

## CHAPTER TWO

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### *Lanval to Sir Launfal:* A Story Becomes Popular

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*Lanval* is one of the most appealing of the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman *lais* of Marie de France. Written in octosyllabic couplets, these briefish narratives proclaim themselves to be the stories underlying songs (the *lais* proper) performed by Breton minstrels, songs which Marie's tales thus purport to contextualize. Marie's poems were widely imitated, becoming the prototype of a whole new genre now known as 'the Breton *lai*', and were thus, in that sense, demonstrably popular. The sort of popularity attested to by subsequent imitative recreations is also discernible in a more specific sense in the afterlife of the particular *lai* at issue here.

*Lanval* tells the story of a knight whom Arthur neglects to include in one of his periodic distributions of rewards. Knights in full-time attendance at court were normally conceived of as those who had not yet come into their inheritances. Lanval is the son of a king, but from a distant land (*luin de sun heritage*, 28), and Arthur's omission therefore leaves him in straitened circumstances. Having dismounted from his horse in the course of a ride into the countryside, his disconsolate musings are interrupted by the approach of two beautiful and expensively accoutred damsels, who invite him to the pavilion of their mistress, who is likewise of superlative pulchritude and wealth. She has come specifically to offer her love to Lanval, and further promises to fund all his expenses. He must, however, never discover his new-found *amie* to anyone, or he will instantly lose her. Lanval proceeds to live with the lavish *largesse* – in entertainment, gifts and charitable donations (205–14) – which was expected from those of *gentil* status (and which was in large part responsible for any prestige and popularity they enjoyed among the many to benefit from such big-spending habits). Guinevere one day offers Lanval her love, which he refuses on the grounds of the breach of faith with his *seigneur* that would be involved. Guinevere angrily retorts that

his real reason is a preference for boys over women, a charge which Lanval heatedly rebuts by declaring that he has for *amie* a woman whose humblest attendant excels Guinevere in beauty, refinement and personal worth (298–302). Guinevere demands redress from Arthur for this insult, which she represents as having been delivered in response to her own rejection of improper advances from Lanval. The court convened by Arthur declares that Lanval should be banished if he cannot purge his slander by producing his *amie* – which he cannot do, because, now that he has broken her injunction, she no longer responds to his call. Despite this, he is at the eleventh hour delivered from his dilemma by her: the barons' deliberations are interrupted by the arrival – to the accompaniment of much eye-boggling at their beauty and splendour – first of two successive pairs of her damsels, and finally of the *amie* herself. Letting her mantle fall (to maximize visibility of her person), she offers herself in exoneration of his offending words. All agree that Lanval has been vindicated; but he leaps onto the palfrey of his departing *amie*, and it is stated that the two disappeared to Avalon (an island home of the *fée* or fairy) and that nothing more was ever known of Lanval.

If it was the appeal of a Breton song (itself presented as a response to an *aventure* that struck the imagination: Prologue 35–8) which prompted this tale from Marie, her own poem provoked similar recreations. The *lai* was Englished into a fourteenth-century *Landevale*, in which the octosyllabic couplets are preserved, but in which the often trite wording does less than justice to the spare elegance of Marie's style. Landevale's poverty is caused by his own uninhibited *largesse* – an imprudence not too discreditable to the hero, given the value attached to liberal spending habits – and there is only passing mention of his being 'in uncuth londe' (27).<sup>1</sup> Since this poem otherwise stays close to the sense of the Anglo-Norman one, it may be that the beginning of Marie's *lai* was defective or misunderstood by its redactor, who thus virtually omits the socio-economic explanation there given for Lanval's poverty: that he had been passed over in the 'gift economy' operative at court, and, though a king's son, was a foreigner far from home.

These last two facts – so central to the impression given by Marie of a protagonist literally and psychologically alienated from his social environment – are thus likewise absent from a second English verse redaction in turn based on *Landevale*. The author of this later fourteenth-century romance (headed 'Launfal Miles' in the manuscript, but now known as [*Sir*] *Launfal*) names himself in its final stanza as Thomas Chestre. Chestre, who evidently wanted a squeaky-clean but victimized hero, substituted for the one given in *Landevale* yet another reason for Launfal's poverty. In his version, it is occasioned by Arthur's marriage to Guinevere, who is disliked by Launfal because of her reputation for promiscuity, and who thus leaves him out of her own distribution of gifts. Chestre plays other variations on

