe, / a chirche wiþ stepel fair & heiȝe" (lines 157–58). Such a night would of course be cold, and the bodily sensation of coldness, which Marie never mentions, becomes an important part of the imagined scene. The maiden places the baby in the tree "for cold" (line 177); when the porter's daughter puts it to her breast, "Sche bad it souke & it nold, / for it was neiȝe ded for cold" (lines 203–204); but once she has lit a fire and warmed it, she does persuade it to feed, "& seþþen laid it to slepe

[18] St.-J. Perse, "André Gide: 1909," *SR* 60 (1952):593–604 (p. 601), cited by Donald Davie, *Articulate Energy: An Enquiry into the Syntax of English Poetry* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), p. 97.

[19] Stemmler points to the contrast between Marie's treatment of this scene—"knapp und nicht sehr anschaulich geschildert"—and the adapter's addition of "zahlreiche realistisch beobachtete Einzelheiten" (p. 258) including his emphasis on the cold (p. 259).

warm" (line 208). Marie mentions warming the child, but in the English version the warmth is evoked more strongly by the contrast with the preceding cold.

There are still other ways in which the English poet makes the episode present to the senses, as, for example, by adding the following lines, which evoke visual, auditory, and muscular effects (lines 180–82):

> With þat it gan to dawe liȝt;
> Þe foules vp & song on bouȝ,
> & acremen ȝede to þe plouȝ.

This is a small scene in a small poem, but it is extraordinarily vivid. (It evidently impressed one medieval contemporary, for the author of *Sir Degaré* seems to have imitated it when he had to narrate another episode in which an unwanted baby was got rid of for its mother by a helpful maiden.)[20] A certain price is paid, though, for the gain in sensory vividness, and this concerns the reduction in symbolic potential mentioned earlier. The ash tree, the crucial symbol in Marie's poem, is naturalized here, so that its significance is confined to its material nature and function:[21] "þe bodi was holow as mani on is" (line 176). This explains how the maiden could place the child in the tree and how it could provide shelter from the cold, but at the same time it makes it just like other ash trees. Its significance now lies in its relation to a reality outside the poem, rather than in its power to concentrate the poem's inner meaning. And the English poet leaves out Marie's statement that "En quatre fors esteit quarré" (line 169), with its possible connection with the two pairs of twins. It would seem that for the adapter Marie's distinctive way of focusing the whole poem's meaning in one or more symbolic objects was simply of no interest; he may not even have noticed it.

The adapter also shows little awareness of the distinctive feature of Marie's narrative technique noted above: repetition which has the effect of suggesting how events may be seen in different ways by different characters. He removes most of this renarration, along with the occasional examples of

[20] See G. Schleich, ed., *Sire Degarre* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1929), lines 219–22 with listed variants. The literary argument for assuming that this was the direction of the imitation—namely, that the details are more fully integrated in *Le Freine* than in *Degaré*—supports the argument on other grounds given by Nicolas Jacobs, "*Sir Degarré*, *Lay le Freine*, *Beves of Hamtoun* and the 'Auchinleck Bookshop,'" *N&Q*, n.s., 29 (1982):294–301.

[21] Noted in Axton's paper.

prenarration, and so in his version the story follows a more straightforward chronological sequence. A particularly clear instance of this is found in the following account of Le Fresne's growing up (lines 241–50):

> & whan hye couþe ouȝt of manhed,
> hye bad þe abbesse hir wis & rede
> which were her kin, on or oþer,
> fader or moder, soster or broþer.
> Þe abbesse hir in conseyl toke,
> to tellen hir hye noȝt forsoke,
> hou hye was founden in al þing,
> & tok hir þe cloþ & þe ring,
> & bad hir kepe it in þat stede;
> & þer whiles sche liued so sche dede.

Here the adapter is careful to avoid repetition: he does not let the abbess retell the story of the girl's discovery but simply summarizes: "hou hye was founden in al þing." There is no passage corresponding to this at the same point in the French, but the English poet has collected these details from a later passage of Marie's (F 295–308), occurring when Le Fresne agrees to live with Gurun. In Marie's version the effect given is of Le Fresne looking back over her own past; it is seen from her point of view, in a way that encourages us to imagine her state of mind at this crisis of her life (nostalgia perhaps for the safety she is leaving behind), and at a point when the brocade and the ring are much nearer to enabling her true origin to be recognized. It is easy to understand why the English poet should have reshaped the narrative in this way, so as to put it in a more rational sequence; this is something he does throughout, eliminating what must have seemed to him pointless repetitions and anticipations; but the effect is greatly to reduce the story's suggestive power. On the whole, outward, spatial perspective is stronger in the English version; this goes with its greater concreteness, as when we experience the nighttime journey from the maiden's viewpoint, seeing, hearing, feeling cold, just as she does. But inward perspective is weaker; unlike Marie's version, the English *Lai le Freine* is not a drama of consciousness but one of event and speech. It gives us less stimulus to engage in imaginative construction of the inner states of the characters, just as it gives us less stimulus to engage in imaginative reconstruction of the meaning of the whole story by meditating on the symbolic objects that focus that meaning.

In turning now to *Lanval*, I want to begin with a summary of the story as

Marie tells it. I do this both because I shall be arguing that the story itself has a meaning and because one of the English versions changes it in important ways. *Lanval* concerns a knight of King Arthur's who begins by being miserably bereft of wealth and love but receives compensation for this when a lady (evidently a fairy) falls in love with him, makes herself known to him, and grants her love and an unending supply of wealth on condition that he reveals their relationship to no one. He lives a knightly life of great splendor for some time, during which she comes to him secretly in answer to his thoughts. But one day Queen Guinevere offers him her love; when he refuses it, she accuses him of homosexuality, and he indignantly answers that he has a mistress whose poorest servant is more beautiful and virtuous than she. These rash words have two consequences: the queen accuses him of having propositioned and insulted her, so that he is put on trial and can escape banishment only by providing evidence of the truth of his boast; and the fairy lady abandons him because he has revealed their relationship. But in the end she relents, appears in person at the trial to vindicate him, and finally carries him off with her to the island of Avalon (lines 644–46):

> La fu ravi li dameiseaus.
> Nul hum n'en oï plus parler,
> Ne jeo n'en sai avant cunter.