his source. Launfal's signal *largesse* has qualified him (28–33) for appointment as royal steward (the official responsible for the provisioning of inmates and guests). His subsequent poverty is underlined by extended emphasis on the tangible humiliations attendant on reduced means: he can no longer afford to stay at court and, to disguise his necessitous state, offers his father's funeral as the grounds of his plea for leave of absence (76–8); Arthur furnishes him with companions in the form of two royal nephews, who, however, later have to return to the king, because of an impoverishment Launfal cannot relieve; at Launfal's request, they conceal his difficulties from the king, and a second fiction is found to explain the poor state of their attire (166–74); on leaving the court, Launfal seeks out the mayor of Caerleon, a former dependant of his (90), who at first welcomes him on account of Launfal's connections with the court (95–6), but, on hearing from him that he is out of royal favour, suddenly recalls that he is expecting seven knights, and so cannot put Launfal up; Launfal makes a sarcastic comment on the loyalty to be expected towards a lord of no account ('lyttel pryse', 119), at which the mayor rather shamefacedly offers him makeshift accommodation; the 'lyttyll pryse' enjoyed by the no longer rich and influential is confirmed when there is a feast to which Launfal is not invited, for now 'Lyte men of hym tolde' (189); he reveals to the mayor's daughter that he has not eaten for three days, and is too ashamed even to attend church, such is the state of his clothing (194–204); he takes a ride out of the city, cutting a poor figure – unattended as he is (210–12) and 'wyth lytyll pryde' – to which the finishing touch of mud-spatter is added when his horse stumbles into 'the fen' (214); it is to escape the scornful gazes he attracts ('For to dryue away lokyng', 218) that he rides into a forest. These added details provide a sharper contrast, not only with his former *largesse*, both private and official, but also with the sumptuousness that he now encounters in the apparel and pavilion of the damsels and their mistress. The lady is here explicitly declared to be a fairy (the daughter, in fact, of the 'kyng of Fayrye') and is given the name of Tryamour (278–81). To her gifts of love and inexhaustible wealth (which here takes the form of a magic purse that never empties) are added a steed and 'knaue' of her own, named Blaunchard and Gyfre respectively, who will ensure consistent gratifications of a more macho kind – to wit, unconquerability in combat (325–33). This duo, accompanied by a baggage-train of ten pack mules laden with gold, silver, rich clothing and armour, ostentatiously make their way to Launfal's lodgings (376–99) after he has returned thither. The mayor now changes his tune, only to be met with a snub from Launfal (409–14). His *largesse* quickly leads to recovery of his public 'prys' in more ways than one: it results in the staging in his honour of a tournament in which he gains 'the prys' (478) – the 'praise' and the 'prize' due to the proclaimed man of the match. The

fame of his prowess reaches Lombardy, where it comes to the ears of a fifteen-foot giant called Sir Valentine, who sends a jousting challenge which Launfal accepts; he succeeds (with a little magical and invisible aid from Gyfre) in slaying both his redoubtable opponent and all the lords who, upon seeing that, attack him (601–12). Arthur invites him, ahead of a forthcoming feast, to resume his office of steward, again because of his (now renewed) *largesse* (622–3). It is at these festivities that the fatal exchange with Guinevere takes place. She, in the subsequent proceedings, declares by way of asseveration, ‘yf he brynge a fayrer thyng / Put out my eeyn gray!’ (809–10) – and is taken at her word: Tryamour, after vindicating Launfal, blows into her eyes, with the result that ‘neuer eft myght sche se’ (1008). Gyfre brings Launfal his steed, and he rides away after his mistress; but on a specific day every year, his steed can be heard to neigh, and anyone who fancies a joust can on that day have one against Launfal.

Some of Chestre’s narrative elaborations may have been suggested to him by a version of *Graelent*, an old French *lai* that is recognizably an analogue of *Lanval*.<sup>2</sup> But he has taken up those (sometimes distant) hints with a robust inventiveness and consistency that adapt the story into a more aggressive whole, centred on a less passive hero with more to endure, combat, and exert himself to win in the external world. A measure of sturdy initiative is also evident in Chestre’s metrical choice: the couplets of his source are transposed into stanzas of tail-rhyme (that is, couplets interspersed with shorter lines in a rhyme and stress scheme of a<sup>4</sup> a<sup>4</sup> b<sup>3</sup> c<sup>4</sup> c<sup>4</sup> b<sup>3</sup>, etc). *Sir Launfal* is, in short, written in the metre and style burlesqued by Chaucer in his *Tale of Sir Thopas*. A modern reader cannot, therefore, but notice in it the absurdities Chaucer exposed: the jejune rhythm, the reliance on tags and formulaic clichés, the elf-queen and the giant, and so on. No-one would be reminded by Marie’s *Lanval* of *Thopas* – partly for metrical and stylistic reasons, partly for narrative ones (there is no giant, and the *amie*, though one assumes she is a *fée*, is never explicitly referred to as such).

With Chestre’s version, in fact, the story has become popular in a sense other than that which would refer to the evidence of the appeal and circulation of the tale. It has become popular – in style and narrative – in the aesthetic sense that is most simply glossed by the frankly snobbish term ‘low brow’. Neither sense of the word necessarily implies the other. Although *Sir Thopas* presupposes a public familiar with tail-rhyme romances, there is no evidence that *Sir Launfal* itself was any more popular in the take-up sense than was *Lanval*; the manuscript evidence (inconclusive though that is) would in fact suggest the reverse: Marie’s *lais* survive in four manuscripts, *Sir Launfal* in one.<sup>3</sup> Nor does the aesthetic and evaluative sense of the word necessarily entail the social one, although an association of ideas in this respect formerly led to folksy speculations on the socially popular audience

putatively implied by Chestre's tale ('simpler, less sensitive listeners' who heard it performed by a travelling minstrel 'in market square or innyard'<sup>4</sup>). Such assumptions were once current with respect to the whole group of so-called 'popular' romances to which *Sir Launfal* is usually assigned;<sup>5</sup> but the lack of evidence to warrant them is apparent from more recent and cautious studies of what can be concluded about the audiences of these works.<sup>6</sup>

That Chestre's tale represents a more 'popular' version of Marie's *lai* is thus primarily an aesthetic judgement made by those who, comparing the two texts, have found the former 'cruder' and lacking in the subtlety and nuance of the latter.<sup>7</sup> To the contrasts that have already been drawn between them, I wish to add some observations about each which may be relevant to the instinctive assignment of them to different categories of literary art.

The persuasiveness of Marie's story seems to be partly referable to the way in which the material plays both with and against facets of familiar and less extra-ordinary experience, resonances from which are set off by the handling of the narrative. Psychological processes are certainly one of the counterparts in mundane reality adumbrated by the pattern of events in the story as here told.<sup>8</sup> The so-called 'omnipotent' mental modes of wish-fulfilling daydream or make-believe – whether in the child or in the less deceived but still wishful adult – are in effect experiments with mental magic wands which have, interestingly, been linked specifically with 'magical thinking' in psychoanalytic literature (as comparable attempts to 'will' desires into actuality).<sup>9</sup> Though it seems to be totemic or ritual magic that is referred to when the analogy is made, the association of ideas is natural, and may help to explain why one is ready, at the prompting of the narrative, to be reminded of wishful fantasies by the beneficent timeliness of the magical events in *Launfal*. For daydreams and fantasies (in which the 'ideal ego' solaces itself with imagined scenarios that supply those of its desires unmet by objective reality) are an instinctive response to disappointment or pain caused by external circumstances – which is a common trigger for a switch of cathexis from the object world to the subject world:<sup>10</sup> that is, when things go wrong, people often start to imagine how nice it would be if they were different.

Though wishful fantasizing is scarcely in itself evidence of psychic disorder, a pathological version of it has been identified: a condition wherein the outer world is consistently retreated from via 'the compensatory construction of an alternative world' in which the self lives 'an alternative life'. There is an understandably felt ban on disclosure in these cases: the fantasies are as intimately secret as a 'lover', and revelation, as if of 'a secret affair', is as compulsively shunned as if it threatened to 'terminate

the relation' between the self and the private world (Bollas 1989, 118, 130). This is another analogy from psychoanalytic literature which (like the one drawn between magic and fantasy) finds a narrative correlate in *Lanval*, where the private world centres precisely on a lover – and is lost when communication betrays it and her to the outer world.

Lanval's plight has from the first a larger psychological element than Launfal's. Lanval is literally in unfamiliar territory, and his status as a stranger (which plays no part in Chestre's version) is not lost sight of by Marie: it forms part of the later reluctance of the barons to subject him – 'humme d'autre païs' (429) – to harsh treatment, and is the reason why, 'suls et esgarez' (398), he has no-one to turn to when obliged to find persons willing to stand bail for him pending his trial (until Gawain and his friends generously step forward). Arthur's oversight is quite unlike the deliberate discrimination for disreputable motives visited upon Launfal: Lanval's alien status is thereupon compounded by the further alienation of seeing himself unregarded and unvalued in both personal and economic terms. Unregarded likewise is his poverty: there is no sense in Marie, as in Chestre, that it has become a public and therefore humiliating fact – or, indeed, a fact at all (as yet) as opposed to a grim prospect, which no-one else seems to register. It is not, therefore, to escape notice, as with Launfal, that Lanval retreats from a court in which he appears to be alone and unnoticed. On adopting the reclining posture of sleep or reflection, his mood is described (51) as *pensis* ('pensive', a word used of a worried distress helpless of remedy). This adjective (for which there is no equivalent at the relevant points in *Landevale* or *Sir Launfal*) is later used of both Lanval and the barons at the arraignment of the former (338, 428, 507). In each case, the indication of troubled interiority heralds the emergence into the narrative of an external but extra-normal event which provides the resource and recourse that is wanting in the world of everyday reality.

What Lanval then meets with presents itself narrowly and specifically in terms of his present needs: it is exactly and exclusively in terms of wealth and expensiveness that the visions of feminine charm and beauty now manifest themselves. Though Chestre has been said to be the more materialistic at this point,<sup>11</sup> he is so only in the sense that he provides more enumeration of jewels, fabrics, etc., with the result that his description does not markedly differ from those (not uncommon) in which feminine beauty is conveyed through a classy luxuriance of accessories. Marie, in fact, in this as in other areas of less than romantic significance, is consistently more pointed and unembarrassed than her more 'popular' English redactors. In this case, she uncharacteristically concentrates on sheer monetary value in her depiction of female attractions. The link is made at once with the two serving-women first seen –

Unkes n'en ot veü plus beles!  
 Vestues furent richement . . .  
 (55–6)

(He had never seen any more beautiful. They were dressed richly . . .)

– and becomes ever more marked as the *aventure* unfolds. Of the pavilion Lanval is then led to, we are given little visual detail, but only the information that it could not have been afforded even by Semiramis or the emperor Octavian (81–6), that the golden eagle surmounting it was of price incalculable (87–8), and that the very ropes and pegs were beyond the means of any king in the world (89–92). The surpassing beauty of the lady, lying in inviting *déshabillé*, is thus firmly set in a framing tent of monetary value, and the same emphasis continues into her more immediate context: she lies on a bed of which even the sheets cost a castle ('Li drap valeient un chastel', 98), and is (half-)draped in 'Un chier mantel de blanc hermine' (101). The word *chier* here epitomizes the fusion of sexual and economic attractions that doubly 'endears' this lady to Lanval.

But economic value is coupled by Marie with the affirmation of his personal value that Lanval sadly needs, in view of the lack of recognition which his service to Arthur has met with, despite his excellent qualities (21–2). The damsels have been sent specifically for *him* (73), and the lady herself has come precisely for him. Her first words to him are:

'Lanval, fet ele, beus amis,  
 Pur vus vinc jeo fors de ma tere:  
 De luinz vus sui venue quere!  
 (110–12)

('Lanval,' said she, 'fair friend, for you came I out of my own land:  
 from far away am I come to seek you out.')

This is calculated to be balm to the ears of one who has himself travelled far from home only to find himself slighted and unrated; it is a detail left untranslated in *Landevale* (and thus has no equivalent in *Chestre* either), where the lady declares herself thus:

'Landavale,' she seid, 'myn hert swete,  
 For thy loue now I swete'  
 (113–14)

– which, alas, is a not untypical example of what happens to Marie's verse at the hands of her English translator.