Even the most traditional scholars agree that this story may be seen as one of wish fulfillment,[22] and this no doubt accounts for its widespread popu-

[22] E.g., Bliss, ed., *Sir Launfal*, p. 43. The suggestion may have been made first by S. Foster Damon, "Marie de France: Psychologist of Courtly Love," *PMLA* 44 (1929):968–96 (p. 984). One recent scholar who rejects it, on the ground of anachronism, is Paula Clifford, *Marie de France: Lais* (London: Grant and Cutler, 1982), p. 60. The notion of the wish-fulfilling dream did in fact exist in the Middle Ages, for example, in the widely used schoolbook known as the *Liber Catonianus*, which includes Claudian's famous passage on how our dreams reflect our waking preoccupations and glosses his "furto gaudet amans" with phrases such as "id est toto coitu" and "furtivo choitu" (see Robert A. Pratt, "Chaucer's Claudian," *Speculum* 22 [1947]:419–29, especially pp. 421–23 and n. 27). We do not of course have to suppose that this was consciously intended by Marie de France. Of the supernatural events in her *lais*, that which most readily allows itself to be interpreted as an example of wish fulfillment occurs in *Yonec*. The young wife locked in a tower by her aged husband soliloquizes about *aventures* in which knights and ladies found lovers to relieve their care, and concludes: "Si ceo poet estrë e ceo fu, / Si unc a nul est avenu, / Deu, ki de tut ad poësté, / Il en face ma volenté!" (lines 101–104). At that moment a hawk flies through her window and is transformed into a handsome knight who becomes her lover.

larity in many versions. The young knight who is the normal hero of medieval romance, an idealized everyman, here gains without effort what every young man wishes, wealth and love; then he loses them again—and this produces the tension of the story, which in Marie's version takes the form of a courtroom drama—but, by sheer force of wishing, he regains what he has lost. The story differs from that of *Le Fresne* in including a supernatural element; it therefore requires a different kind of interpretation. *Le Fresne*, for all its reliance on coincidence and symbolism, is a story of possible events in the human world, whereas, in the encounter with the fairy lady and its consequences, *Lanval* includes events regarded as impossible by modern readers and probably by Marie herself. Several of Marie's *lais* are of this general type, and many modern readers would wish to interpret the supernatural elements in them as having psychological significance; but it would doubtless be a mistake to suppose either that Marie intended objective magic to symbolize subjective fantasy or—perhaps more important—that, in the "mélange indissociable du merveilleux et du rëel"[23] of the whole collection, she and her public would have distinguished between objective and subjective, outer and inner, precisely as we do. In *Lanval* she brings the outward magic and the inward wish unusually close together. When Lanval first encounters the fairy world, though "La mot de fée n'est jamais prononcée,"[24] there are explicit outward signs of the supernatural: he dismounts by a stream (the usual river barrier between this world and the next), and his horse trembles violently. On the other hand, he is alone, in a sleeping posture, lying with his head resting on his cloak, and he is thinking of his troubles, when the solution to them emerges, as if in a dream, with the appearance of the fairy lady's maidens to summon him to her. Again, the fairy lady corresponds to an obvious male erotic fantasy, lying as she does half-naked, exposed and displayed to Lanval's gaze: "Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight."[25] She promises to be present to him whenever he wishes, but only

[23] Ménard, *Les Lais de Marie de France*, p. 182.

[24] Ibid.

[25] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corp., 1972), p. 47, discussing the differential "social presence" of the sexes. Marie de France tends to avoid voyeuristic moments in her *lais* (e.g., *Guigemar* 531–34); *Lanval* is a rare exception, a fact which may indicate her awareness of the wish-fulfilling nature of the scene. Doubtless there are also elements of female fantasy involved in the lady's self-display and more generally in her role as wealthy, self-pleasing, and successful seductress; though I think these are subordinate to male fantasy in *Lanval* (and still more in *Sir Launfal*), they would be worth further exploration.

where a man may "aver s'amie / Sanz reproece, sanz vileinie" (lines 165–66)—that is, when no one else is present—and he is forbidden to disclose their love. The conditions are precisely those of a pleasant fantasy, whether dream or daydream, substituted for an unpleasant reality.[26] The queen's accusation of homosexuality might be seen as belonging to the same realm of sexual fantasy, here anxiety about gender identity. One reason why the tension of the trial scene is so powerful is that it is hard to believe that Lanval's secret love is anything *but* a fantasy, and we do not really expect the lady to return to save him once he has allowed reality to impinge on his fantasy world. What could be more prosaically literal than the "innombrables questions de procédure vétilleuse"[27] to which his fantasy is submitted? Yet the lady does return; the dream comes true, he is completely vindicated, and he disappears forever inside it, carried off to Avalon, "un isle que mut est beaus" (line 643), itself cut off from normal reality by the barrier of water all round it.

This is a story, then, in which fantasy plays an unusually strong part: it is not just a fantasy, but a fantasy about fantasy, a wish fulfillment about wish fulfillment. Marie tells a story about what seems to be a story that Lanval tells himself; in her story his story comes true, and he ends by being absorbed into the realm of story, the realm of what "nus recuntent li Bretun" (line 642). Naturally enough, she ends by saying, "Ne jeo n'en sai avant cunter" (line 646). (The closing lines of *Lanval*, with the repetition "recuntent . . . cunter," place a strong emphasis on storytelling.) But what has been said so far may not go far enough in recognizing the element of fantasy in the story *Lanval* tells. Wish-fulfilling fantasy may seem to be offered as compensation for an unpleasant reality but the "reality" in which the hero begins can equally be interpreted as a fantasy, not of wish fulfillment but of persecution. Lanval is a knight of "valur, . . . largesce, . . . beauté, . . . prüesce" (lines 21–22), whose very virtues cause him to be envied and to be singled out for disregard when King Arthur is distributing "femmes et tere" (line 17) to everyone else (lines 24–26):

> Tel li mustra semblant d'amur,
> S'al chevaler mesavenist,

[26] Cf. Lee C. Ramsey, *Chivalric Romances* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), pp. 148–49: "The paradise offered by the fairy lady is a dream world, a land of the imagination, and attempts to investigate it or to make it known to others result in its loss. . . . Launfal's mistress comes to him in a dream, experienced only by him."

[27] Sienaert, *Les Lais de Marie de France*, p. 104.

Ja une feiz ne l'en pleinsist.
Fiz a rei fu de haut parage,
Mes luin ert de sun heritage.

Suppose I were to go about saying that I was the son of a king but inexplicably cut off from my inheritance; that it was my virtues and good looks that made everyone envy me; that I was surrounded by people who pretended to respect me but would really be delighted if misfortune befell me; and that everyone else was being given valuable presents, with myself as the sole exception. I would surely be diagnosed as a victim of persecutory paranoia—that is, unless I were a little child, because such feelings of persecution are common childhood fantasies, which are regarded as paranoid only if they survive into adult life. Arthur's court may be seen as symbolizing the family, with Arthur as father and the knights as his sons;[28] and it is a normal part of growing up for a child to feel that his siblings are being unjustly favored against himself and to fantasize about having a parent different from the one who actually has the power to give or withhold love. If Arthur is father, then obviously Guinevere is mother; and just as there are two versions of father (bad and good, Arthur and Lanval's "real" but absent father), so there are two versions of mother (good and bad, the fairy lady and Guinevere). The fairy lady offers Lanval everything he could possibly want, and especially what father denies him, wealth and sex. And Lanval, like a baby, is not required to *do* anything to receive mother's bounty: there are no knightly enterprises to be undertaken; she simply offers herself, saying, "...jo vus aim sur tute rien" (line 116). We have, in effect, the nurturing situation of *Le Fresne*, but now seen from the point of view of an adult who imagines himself as the baby. It is as if, like mother to baby, the fairy lady manifested herself as food to be devoured. That indeed is how Marie puts it when she speaks of the supper Lanval was served at his first meeting with her (lines 181–88):

Od s'amie prist le super:
Ne feseit mie a refuser,
Mut fut servi curteisement,
E il a grant joie le prent.