The closely paralleled grants by Marie's lady (133–9) of her love and of limitless underwriting of the liberal spending implied by *largesse* (Lanval is to 'give' and 'spend' henceforth without inhibition) thus only bring into climactic focus a dual emphasis throughout the 'vision' that meets Lanval's eyes when, in the real and everyday world, he sees nothing that offers him any solace ('Il ne veit chose ki li plaise', 52) – and when someone to serve who would love and value him, and so fund him in a way that demonstrated appreciation, is just what he would be wishfully dreaming of. He promises to obey all his *amie's* commands (124–7, 151–2) and to renounce all other connections for her sake (128). This traditional romantic metaphor from feudal service stresses just that replacement of the unappreciative master Lanval had left his friends for and 'tant . . . servi' ('served so loyally', 18, 40) with the liberal and grateful mistress that is a dream come true.

The closeness of the whole episode to a dream or fantasy is felt by Lanval himself, who, as he rides back to court, often looks back doubtfully towards the place he has left:

Suvent esgarde ariere sei . . .  
De s'aventure vait pensaunt  
E en sun curage dotaunt;  
Esbaïz est, ne seit que creire,  
Il ne la quide mie a veire.  
(195–200)

(He often looks behind him . . . He goes reflecting on what has befallen him, and doubting it in his heart; he is disconcerted, does not know what to believe, and does not at all trust it to be true.)

The passage has no equivalent in *Landevale* – or in *Sir Launfal*, in which the chivalric successes granted Launfal, having no remedial relevance to his former plight (since he had not appeared to have any problems in that area), render the hero's fortunes more generally enviable, while simultaneously diluting the precise compensation for present deficits that in Marie also suggests a dream come true.

More significantly, Marie's strict separation of the private from the public world is also lost in *Sir Launfal*. The bottomless purse (319ff, 733), the public delivery of riches (376ff), the squire Gyfre and the steed Blanchard, all carry over into the public everyday world as triumphant tangibilities that establish Launfal's fairy liaison as having a comparable ontology, as belonging to the same plane of reality. By contrast, Lanval's beloved and her favours are realities only to his own consciousness; there are no sensible objects to verify an existence measurable by the same means as that of normal 'reality'. The anonymity of the lady herself contributes to the sense of a

sphere of reality different from that of the objective identities of the outer, public world. She is not 'Triamor', and she is not even rationalized into the recognizable identity of a *fée*, to which category she is never explicitly assigned (cf. Spearing 1993, 98).

This leaves her as a figure more fluidly ambiguous between normality and supranormality, more suggestive of an 'alternative world'. The meetings with Lanval she promises and the ban on disclosure she imposes are both treated so as to suggest, not magic mantras or taboos, but especially close observance of the privacy and secrecy essential to what was termed in English 'derne love'. The promise is phrased thus:

'Quant vus vodrez od mei parler,  
Ja ne savrez cel liu penser  
U nuls puïst avoir s'amie  
Sanz repreoce e sanz vileinie,  
Que jeo ne vus seie en present  
A fere tut vostre talent;  
Nuls hum fors vus ne me verra  
Ne ma parole nen orra.'

(163–70)

('When you wish to speak with me, you will no sooner have thought of a place where any man can have his *amie* to himself without attracting blame or disgrace than I will be present with you in it to be entirely at your will; no man except you will see me or will hear my words.')

The supernatural ability to be willed into presence and to be invisible is here expressed as an observance of the 'normal' rules governing lovers' trysts in romance: the lady will come to such suitably secret places as other lovers would choose (164–6) and will ensure that her presence is known to only one pair of eyes and ears. Her ban on disclosure, too –

'Ne vus descovrez a nul humme!  
De ceo vus dirai ja la summe:  
A tuz jurs m'avrière perdue,  
Si ceste amur esteit seüe.'

(145–8)

('Do not disclose this to anyone. – In this matter, I will tell you the short and long of it: for ever would you have lost me, if this love were to be known.')

– simply articulates a well-known point of romantic etiquette: the lover (even where no apparent social or moral taboos were breached by the

relationship) must not expose his mistress to public notice or remark. An *avauntour* or 'boaster' was abhorred and deprecated as a traitor to his beloved.<sup>12</sup> It is precisely as a version of the romantic ban on 'boasting' of or broadcasting the lady's favours that the ultimatum here is interpreted by *Landevale* (followed by *Sir Launfal*, 361–5): 'Ne make ye neuer bost of me!' (162). Nor would the irreparably disastrous effects of disclosure have been remarkable under 'normal' circumstances. As Spearing points out (Spearing 1993, 115), there is in fact a French poem (*La Chastelaine de Vergi*) in which the lady dies from heartbreak at the breach of faith constituted by disclosure on the part of her *ami* (even though no other ill effects, such as opposition or dishonour, follow from it), and her lover responds by killing himself.

But the romantic stipulation becomes in Marie a measure of and analogy for the conditions that govern a larger private paradise that gives no evidence of itself to the outside world. Narcissistic fantasies of love, wealth, importance, etc., must similarly never be admitted into the public arena. If they are openly spoken of as objective facts, they will require the unproducible objective evidence demanded of Lanval. Such private and public selves can cohabit only under a system of the strictest apartheid; contact embarrasses and endangers the social self, simultaneously depleting the subjective world by exposing its want of objective reality.

A certain degree of narcissistic introversion and engagement in fantasies or daydreams are otherwise said to perform, in fact, an adaptive function.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, positive 'self-images' give a self-sufficiency and confidence to the outer self that often prove to be attractive and interesting to others (Freud 1957, 89). Lanval's private adventure seems to have similar effects. Though he uses his new-found wealth to behave with all the generous *largesse* becoming to his status (209–14), there is no indication that this attracts any of the remark that it does in Chestre, or that the court notice it any more than they had the poverty that obviously faced him before. All that happens is that, for the first time, Lanval is registered and remembered. When a group of knights gather to disport themselves, Gawain suddenly declares that they should have brought Lanval,

'Ki tant est larges e curteis  
E sis peres est riches reis.'  
(231–2)

('who is so liberal and courtly, – and his father is a wealthy king.')

These facts about Lanval were known before his *aventure* (cf. 21–2, 27), but had procured him neither attention nor regard. It is only now that the court

remembers and actually seeks him out (235–6) – now that he has already been remembered and sought out in his own private world, and now that his peace of mind no longer depends on such marks of notice and regard from his peers. The point is emphasized by the immediate juxtaposition of a similar reaction in Guinevere. Chestre accounts for her behaviour by assuming an existing passion (simmering for seven years for Launfal, 678). In *Lanval*, she seems simply to display in a more pronounced form the phenomenon just witnessed in Gawain. On seeing the knights from a window, ‘Lanval conut e esgarda’ (‘she recognized Lanval and looked at him’, 241). We are told nothing more of what passes in her mind at that point; acting apparently on a sudden instinctive plan, she immediately summons her ladies and joins the knights. Lanval, now self-sufficient – in the economic and emotional terms that are throughout the story so closely interrelated – has become the valued and sought-out figure that those who need no reassurance of their worth often prove to be.

Marie’s story is not, of course, actually about a fantasy, nor is it reducible to an allegory of psychological processes.<sup>14</sup> Such a reading would be not only anachronistic, but also counter to the narrative: daydreams do not pay the bills or deliver from the dock.<sup>15</sup> Marie’s half-amused awareness of how *like* a wish-come-true the early events are actually serves to distinguish the idyll from sheer fantasy. There are verbal winks that serve to strengthen the link between the juxtaposed gifts by the lady (of herself and of assured wealth): ‘Or est Lanval en dreite veie’ (‘Now Lanval is on the right path’, 134), ‘Mut est Lanval bien assenez’ (‘Lanval is very well placed’, 140), ‘Ore est Lanval bien herbergiez’ (‘Now Lanval is comfortably lodged’, 154). We are invited to observe, that is, how pretty our hero is now sitting. Such features, together with Lanval’s own subsequent doubts (197–200) as to whether all this has not been too good to have been really true, offer not an idealizing fantasy but, more specifically, what is quite good enough to be mistaken for one. Marie grants her hero with a knowing smile the ideal self-image wistfully pictured by most: interlinked sexual/romantic and economic success, and a ‘name’ to be repeated with admiration and warmth – a name bestowed by Marie herself in semi-serious applause:

Lanval donout les riches duns,  
Lanval aquitout les prisuns,  
Lanval vesteit les jugleürs,  
Lanval feseit les granz honors!  
(209–12)

(Lanval gave the rich gifts, Lanval redeemed the prisoners, Lanval provided robes for the minstrels, Lanval performed the great honours!)

But the realization of an ideal self – to which Chestre gives prime and prolonged narrative space – is, in effect, merely this brief in *Lanval*. Marie seems interested in larger and more complex questions concerning the relation between private and public worlds.

Lanval now enjoys an independence from the court much more potentially dangerous than the psychic self-sufficiency enjoyed by the confirmed daydreamer. He looks to his social circle for neither personal nor economic gratification or advancement. It has lost the sanctions and incentives with which it can normally command the commitment of its members. Arthur rewards his followers with ‘femmes e terres’ (‘wives and lands’, 17), and it is thus from the court that domestic and economic prosperity is normally looked for. Lanval is now not interested. Herein lies the real significance of the exchange with Guinevere.

The Guinevere of the more worldly-wise Marie is not Chestre’s royal tart. She is the queen: the patroness of the court, able to dispense favours and to personify in her feminine form the romantic ideal of an *amie* so central to the Arthurian ethos. What she offers is a mark of signal favour from the top and a most prestigious *amie*. It is quite clear that both Guinevere (267–8) and Marie would expect any normal knight to jump at the chance of such glamorous career prospects. Perhaps it would be nice to turn down offers of professional distinction and promotion because one is already amply provided (from other sources) with esteem and remuneration; but it would produce an impossible situation – as it does in *Lanval*.

Lanval’s insult to Guinevere constitutes a much more comprehensive rejection of all the court stands for in terms of social and personal worth and desirability than it does in Chestre. In the latter, what it leads to is merely a beauty contest to satisfy the pique of a vain woman. In *Lanval*, beauty is only one of the ways in which Guinevere is surpassed, Lanval claims, by the least of his *amie*’s attendants, who

‘Vaut mieux de vus, dame reïne,  
De cors, de vis e de beauté,  
D’enseignement et de bunté.’  
(300–302)

(‘... is of more worth than you, my lady the queen, in body, face and beauty, in social graces and in goodness.’)

In this world, beauty is a measure of status, courtliness and value (cf. 489–90, 529–33, 550–74). Guinevere’s angry distress at having been *si aviliee* (‘so degraded’) is thus not simply feminine petulance at hearing she is not the prettiest woman alive. Lanval has, in more senses than one, found an

alternative ‘mistress’, an alternative measure of courtly ideals. Subsequent references to his ‘boast’ make it clear that it is interpreted as an aspersion on Guinevere’s claims to courtly refinement and nobility generally (321); and the king too sees the link between ‘more beautiful’ and ‘of more worth’ in a larger sense in that boast of a mistress so *noble* (368) that ‘plus est bele sa meschine / Et plus vaillanz que la reine’ (‘her serving-lady is more beautiful and of more worth than the queen’). Lanval has, in effect, withdrawn his allegiance to the court.