[28] For this general way of reading medieval romances, see Derek Brewer, "The Interpretation of Dream, Folktale and Romance with Special Reference to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *NM* 77 (1976):569–81; Derek Brewer, *Symbolic Stories: Traditional Narratives of the Family Drama in English Literature* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1980).

Un entremés i ot plener,
Que mut pleiseit al chevalier:
Kar s'amie baisout sovent
E acolat estreitement.

But this reenactment as fantasy of what for the baby is reality inevitably causes confusion in human relations. If Lanval's relationship with the fairy lady is pre-Oedipal and guiltless, his relationship with Guinevere is Oedipal and guilty. She too offers herself to him without any initiative on his part. But she is a seductive mother, wickedly proposing to take the son in her husband's place (or, to put it differently, this scene is a repetition of the earlier seduction by the fairy lady, but now regarded in the light of a post-Oedipal awareness). Hence Lanval's horrified repudiation of the betrayal that would be involved, and his reaffirmation of his earlier, more innocent fantasy. At this point the story might take either of two different turns: on this contact with post-Oedipal consciousness, the child's fantasy of total, passive possession of mother might be repressed, leaving Lanval to make his way to maturity, like so many other romance heroes, by performing worthy deeds and thus gaining a wife and land; or the original wish fulfillment might take over completely. The latter is, of course, what happens; after agonizingly intense wishings, the fairy lady, the good version of mother, returns. This may fairly be called a regressive fantasy, for

> The liberation of an individual, as he grows up, from the authority of his parents is one of the most necessary though one of the most painful results brought about by the course of his development.[29]

So Freud puts it, and the stories told by many romances can be interpreted as offering a kind of reassurance about the possibility of growing up: despite all obstacles the son *can* separate himself from his parents, make his own way in the world, and become a husband and father in his turn.[30] That is not the message of *Lanval*. Its message is rather: life is hard, but never

[29] This is the first sentence of Freud's paper "Der Familienroman der Neurotiker," trans., James Strachey, here quoted from Angela Richards, ed., *On Sexuality*, The Pelican Freud Library, vol. 7 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 221.

[30] Cf. Brewer, *Symbolic Stories*, p. 11: "The emerging adult successfully casts off childhood, frees himself or herself from parents, proves his capacity to stand on his own feet, finds his wife, or she her husband, and is then reconciled with the parents; in other words, is fully integrated into adult society. Fairy tales and most medieval romances are essentially stories of the successful *rite de passage*."

mind, you can go back instead of going forward; you can be reunited with mother. So when the fairy lady ultimately returns, Lanval has still performed no knightly deeds, and when she leaves, even though the king and everyone else agrees that he has been vindicated, he does not resume his place in the world, but "Sur le palefrei detriers li / De plain eslais Lanval sailli" (lines 639–40). To be riding a palfrey behind a lady, rather than riding a warhorse on one's own, is not a very knightly situation;[31] in fact, it is the situation of a child. And in these terms Avalon, to which he goes with her, is analogous to the water-surrounded womb; the son is reunited with mother forever by ceasing to have an independent existence of his own.

I remarked above that there is no reason to believe that Marie wrote with the intention of using the outward, supernatural events of her story to symbolize psychological events and states. Her conscious intentions are beyond recall; unlike the authors of many romances, from *La Queste del Saint Graal* to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, she did not incorporate a gloss in her work but left her readers to supply their own interpretations. Nor does she make it easy to interpret her attitude toward the stories she tells. As *Lanval* begins, Arthur is "li pruz e li curteis" (line 6), yet he is apparently doing nothing to resist the attack of the Scots and Picts on his kingdom, and his treatment of Lanval is arbitrary and unjust. Again, she initially invites our sympathy for Lanval in terms that may indicate the fellow feeling of one who had also been a stranger in a foreign court[32]—

> Ore est Lanval mut entrepris,
> Mut est dolent et mut pensis.
> Seignurs, ne vus esmerveillez:
> Hume estrange descunseillez
> Mut est dolent en autre tere,
> Quant il ne seit u sucurs quere (33–38)

—yet she later appears to stand at a certain distance from his retreat into the fairy world, and to emphasize that only in stories are such possibilities available. The tale is pleasing, but the hero's role is unheroic, and, even

[31] Critics have commented on the possibly unknightly implications of Lanval's earlier abandonment of his horse by the stream: see, e.g., Michèle Koubichkine, "A propos du *Lai de Lanval*," *MA* 78 (1972):467–88 (p. 474).

[32] Cf. Ernst Hoepffner, *Les Lais de Marie de France* (Paris: Boivin, 1935), p. 50; Ménard, *Les Lais de Marie de France*, pp. 114, 116; Burgess, *The Lais of Marie de France*, p. 20, notes the frequency of "personal interventions" by Marie in this story (as in the following quotation above) and sees this as revealing her identification with her hero.

considered in historical terms, our last glimpse does not show him in a knightly posture. The fantasy that I have been suggesting the story embodies becomes (though it may not begin as) a male fantasy, that of the son who gets mother all to himself. If there is some detachment in Marie's attitude toward it, that may be partly because her gender made it easier for her to see her hero from outside; thus she is less committed to Lanval's fantasy of erotic fulfillment than to that of the young wife of *Yonec*. If Marie has a role in the Lanval story at all, it is not as Lanval but as the fairy lady who confines him to the world of fiction. He may imagine that he is devouring her; actually she, as storyteller if not as mother, is devouring him.

Much of what was said about the Middle English *Lai le Freine* is equally true of *Sir Landevale*. Like *Lai le Freine* it is properly described as a translation: it is close to the original, in the accentual English equivalent of the same verse form, and shows an equally good knowledge of French. Neither translator makes one suspect that his changes from the original are due to misunderstanding. Thus the author of *Sir Landevale* has a habit of inserting conventional similes, familiar from the common style of Middle English romances and lyrics. When the lady finally appears at Lanval's trial, Marie describes her as follows (lines 563–70):

> Le cors ot gent, basse la hanche,
> Le col plus blanc que neif sur branche,
> Les oilz ot vairs et blanc le vis,
> Bele buche, neis bien asis,
> Les surcilz bruns et bel le frunt
> E le chef cresp e aukes blunt;
> Fil d'or ne gette tel luur
> Cum si chevel cuntre le jur.

The corresponding English passage is (lines 431–37):

> This lady [was] bright as blossom on brere,
> Her jeen lofsum, bright and clere;
> Jentyll and jolyff as birde on bowgh,
> In all thing faire ynowgh.
> As rose in May her rude was rede,
> Here here shynyng on her hede
> As gold wyre yn sonn bright.

For Marie's elegant play of (mainly chiastic) verbal, syntactical, and metrical patterns the adapter has substituted the additional similes of lines 431,

433, and 435. He plainly grasps the full force of the one simile taken from the French, since his "yn sonn bright" translates Marie's "cuntre le jur," and, though he omits Marie's other, more delicate simile — "plus blanc que neif sur branche" — the change was not because he failed to understand it, for he had inserted a related simile in the description of the lady on her first appearance, calling her "white as lely in May, / Or snowe þat fallith yn wynterday" (lines 105–106). There are a few more similes in the English than in the French, and they are somewhat more concrete and specific, but they seem to belong to the stylistic register of fourteenth-century English nearest to that of Marie's French.