His leap of a choice at the dénouement, to follow his mistress rather than remain at court, is a measure of how impossible further residence at court has become – even though he has loyal friends inside it and has been publicly cleared of the charges against him (626–9). No man can serve two masters (or mistresses), and Lanval cannot truly serve the court and be funded, emotionally and monetarily, from outside it. His instinctive, impulsive and irrevocable choice is a much more satisfying and conclusive one in Marie than in Chestre, in whose version Launfal’s fairy *liaison* serves to establish and maintain his public identity as an archetypal knight – a role which, indeed, he returns annually to re-enact. Marie preserves to the last the antithesis between her hero’s private and his public world: when he leaps onto his mysterious mistress’s horse, he is carried for ever out of public perception, to disappear even from narrative view:

Nuls hum n’en oï plus parler  
Ne jeo n’en sai avant cunter.  
(645–6)

(No man ever heard tell any more of him, nor do I know anything more to recount of him.)

The ever-growing tension created by an objective world that is oblivious to, or denies and challenges, private realities also appeals, in a larger way, to an experience undergone, in minor or acute form, by all – and Marie’s conclusion is in every sense a romantic one: Lanval is loyal to his private love, his personal reality, and rejects the outside world. His effective death to the world of everyday reality is felt as a deliverance from it. The focus during the trial has been on his psychological and emotional rather than his legal or financial need for his *amie*. The economic issue gradually ceases to be one: when he betrays his mistress, it is the loss only of her company that desolates Lanval (333ff); the loss of wealth is unmentioned, though it is presumably concomitant – and this is certainly what Chestre finds most heart-rending, since he here adds one of his most effective stanzas to picture Launfal finding all his recently acquired wealth has ‘malt as snow ayens the

sunne' (740). Lanval prays his beloved only for the mercy of renewed sight of her (349–50), not for financial or judicial deliverance, and when she does appear, breathes a sigh of relief, expressing restoration merely by the sight of her and consequent carelessness as to what penalty, even death, may now be imposed upon him – words changed into a triumphant cry of hope of deliverance by Chestre (970–72). Lanval desires only some assertion of his private reality in the midst of the lonely estrangement into which his initial alienation, by geography and indifference, has now intensified.

Marie's story thus suggests areas of everyday experience or speculative possibility (the related and essentially private worlds of love and of imaginative fantasy; the common psychological experience of alienation from social context and of division between social and subjective identity; the possible social consequences of simultaneous independence from and membership of a collective), whilst retaining an otherness, a non-everyday drama and singularity, which resists reduction to all or any of them.

There is in Chestre little sense of a private world of Launfal's which belongs to a different order of reality, for the hero is constantly exposed, for good or ill, to public view<sup>16</sup> – and the connection between public standing and economics is especially evident (Chestre plays up this element of the plot, where Marie fades it out). Launfal's renown for *largesse* results in the public office of royal steward; the social reactions to his poverty are marked in the mayor's behaviour and in public scorn; his accession to wealth is public (376ff), and is accompanied by pronounced public success in a tournament held in his honour (434–5), to celebrate which he holds a magnificent public feast (493ff). This coupling of publicly acclaimed chivalry and magnificence continues when his renown in the former area spreads to Lombardy, resulting in his defeat of the redoubtable Sir Valentine (505ff); and tidings of the latter then cause Arthur to summon him to resume his office of steward for the forthcoming public feast (613ff) – causing a reintegration into the court marked by the reconferring of a public office, for which Launfal proves himself qualified by the very spending style that had earlier won him the stewardship (28–32). The public humiliations at his arraignment are as marked as were those attendant upon his poverty: he is bound (757) by the knights (and so led away 'as theff', *Landevale* 277), and threatened with similarly shameful public execution ('He schud be hongede as a thef', 803); and Lanval's sigh of private feeling on his mistress's arrival becomes in Chestre a public cry of defiant acclamation ('To alle the folk he gon crye an hy', 968; cf. *Landevale* 456).

Chestre's tale is not without distinctive emphases of an interesting kind. Squarely facing the outer world, it conveys vividly the mortifications and exaltations attendant upon economic fortunes. It has a consistent concern with *largesse* as an economic posture proper to *gentils* and as deserving of

public acclaim, recognition and office. Following *Landeveale* (21ff), it from the first associates signal *largesse* with the hero (28–35), where in *Lanval* this is merely one among a list of the typical chivalric virtues he possesses (21–2). Chestre's juxtaposition of triumph in combat and conspicuous magnificence also makes an interesting association between two kinds of activity that compel public endorsement,<sup>17</sup> and the fusion of the two kinds of large spirit (not to be deterred by wounds or bills) lends an aggressive and defiant quality to Launfal's *largesse*, as if he were defeating both physically and economically the resistance he encounters from the world.

Launfal 'shows 'em', and the success must be public, for this is part of the logic of the sort of story Chestre has turned the *lai* into: an adventure story of the type still met with in Hollywood films – a tale of dramatic incident in which the hero gets the girl and the loot and triumphs over the opposition. The defeat of Sir Valentine by the invisible aid of Gyfre has attracted deprecating comments on its supposed crude violence and dishonourable cheating,<sup>18</sup> but the episode is entirely in the spirit of this sort of fiction, and the hero is no more bloodthirsty than, and enjoys roughly equivalent advantages with, his modern counterpart, James Bond, whose gruesome dispatch of opponents is often achieved with the aid of the technological wizardry that stands in for magic in the twentieth-century mix of these time-honoured ingredients.

*Sir Launfal* – in which elusiveness has become sensible incident, and which is so much more combative, in every sense, than *Lanval* – is in some ways quite refreshing to read after the earlier *lai*. But in the element of triumph that is virtually absent from Marie's tale there is a moral polarization typical of popular or popularized fiction – in which the triumph is given an often bogus legitimization by the grafting of received types of wickedness onto the opposition, who must be seen as morally inferior to the defeater. The moral superiority of the hero is often unconvincing, as is revealed by the old French *Graelent*. The high-minded line Graelent takes in refusing Guinevere at the start of the tale (121–8) is obviously meant to establish him as a loyal and honourable vassal – but it is made nonsense of when it is followed by the rape of the fairy mistress-to-be he encounters bathing (277–90), an act at which, since the victim is unperturbed by it, the audience is not permitted to protest. Such inconsistency in the moral seriousness with which the irregularities of the hero and of the opposition are to be taken is not uncommon in popular fiction of the present century.

In Chestre, a hypocritical and snobbish mayor and a promiscuous and unprincipled Guinevere become targeted as the focal sources of Launfal's troubles, from which his emergence thus entails a form of righteous punishment – a verbal put-down in the case of the mayor (409–14), and the blinding of Guinevere (1006–8), because, the tale insists, she really did 'ask

for it' (cf. 809–10). The difference between Marie and Chestre in this respect may be seen in the gnomic comments briefly interposed by each to point to a generally applicable truth emerging from the plight of the hero. Marie's occurs at the close of her scene-setting introduction, and draws attention to a *situation* (of social and psychological isolation):

Hum estrange descunseillez,  
Mut est dolenz en autre tere,  
Quant il ne seit u sucurs quere!  
(36–8)

(A foreigner without recourse to assistance is much distressed in another land, when he does not know where to turn for help.)

Chestre's is uttered by the hero himself, to the internal audience of his companions, to point up the moral of the mayor's sudden recollection of seven imminent guests; and it takes the form of social satire:

Launfal turnede hymself & low,  
Therof he hadde scorn ynow,  
And seyde to hys knyghtes tweyne:  
'Now may ye se – swych ys seruice  
Vnther a lord of lytyll pryse! –  
How he may therof be fayn.'  
(115–20)

As to Guinevere, Chestre follows *Graelent* (rather than *Landeveale*) in attributing the hero's decline in fortunes to the immorality and malice of the queen. Launfal is one of those right-minded and 'hende' members of the court who cannot approve of their master's new wife – who is credited with a promiscuity the inveterateness of which is established by a typical tail-rhyme hyperbole:

But Syr Launfal lykede her noght,  
Ne other knyghtes that wer hende,  
For the lady bar los of swych word  
That sche hadde lemmanys vnther her lord,  
So fele ther nas noon ende.  
(44–8)

So when Guinevere consequently leaves him out of her gift-distribution, Launfal figures as the innocent persecuted for his uprightness. He figures in a similar victimized role at his trial, in which Chestre depicts a more

vengeably choleric king (835–7) and queen (706, 713) – who in Marie takes no further part in the proceedings after her initial complaint to Arthur – than is found in either *Lanval* or *Landevale*. Guinevere's promiscuity is recalled to blacken her further at this point: whereas in *Lanval* the charge of improper advances (as opposed to the insult Lanval admits to) is simply ignored by the court, in both *Landevale* (295–302) and *Sir Launfal* (787–95) it is dismissed because, due to the queen's reputation with regard to *lemmanes* (791), all are immediately convinced that the advances were hers rather than Launfal's.

The tabloid enjoyment of detecting sexual misdemeanours in the royal family and corruption in high places thus provides a moral justification for triumph over the 'other', and the grim satisfaction afforded by the blinding of Guinevere (1006–8) is a more pronounced version of the come-uppance received by the mayor (409–14). In this sort of story, troubles are seldom viewed simply as what life can and does throw up, but traced to a 'guilty' party.

Marie, by contrast, achieves a socially and psychologically more complex picture by consistently discouraging any 'sin-spotting'. The king's initial failure to include Lanval in the gift-dividends is simply an oversight (19–20), a sin of omission too unheinous to elicit much indignation.<sup>19</sup> The explanation for why no-one reminds Arthur of Lanval's claims to recognition – that many knights were envious of his many excellencies (21–6) – is the closest Marie gets to any criticism of anybody; but the tale certainly does not suggest (as it could do) a court manned by mean-minded and self-serving careerists, since Lanval later meets with much generosity and consideration from a fellowship quite capable of giving both – and of conducting a hearing with unintimidated fairness and humanity.

Nor is there any disapproval implied with regard to the advances made by Guinevere to Lanval. In the world of Arthurian literature, married men or women may often take *ami(e)s* without narrative censure.<sup>20</sup> This presumably explains why Chestre cannot get enough moral mileage out of Guinevere's well-known possession of one particular *ami* (Lancelot), and has therefore to represent her as promiscuous to a nymphomaniac degree. The contretemps between the queen and Lanval is also intelligently handled by Marie to suggest, not clear innocence and guilt as between the parties, but something much more recognizable: a situation in which each person is surprised into an overhasty reaction.

Lanval's rejection of Guinevere is on the same grounds as those attributed to Graellent (121–8) and Guingamor (95ff):<sup>21</sup> it would be a breach of faith to the *seigneur* he serves (269–74). But at this point in the narrative (when Lanval is already possessed of an *amie* of such exceptional and various charms), the rectitude of his response is a little more suspect than it is in

the analogues, in which the exchange takes place at the beginning of the tales. Lanval can well afford his moral scruples, which are at least partially a screen for the more pressing influence of an existing *amie* he cannot reveal. Guinevere's response is perfectly understandable: rejection is mortifying enough, but rejection on grounds that imply impropriety in the offer adds insult to injury. And it is the implicit charge of misservice to Arthur that she hotly turns back on Lanval. The charge (277–82) of homosexuality (which is more explicit than in the English versions – another example of Marie's more 'courtly' romance being, in fact, on certain subjects, blunter and plainer in expression than are its more 'popular' descendants<sup>22</sup>) is made chiefly to challenge Lanval's assumption of the moral high ground, by presenting it as a cover for more sordid facts, and, by discrediting any honour redounding to Arthur from Lanval's service, to retort on the knight his claim that Arthur's honour is safer in his hands than in hers:

‘Mut est mis sires maubailliz  
Ki pres de lui vus ad suffert.’  
(284–5)

(‘My lord is much ill-served in suffering you in his vicinity.’)