Overall, *Sir Landevale* is shorter than *Lanval* (538 lines as against 646); but abbreviation is not achieved, as we found it partly was in *Lai le Freine*, by omitting Marie's narrative repetitions, for *Lanval* has few such repetitions. (This fact tends to support the interpretation of the story as the hero's fantasy: whereas in *Le Fresne* the characters share the stage among them, and none constitutes a central consciousness, in *Lanval* the hero is present almost continuously, and we are given little encouragement to imagine events in the perspective of any consciousness but Lanval's own.) A good example of an abbreviated passage is the dialogue between Guinevere and Lanval at *Lanval* 277–302; Marie's twenty-six lines are reduced to twelve in *Sir Landevale* (lines 223–34), partly by omission of Guinevere's accusation of homosexuality (perhaps on grounds of propriety) and partly by pruning of that and other details from Lanval's response. At the same time, some passages are added in *Sir Landevale*, the longest being the dialogue between Landevale and the lady at lines 507–24 (the reasons for which I shall consider later). The total reduction in length of more than one hundred lines appears to be produced by a series of local choices rather than in accordance with a global plan.

Among the more systematic changes, a very prominent one, which we also found in *Le Freine*, is the shift from reported to direct speech (cf. Stemmler, pp. 248–49). The English poet has added fifteen direct speeches. Some are extremely short, one indeed consisting of the single word "Nay!" (line 500), and he has also omitted two or three direct speeches; but it is significant that the longest single addition consists almost entirely of dialogue, and the overall effect is certainly of a more dramatic narrative. (On the other hand, I do not find, as in *Le Freine*, that the effect of this change is to remove the sense of narratorial presence from the story: once more the overwhelming centrality of the hero in *Lanval* means that there the narrator's presence is attenuated and makes itself felt chiefly as an intangible but pervasive coolness.)

A second systematic change, again as in *Le Freine*, is the addition of sensory detail. There are many small examples all through the poem, but one noticeable cluster (yet once more as in *Le Freine*) has to do with the action's physical setting. When Lanval first meets the fairy lady's maidens, the English poet tells us that he was journeying westward "Betwene a water and a forest" (line 36), the sun was warm (line 37), it made him feel hot (line 39), and so he lay down "Vndre the shadow of a tree" (line 42); a little later the maidens emerge "oute of holtys hore" (line 52). The details fit together and help us enter into his experience more fully; to some extent they naturalize it, but at the same time the location between river and forest has a liminality which is appropriate for the appearance of the supernatural.[33] Another cluster of sensory details evokes the lady's physical appearance:[34] when Lanval first sees her, so enticingly half-naked, the English poet adds, "Al her clothes byside her lay" (line 99), which is more realistic and also more suggestive.[35] Before replying to her first speech, Landevale "sette hym down by her syde" (line 121); this uncourtly freedom of manners provides one of several specifications of spatial relationship added in the Middle English. When the lady arrives to save Lanval at his trial, the poet again gives more detail about her clothing and person, adding (lines 439–42):

> A crown was vpon her hede,
> Al of precious stones and gold rede;
> Clothid she was yn purpyll pall,
> Her body gentill and medill smale.

There are numerous other small items of the same kind. I suggested that in *Le Freine* one consequence of such additions of sensory detail was to reduce the symbolic to the literal and the natural; in *Sir Landevale* this effect is scarcely noticeable, because symbolism is less important in its French source.

Another kind of change paralleled in *Le Freine* is the dilution of court-

[33] Williams, "*Lanval* and *Sir Landevale*," p. 87, notes that "most of the additional details . . . can be paralleled in similar situations in tales of contact with the Otherworld, and it is not unlikely that the translator supplied them himself from his knowledge of the conventions."

[34] Stemmler discusses this aspect of both *Sir Landevale* and *Sir Launfal* in some detail (pp. 249ff.), but chiefly in connection with the English adapters' loss of the "unheimliche and unwirkliche Atmosphäre" (p. 250) with which Marie surrounds the supernatural.

[35] Cf. Williams, "*Lanval* and *Sir Landevale*," p. 89.

liness. Abstract virtues belonging to the *höfische Wertwelt* tend to be left out or to be replaced with more concrete terms. A typical example is that in Marie's account of the fairy lady's summons her messengers refer to "ma dameisele, / Que tant est pruz e sage e bele" (lines 71–72), but in *Sir Landevale* this becomes "My lady, that is bright as floure" (line 71). Another example occurs when the lady tells Lanval she will come to him in any place where it is possible "Sanz reproece, sanz vileinie" (line 166), while the translator just says, "sum derne stede" (line 159). Action becomes more violent and drastic, manners bolder and coarser. If Landevale's response to the fairy lady lacks refinement—"He clyppid her abowte the swire, / And kyssyd her many a sith" (lines 136–37)—this is not surprising when she has already told him (from a courtly point of view, most indelicately) that "For thy loue now J swete" (line 114).[36] The English poet's creation of a coherent and almost self-sufficient material world arouses suspicion that the heat of the sunny day may have been responsible for both perspiration and passion. Some of Marie's comments on manners are simply omitted, such as her remark about conversation at Arthur's court that "Cil parlemenz n'ert pas vilains" (line 252). Part of the same tendency is the omission of some of Marie's remarks about the characters' inner feelings. Some are turned into speech and gesture; thus, when Lanval lies down in the meadow, Marie's statement "Mut est pensis pur sa mesaise, / Il ne veit chose ke li plaise" (lines 51–52) is translated by the English poet into a soliloquy in direct speech, with weeping and hand wringing (E 43–50). And some explorations of subjectivity simply disappear: there is no equivalent in *Sir Landevale* of Marie's lines on Lanval's feelings as he returns home after his first encounter with the fairy (lines 196–200):

> Mut est Lanval en grant esfrei;
> De s'aventure vait pensaunt
> E en sun curage dotaunt;
> Esbaïz est, ne seit que creir[e],
> Il ne la quide mie a veir[e].

Similarly there is nothing corresponding to (lines 254–58):

[36] Cf. Absolon's statement to Alisoun in *The Miller's Tale* that "for your love I swete there I go" (line 3703) (a parallel suggested to me by Barbara Nolan), and the discussion by E. Talbot Donaldson, "Idiom of Popular Poetry in the *Miller's Tale*," in his *Speaking of Chaucer* (London: Athlone Press, 1970), pp. 13–29, of Chaucer's parodic use of the language of Middle English romances and lyrics to establish an atmosphere of subcourtly vulgarity.

> . . . ceo l'est tart
> Que s'amie puïst tenir,
> Baiser, acoler e sentir;
> L'autrui joie prise petit,
> Se il nen ad le suen delit.

When Lanval thinks he has lost his mistress, the English poet repeats all the outward signs of grief from Marie but omits that "Pensis esteit e anguissus" (line 338).

Another feature characteristic of English romances but much less of those of Marie and Chrétien is a strong identification of the poet with his hero, an identification in which the audience is expected to share. Marie, I have suggested, is sympathetic toward Lanval but also keeps her distance from him; the English poet goes some way toward closing that distance. At the beginning, it is true, he seems to make Landevale more responsible for his own poverty, removing any suggestion that he was unfairly treated; but then generosity is plainly a virtue. The more extreme outward expressions of Landevale's sufferings demand our uncritical sympathy; hence additions such as the following, with its lapel-grabbing vocative (lines 319–23):

> Ete ne drynke wold he neuer,
> But wepyng and sorowyng evir.
> (Syres, sare sorow hath he nom! –
> He wold hys endyng day wer come,
> That he myght ought of lif goo.)

Moreover, the English poet never loses an opportunity to insert exculpations of Landevale and condemnations of Guinevere. Thus he adds a passage (lines 292–304) after Landevale has made his initial denial of the king's accusation; this is partly to change Marie's legal framework,[37] to bring it closer to fourteenth-century reality; but in it the twelve knights are reassuringly unanimous that "The kyng was good, all aboute, / And she was wyckyd, oute and oute" (lines 297–98), and that what had happened was all Guinevere's fault, not Landevale's. We receive another nudge toward partisanship for the hero when the translator adds (lines 324–26):

[37] On which see Elizabeth A. Francis, "The Trial in *Lanval*," in *Studies in French Language and Mediaeval Literature Presented to Professor Mildred K. Pope* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1939), pp. 115–24.

Every man was for hym woo,
For larger knyght than he
Was þer neuer yn that countrey.

The same point, again referring to Landevale's splendid generosity, is made by the earl of Cornwall in another passage entirely added by the translator (lines 341–44):

Butt greatt vilany were thervpon
To fordo suche a man,
That is more large and fre
Then eny of vs that here be.

There are other examples too, but further evidence seems unnecessary. Aristocratic detachment and a gendered point of view may have deflected Marie from complete identification with Lanval; the English poet, presumably male, is determined that we should think Landevale entirely in the right.

The translator's tendency to leave no room for alternative judgments can be seen as part of a general sharpening of point and outline on the level of both style and narrative structure. The English poet is an accomplished rhetorician, of a somewhat forensic kind; it could even have been an interest in legal procedure that led him to translate a poem in which courtroom drama is of such importance. A few examples must suffice to illustrate a pervasive feature of *Sir Landevale*. The adapter recognizes the effectiveness of Marie's use of anaphora in a passage describing Lanval's behavior once he has become rich (lines 209–12):

Lanval donout les riches duns,
Lanval aquitout les prisuns,
Lanval vesteit les jugleürs,
Lanval feseit les granz honurs. . . .

The adapter goes one better, however, and uses the device seven times in place of Marie's four (E 173–80). (A byproduct of this change is, of course, to emphasize Landevale's generosity even more strongly.) In Guinevere's speech of complaint to Arthur, one of those turned from reported into direct speech, a highly effective closing line is added: "And all, lorde, jn dispite of the!" (line 252)—just the right touch to sting Arthur into action. Somewhat similarly, the fairy lady is given some pointed closing lines to her

speech at Lanval's trial. Marie makes her say, concerning his alleged approach to the queen, "Unques nul jur ne la requist" (line 621), but the English is much sharper in turning the accusation against the accuser: "He bad her not, but she bad hym!" (line 484). And then, with a final turn to the gentlemen of the jury, the English poet makes her add (lines 485–88):

> And of that othir, that he saide
> That my lothliest maide
> Was fairer þan the quene,
> Loke anone yf yt so bene!

She confidently offers her maidens and Guinevere as exhibits A and B.

The shaping of the whole narrative has a similar emphatic straightforwardness. This is perhaps most noticeable at the conclusion. In Marie's version, after the carefully built-up climax of the trial scene, culminating in the arrival of the fairy lady and her vindication of Lanval, the end comes rather suddenly. Lanval is freed, the lady leaves, and just as she is doing so, Lanval leaps up behind her on her horse, and they disappear, without a further word from either. To explain how he mounts the horse, Marie remarks (lines 633–40):

> Fors de la sale aveient mis
> Un grant perrun de marbre bis,
> U li pesunt humme muntoënt,
> Que de la curt le rei aloënt:
> Lanval esteir munté desus.
> Quant la pucele ist fors a l'us,
> Sur le palefrei detriers li
> De plain eslais Lanval sailli.

The detail of the mounting block is puzzling; it seems to be given an importance out of proportion to its narrative function, and it is hard to know whether to interpret it as contributing to the "effet du réel" precisely because it is not a narrative necessity or to see it as a kind of "wild-card symbol," present to receive whatever significance readers may project onto it (perhaps, for example, it evokes the solidity and bodily weight of the physical world from which Lanval is now withdrawing forever.)[38] In any

[38] For "l'effet du réel," see Roland Barthes, "L'Effet du réel," *Communications* 11 (1968): 84–89. Cf. Evelyn Birge Vitz, "The *Lais* of Marie de France: 'Narrative Grammar' and the Literary Text," *RR* 74 (1983):383–404 (p. 395 n. 22).

event, its effect is to disturb the closure of the last few lines, a closure which is otherwise complete in affirming the impossibility of further narrative. The English poet omits the mounting block altogether, but he adds a long conversation between Landevale and the lady (E 503–24), the effect of which is to produce a psychological closure conspicuously absent from Marie's version.

Landevale explains his leap onto the horse by saying that he will never be parted from the lady, "Whedir ye ride or goo" (line 505). She responds by asking him (I think playfully) how, having broken her earlier command never to speak of her, he now dares to ride with her "withoute leve" (line 513). He begs forgiveness for his transgression and throws himself upon her mercy; and finally, "wyth wordys meke" (line 520), she grants her forgiveness, welcomes him to her, and confirms that "We woll neuer twyn, day ne nyght" (line 524). The emotional warmth and the vicarious satisfaction offered to readers who have identified with the hero as the English poet requires contrast strikingly with the more coolly enigmatic quality of Marie's ending. (It is impossible to make a similar comparison between the French and English versions of *Le Fresne*, because the end of the latter is missing, but there is an analogous difference between the end of Chrétien's *Chevalier au lion* and that of the Middle English translation *Ywain and Gawain*.) But the *Landevale* poet has still not finished his reshaping of the ending. He adds a prosaically reductive *sententia* to assure us that the story exemplifies a general and undisturbing truth about real life: "Loo, howe love is lefe to wyn / Of wemen that arn of gentyll kyn!" (lines 527–28).[39] Next come two lines that employ the common closural device of repeating a narrative movement in reverse: "The same way haue they nomyn / Ryght as before she was comyn" (lines 529–30). And finally, with the piety that we also found in *Lai le Freine* (and that the *Landevale* poet had added earlier in making his hero beg the lady for forgiveness "For His loue that shed His blode" [line 516]), the poet concludes with a prayer: "Butt God, for His greatt mercy, / Bryng vs to His blysse on highe" (lines 537–38).[40] Marie ends with a gesture of separation (of Lanval and the lady from the human world); the English poet softens this with gestures of reunion—the lovers'

[39] Marie offers a similar surprise at the end of *Equitan*: "Ki bien vodreit reisun entendre, / Ici purreit ensample prendre: / Tel purcace le mal d'autrui / Dunt le mals [tut] revert sur lui" (lines 307–10). There, though, the general truth is more obviously relevant to the narrative experience, and we are offered the choice whether or not to accept it.

[40] For prayer as formal closure of Middle English romances, see my *Readings in Medieval Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 113ff.

determination never to part, the joining together of "The lady, the maydyns, and the knyght" (line 526) in their ride, and the prayer which links poet and readers as an "vs" hoping to be joined to God.

For all these changes *Sir Landevale* remains a Middle English version of Marie's poem. That cannot be said of *Sir Launfal*. To put briefly and dogmatically the case I argue, it seems to me that Thomas Chestre either failed to grasp or failed to value the true nature of the Lanval story. He loved it, and that was why he devoted so much effort to amplifying and elaborating it (*Sir Launfal* is nearly twice as long as *Sir Landevale*), but he loved it in a way that involved total commitment to the fantasy from which Marie remained at least partly detached. It became *his* fantasy, and he attempted to live it in writing as fictive reality. The result is a fascinating disaster.

Though Chestre seems likely to have taken some details, including perhaps his hero's name, from Marie's French, his main source for the story was unquestionably not *Lanval* but *Sir Landevale*, though we should bear in mind that he did not read it in precisely the text preserved in the Rawlinson manuscript. Occasionally, for example, it is possible to supply from *Sir Launfal* a line or two that seem to be missing (on grounds of rhyme or sense) from the Rawlinson *Landevale*. But major changes were necessitated simply by Chestre's choice of a twelve-line tail-rhyme stanza as the verse form of *Sir Launfal* in place of *Landevale*'s four-stress couplets. Popular as the tail-rhyme stanza was as a medium for Middle English romances from the fourteenth century onward, and ingenious as scholarly attempts to defend it have been,[41] it remains in the eyes of most modern readers an unfortunate choice of metrical form for narrative — or at least a choice that strained beyond their capacities the poets who made it. The stanza divides the story into very short sections, which do not necessarily have any dramatic significance,[42] and, worse still, it demands more rhymes than the average Middle English poet could easily find. Even Chaucer complains of the scarcity of rhyme in English compared with French,[43] so it was perhaps inevitable that

[41] See A. McI. Trounce, "The English Tail-Rhyme Romances," *MÆ* 1 (1932):81–108, 168–82; *MÆ* 2 (1933):34–57, 189–98; *MÆ* 3 (1934):30–50; and especially Urs Dürmüller, *Narrative Possibilities of the Tail-Rime Romance* (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1975). For a useful survey of criticism of the tail-rhyme romances, see Dürmüller, *Narrative Possibilities*, pp. 1–11. Her valiant defense of *Sir Launfal* (pp. 207–15) does not appear to me to meet objections such as those made here.

[42] Thus in *Sir Launfal* there is apparently purposeless stanzaic enjambement at lines 192–93, 540–41, 756–57. On the other hand, there is verbal stanza linking at lines 804–805, 816–17; this is mildly pleasing in itself, but it is hard to see why it occurs only here and nowhere else.

[43] *Ven* 79–82.

poets lacking his technical *curiosité* should find themselves in difficulties. These show themselves especially in the tail lines, which consist largely of tags and formulas, included only to provide a rhyme; thus the very lines that call most attention to themselves are the ones that are most empty of meaning.

The addition of redundant or empty phraseology is one of the many ways in which Chestre kills the thing he loves. Marie de France's striking economy, some of which is retained in both *Lai le Freine* and *Sir Landevale*, disappears completely from *Sir Launfal*. Where *Sir Landevale* is Chestre's source, a normal pattern is for his couplets to be reproduced as the long lines of a stanza, while the tail lines are additions—additions of words but not of sense, both because there is nothing that needs adding and because in any case only an exceptionally gifted poet would be able to add apt meaning in the form of isolated short lines. A detailed analysis would be intolerably tedious, but lines 288–300 of *Sir Launfal* provide a typical illustration. The eight long lines of this stanza exactly reproduce four consecutive couplets of *Sir Landevale* (lines 103–12), while the four tail lines are vapid additions: "Þan lay sche vncouert," "He seygh neuer non so pert," "J dar wel say, yn sert," and "Ne nauȝt well þenke yn hert." The last two of these are especially characteristic tail lines, in that they do nothing but vehemently assert the truth of what has been said in the other lines.

Even when he is not using *Sir Landevale* as a source, Chestre can still be grossly redundant. A small-scale instance is the following passage, with its fourfold emphasis on seeing (lines 568–70):

> All þat sawe hym yn armes bryȝt
> Seyde þey sawe neuer swych a knyȝt,
> Þat hym wyth eyen beheld.

A striking large-scale instance is lines 811–28, where eighteen lines are employed in saying the Perceval and Gawain acted as guarantors that Launfal would produce his mistress fifty-four weeks hence and that everyone was very sad. The exigency of rhyme can produce a tail line that is inept as well as empty, as when Guinevere has to be described as "hende" (line 42), even though that is just what Chestre wishes to insist she is not. To make such criticisms is not to judge a formulaic style by inappropriate standards; it is to suggest that Chestre was an incompetent user of such a style.[44]

[44] M. Mills has written vigorously and in my view justly about Chestre's pretentious incompetence as a poet; see M. Mills, "The Composition and Style of the 'Southern' *Octavian*, *Sir Launfal* and *Libeaus Desconus*," *MÆ* 31 (1962):88–109; M. Mills, "A Note on *Sir Launfal* 733–44," *MÆ* 35 (1966):122–24.

One sign of Chestre's identification with his hero is his attempt to remedy what must have seemed to him a defect in the story, namely, that the hero has such an unheroic part to play. Some of Chestre's major additions evidently aim to "epicize" Launfal's role.[45] He introduces Launfal initially as the culminating figure in a catalogue of the knights of "Douȝty Artour" (lines 7, 13–24) and raises him to the status of royal seneschal. Then, after Launfal has received the fairy lady's magic bounty, Chestre adds a long section, not derived either from *Sir Landevale* or from *Graelent*, in which a great tournament is held in Launfal's honour by "Alle þe lordes of Karlyoun" (line 433), and, needless to say, he wins the prize. Next he receives a challenge from the fifteen-foot-tall knight Sir Valentyne. They fight, and at the first course Valentyne knocks off Launfal's helmet, "Jn tale as hyt ys telde" (line 576), and then rudely laughs at him. All is not lost, however, for Gyfre, the servant with whom Launfal's fairy mistress has provided him, at this point becomes invisible (without our having received the least warning that this is among his powers) and puts the helmet back on again; and when Valentyne makes Launfal drop his shield, Gyfre retrieves it before it reaches the ground. At the third course Launfal instantly slays Valentyne; and when "Alle þe lordes of Atalye" (line 601) attempt to take vengeance, Launfal slays them too "as lyȝt as dew" (line 608) and returns cheerfully to Britain.

This section of *Sir Launfal* in particular encourages the reader to toy with the notion that, like Chaucer's brilliant parody of the tail-rhyme romance in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, it may be intended to be funny, but there is really no evidence for that. It is far more likely to be a serious attempt to provide Launfal with a display of knightly prowess, rendered inept first by his advantage in having an invisible assistant,[46] then by the ridiculous ease with which he defeats everyone, and overall by the fact that his victory is due to the fairy lady's promise that (lines 331–33)

> Yn werre ne yn turnement
> Ne schall þe greue no knyȝtes dent,
> So well y schall þe saue.

[45] By this I mean something different from what Stemmler (p. 247) refers to as the "episch" character of *Sir Launfal* as opposed to the "novellistisch" character of earlier versions of the story.

[46] The objection to this is less that it is intrinsically "unsportsmanlike" (Bliss, ed. *Sir Launfal*, pp. 43, 94), for the criteria of sportsmanship in fights against giants are hard to determine, than that it is incompatible with the heroism Chestre desires to confer on Launfal.

Chestre wants Launfal to be a true hero, but he is dependent on his lady's favor even for his success in battle. Moreover, even if Chestre's attempt at epicizing Launfal had succeeded, it would necessarily have remained irrelevant to the original core of the story. The hinge of the whole narrative is the requirement that Launfal should keep his fairy mistress secret, and that means that no knightly deeds he might perform could in any real sense be performed in her honor. Sir Valentyne challenges him to joust for the love of his lady (lines 523–28, 538), but Launfal may not mention the lady in accepting the challenge, and Chestre is unfortunately incapable of making that enforced silence part of a drama of inward heroism. Finally, Chestre makes use of Gyfre again to prevent our last sight of Launfal from being one of him riding behind the lady on her palfrey. Gyfre hurries out of the forest with Launfal's own horse (lines 1012–14),[47] and Launfal and the lady ride away together.

For all Chestre's modifications, the story remains essentially a child's fantasy of persecution and reward, and indeed all the more so because Chestre cannot allow himself to see that that is what it is. The role of Arthur's court as family is brought nearer to the surface by another of Chestre's changes, which draws Arthur's marriage to Guinevere into the story as its first event. Thus Guinevere is introduced as a stepmother figure, an intruder into the family who, because of her promiscuity, is not liked by any of the knights from the beginning. And Chestre resolves the ambiguity in Arthur's role by making it Guinevere whose singling out of Launfal as the knight to whom no gifts are given drives him from court (lines 70–72):

> Euerych knyȝt sche ȝaf broche oþer ryng,
> But Syr Launfal sche yaf noþyng:
> Þat greuede hym many a syde.

The discrepancy between this initial enmity of Guinevere's and her later claim to have loved Launfal "More þan þys seuen ȝere" (line 677) has been noted by several critics; A. J. Bliss, however, observes that it "would be explicable in terms of modern psychology," while Peter J. Lucas notes that "From Launfal's point of view both the queen's attitudes have an unpleasant consistency about them, for both have deleterious effect upon him."[48]

[47] That is, presumably, Blaunchard, the horse given him by Tryamour and then lost with all her other gifts.

[48] Bliss, ed. *Sir Launfal*, p. 28; Peter J. Lucas, "Towards an Interpretation of *Sir Launfal* with Particular Reference to Line 683," *MÆ* 39 (1970):291–300 (p. 292).

Chestre does indeed regard Guinevere exclusively from Launfal's point of view, and the discrepancy is further evidence of his identification with his hero's fantasy rather that a sign of any interest in the queen's psychology. (Indeed, I suspect that in this version of the story Guinevere's promiscuity has become a way of symbolizing the general problem of the mother's sexuality, which makes her both desirable and frightening to the son; and the later encounter between her and Launfal, in which he perceives her as having attempted to seduce him while her story is that he has attempted to seduce her, is another way of treating the ambivalence of the son's desire for the mother.)

Like *Hamlet*, then, Chestre's story begins with a jealous and rejected son at a parental wedding feast, and the situation is brought still closer to *Hamlet* when Chestre introduces the death of Launfal's father as his reason for leaving court. The child's feeling that no one in the world loves him and everyone is jeering at him (Valentyne's laughter when he knocks Launfal's helmet off being another example of this) is developed still more fully in Chestre's version through another addition, the episode with Arthur's nephews and the mayor of Karlyoun, to which I shall return shortly. Just as this persecutory paranoid fantasy emerges in a cruder, less censored form in *Sir Launfal* than in its predecessors, so does the wish fulfillment that compensates for it. One small sign of Chestre's identification with the compensatory fantasy is found at the moment of its first emergence. *Sir Landevale* had said about the fairy maidens, "Fayrer women neuer he see" (line 63); Chestre takes the fantasy as his own and changes it to "*J* sawe neuer non swyche" (line 243; italics added). The fairy mistress herself, now called Tryamour, is much the same as in *Sir Landevale*, but what she offers is imagined even more materialistically. She begins by declaring that she loves Launfal, but her first promise is (lines 316–18):

> Yf þou wylt truly to me take,
> And alle wemen for me forsake,
> Ryche J wyll make þe.

She promises him a purse in which he will find a gold mark every time he puts his hand in it, her horse Blaunchard, her servant Gyfre, a pennon bearing her arms, and invulnerability in battle. She will come to him only in private, but Chestre is evidently eager to remove any possibility that this is a mere dream, and so he insists that Gyfre also sees her (lines 499–504):

> And euery day, Dame Triamour,
> Sche com to Syr Launfal bour

Aday whan hyt was nyȝt;
Of all þat euer wer þer þo
Segh he[r] non but þey two,
Gyfre and Launfal þe knyȝt.

There is a certain potential for embarrassment in the provision of a fairy servant who is also a voyeur, but, more important, the less possible it becomes to see the fairy mistress as a wish-fulfilling fantasy, the more naïve Chestre's view of her appears. For him she is the good version of mother, as opposed to Guinevere, the bad version; accordingly, he makes the opposition between the two women considerably more vindictive than in his source. Guinevere longs to take vengeance on Launfal for his rejection of her attempt at seduction; indeed she tells Arthur, "But y be awreke, y schall dye! / Myn herte wyll breke aþre!" (lines 713–14). Chestre adds her rash vow: if Launfal succeeds in bringing forward "a fayrer þynge" than herself, "Put out myn eeyn gray!" (lines 809–10); and, sure enough, Tryamour's last act before her final departure is to blow at Guinevere in such a way as to blind her. The added vindictiveness, marking the final triumph of the good mother over the bad, is plainly Chestre's own.

Chestre's overall aim is to ground and conceal his fantasy in as solid a reality as possible, and one way he does this is to give the fairy lady a name and an origin in a real place: she is "Þe kynges douȝter of Olyroun" (line 277), a real island off the coast of Brittany.[49] He also alleges at the end (rather like Marie de France at the end of *Les Deus Amanz*) that the events of the story are the origin of a real-life custom. His conception of reality in *Sir Launfal* is intensely materialistic. *Sir Launfal* possesses not just the concreteness characteristic of Middle English romances but exactly the materialism that Chaucer diagnosed in *Sir Thopas* as belonging to the vision of aristocratic life seen from below stairs. The weight given to Tryamour's gift of the purse has been noted above; and when she withdraws her favors, the emptiness of the purse and the disappearance of Gyfre and the horse are given far more emphasis than her own absence. Stemmler and others have noted Chestre's additions of ostentatious luxury, such as the many musi-

[49] Bliss, ed. *Sir Launfal*, pp. 89–90. Stemmler (pp. 249ff.) demonstrates how, by such specifying details, Chestre goes considerably further than the author of *Sir Landevale* in removing the atmosphere of mystery that surrounds the fairy lady in *Lanval*. The grounding in reality argues against attempts such as that of B. K. Martin, "*Sir Launfal* and the Folktale," *MÆ* 35 (1966): 199–210, to defend Chestre's poem as being governed by folktale conventions; unfortunately its characters are not sufficiently the "abstract sketches without depth" (p. 208) that Martin describes them as being.

cians who play for Guinevere—"And elles hyt were vnryȝt" (line 669)—or the complete stanza devoted to the trappings of Tryamour's horse (lines 949–60), but even more telling are misconceptions of the true nature of aristocratic largesse that suggest a kind of nouveau riche vulgarity. Launfal surely overtips Sir Valentyne's messenger grossly in giving him "A noble courser, & a ryng, / And a robe of ray" (lines 545–46), and Bliss notes that the insistence that once Launfal comes into the money his debts are paid "be tayle & be score" (line 419) suggests commercial calculation rather than the knightly generosity that is supposed to be his great virtue.[50]

To be fair to Chestre, it is in his evocation of the social dimension of a materialistic way of life that he shows his greatest strength. In a passage derived from *Graelent*, Launfal, accompanied from court by Arthur's nephews, meets his former servant the mayor of Karlyoun, and the ensuing scene shows some shrewd observation of human behavior. The mayor, thinking Launfal is still in favor at court, politely asks after Arthur; but as soon as Launfal tells him that he has left court, the mayor changes his tune, with the implausible excuse that he is expecting seven knights from Brittany to stay at any moment, and proposes that Launfal should lodge in the orchard instead. Later, however, when the mayor sees the first installments of Launfal's magic wealth being delivered, he changes his tune again and instantly invites him to dinner, adding that just yesterday he had wanted him to come to a feast, if only Launfal had not been out. The note of hypocrisy in his speech is caught with delightful accuracy (lines 403–408):

> Þo seyde þe meyr, "Syr, par charyté,
> Jn halle today þat þou wylt ete wyth me!
> Ȝesterday y hadde yment
> At þe feste we wold han be yn same,
> And yhadde solas & game;
> And erst þou were ywent!"

Between these two encounters with the mayor there has been a full treatment of the social consequences of poverty.

Havelok bears witness how a Middle English romance could include a realistic yet dignified account of what it really means for the hero to be poor (labor, hunger, unemployment, violent competition for jobs, and so on); *Sir Launfal* is somewhat different, for it represents not just poverty but a descent from wealth, a social fall involving humiliation and shame.

[50] Bliss, ed. *Sir Launfal*, p. 92.

Arthur's nephews tell Launfal that they are going to leave him because "our robes beþ torent, / And your tresour ys al yspent" (lines 139–40), and he begs them, "Tellyd noman of my pouerté, / For þe love of God almyȝt!" (lines 143–44). When they return to court in their "totore & thynne" robes (line 156), they cover up for him by saying that they happened to depart on a rainy day and had gone hunting in their old clothes. The rainy day is an amusing English touch (it rarely rains in French romances),[51] and there is something unaristocratically prudential about wearing old clothes for hunting, that quintessentially aristocratic activity. (The medieval English aristocracy may really have worn old clothes when they went hunting in the rain,[52] but mention of this custom would surely have seemed inappropriate in a genuinely courtly romance.) Left alone, Launfal is not asked to the Trinity feast at Karlyoun because he is poor and therefore held in low esteem; the mayor's daughter takes pity on him and invites him to dinner; he says he has no heart for it and tells her a pathetic story about how he could not even go to church because he lacked "hosyn & schon, / Clenly brech & scherte" (lines 201–202). What matters above all is evidently what the neighbors think, and that is something that Chestre understands very well. Finally, when Launfal is on his way to the fateful meeting with Tryamour, pathos is laid on with a trowel: he is riding along "wyth lytyll pryde" (line 213), his horse slips and falls in the mud, he is the object of scorn, and he rides off "Forto dryue away lokynge" (line 218).

I ask myself what effect Chestre is aiming at here. Is is simply pathos, considerably overdone, or is it a kind of Chaplinesque pathetic comedy?[53] I

[51] In *The Awntyrs of Arthure* (ed. Ralph Hanna [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974]), on the other hand, King Arthur's hunt is interrupted by rain and snow: "Thus on fote ar þei founde, þes frekes vnfayn, / And fleen to þe forest fro þe fawe felle. / And to reset þei ronne for rydour of reyne, / For þe sneterand snawe þat snaypped hem snelle" (lines 79–82).

[52] Anne Rooney has called my attention to a passage in which John of Salisbury suggests that "wandering about forest glades and lakes clothed in coarse garments" and thus saving money might be a motive for devotion to the chase (*Frivolities of Courtiers and Footprints of Philosophers*, trans. J. B. Pike [London: Oxford University Press, 1938], p. 18) and to another in which a romance hero's hunting clothes are described as "not ouer-dele gaye" by comparison with the splendid garments he has been given by his fairy mistress (A. Trampe Bödtker, ed., *The Middle English Versions of* Partonope of Blois, EETS, e.s., vol. 109 [London: Kegan Paul, 1912]; British Museum MS, line 6356).

[53] The case for simple pathos is strengthened by parallels such as that in the far more competently written tail-rhyme romance *Amis and Amiloun* (ed. MacEdward Leach, EETS, o.s., vol. 203 [London: Oxford University Press, 1937]): when Amoraunt is carrying his leper lord Amiloun on his back, "Þe way was so depe & slider, / Oft times boþe to-gider / Þai fel doun in þe clay" (lines 1843–45), and when he is pushing him in a handcart, "bifor al oþer pouer men / He crud his wain in to þe fen; / Gret diol it was to se" (lines 1882–84).

cannot tell for sure, and the difficulty of interpreting this section—surely the most interesting part of the poem—derives from its inappropriateness to the story into which Chestre has inserted it: context does not offer the guidance that might be hoped for. This addition is the strongest expression of his personal identification with his hero, which involves imagining Launfal's sufferings and rewards as belonging to a material and materialistic world in which love and rejection are seen in terms of wealth and poverty, esteem and humiliation. But, as I have been arguing, the more "realistic" Chestre's imagining of Launfal's story, the more he conceals from himself that the fundamental material of that story has to do with childhood fantasies. *Sir Launfal* is a fascinating specimen, because of the strength and transparency of Chestre's self-delusion. It has the extreme and powerful badness found in other works of self-pitying self-relevation that also at times plead to be rescued by being read as deliberate self-parody—Tennyson's *Maud* and Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* suggest themselves to me as examples, though other readers would no doubt have other candidates. Such compositions are rare enough survivals from the Middle Ages to deserve our close attention.[54]

[54] I am grateful to Richard Axton, Sarah Kay, Barbara Nolan, and Anne Rooney for allowing me to profit from their comments on drafts of this article.