Guinevere speaks, with a nice piece of psychology absent from the English versions, not simply out of wounded vanity, but in anger at being morally sniffed at. Moreover, her speech is prefaced by a characterization of it entirely absent from the English redactions:

La reïne s'en curuça;  
Iriee fu, si mesparla.  
(275–6)

(The queen was enraged at this; she was angered, and so spoke amiss.)

An equivalent introduction is provided for Lanval's reply, which refutes the charge with angry impulsiveness:

Quant il l'oi, mut fu dolenz;  
Del respundre ne fu pas lenz.  
Teu chose dist par maltalent  
Dunt il se repentí sovent.  
(287–90)

(When he heard her, he was most upset; to reply he was not slow. Such a thing did he say in his ill-will which he often repented of [afterwards].)

That Lanval did not pause before speaking (288), and that he said in passion what he would not have done had he taken time to reflect, are similarly details not found in the English versions. The original not only gives more texture to this exchange, but also discourages any moral opposition between the speakers: the insult each gives the other is spoken in haste and in passion, and each says what neither would say when more themselves. Marie is more concerned to evoke a psychologically and socially familiar experience in a situation that is atypical than to take up moral positions.

During the trial, attention is similarly deflected away from the fact that the propositioning actually came from Guinevere (not, as she claims, from Lanval) and away from any moral implications that might be drawn from this. Guinevere's version is offered primarily only as an explanation of how the slur (which is the substance of her complaint) came to be cast on her (317–24), and it is the latter to which Arthur gives more emphasis in his confrontation of Lanval (363–70). The charge of attempted adultery is in the event not considered at all by the court, and there are no speculations within it on this matter. Lanval, after his initial denial that he was guilty of any such *deshonur* to his lord (371–4), is required to defend himself only on the charge (the insult to the queen) that he does admit to (375–7). Marie, Arthur and the barons, it appears, consider that precisely what happened on this score is an unprovable and private matter unsuitable for public investigation or conjecture – where, in the English versions, it is of material interest to both the narrative and the court.

Even the slander on the queen is declared by the court to be an offence which would not normally require a legal defence, were it not for the fact that it might involve a breach of the duty always to 'faire honur' to one's *seigneur* (447–8). If, therefore, Lanval can show he spoke the truth, he will be cleared of any intended *vilté* (456) or cheapening of the king. This court, in other words, understands the real issue – which is here not sexual mores, but the implication that the insult to the king's consort entails (in its suggestion that the courtly ideal is better represented elsewhere) a want of respect for Arthur.

Nor is there in the *lai* any self-righteous exposure of the lie Guinevere (who could scarcely tell the whole truth to Arthur) was forced into. In his denial of the charge of improper advances, Lanval does not say that the boot was on the other foot. He, indeed, probably could not. But Marie and his *amie* observe the same decorum when vindicating him. With regard to this charge, Lanval's redemptress simply declares that 'Unkes nul jur ne la requist' ('never on any day did he request love of her', 621). She does not add that it was the other way round, as Chestre, following *Landevale* (484), takes satisfaction in publicizing through Triamour:

He bad naght her, but sche bad hym  
Here lemman for to be.

(998–9)

Marie's version of the tale thus consistently resists any focus on 'guilty parties' in its account of Lanval's dilemmas. The persons inhabiting the world around him behave understandably, and no need is felt for punishment or exposure of them. It is not uncharacteristic of memorable fictions to be more interested in the fact that people *do* feel, speak and act in such or such a way than in whether they *should* – or in whose 'fault' it is that painful or tragic things occur. It is also characteristic of interpretative processes to impose more moral categorization than appears to be there. Experiment has established that, in the course of successive retellings of a brief fictional sequence, the episode tends to acquire a conventional 'moral' at some point in its serial reproduction (Bartlett 1970, 145, 173).<sup>23</sup> As a story becomes popular (in the sense of 'disseminated'), it tends to take on the moral polarity typical of fiction that is popular in the aesthetic sense. By this process, perhaps, did Chaucer's Pandarus come to be transformed (as *pander*) into a synonym for a bawd. The affair between Lancelot and Guinevere came to be subjected to bourgeois readings which saw in it primarily a moral problem, whereas no moral perspective upon it is offered in the earliest versions.<sup>24</sup> Professional interpretation, or literary criticism, shows the same bias towards eliciting coherence by recourse to moral map-drawing. The dragon in *Beowulf* is discerned as representing 'evil' of a general or specific kind, or the protagonist detected in flaws that morally 'explain' his death in that last duel – though the poem itself seems to see each as acting according to priorities and instincts arising inevitably from their respective natures, situations and status, and certainly expresses no overt concern as to whether either or both 'ought' to die. The transformation of *Lanval* into *Sir Launfal* in that respect illustrates a minor law that seems to operate in the interpretation and retelling of fictions that – though, or because, irreducible to some existing cognitive category – catch the imagination.

## Notes

- 1 Quotations from *Landevele* and from *Sir Launfal* are from *Sir Launfal*, ed. A. J. Bliss (London: Nelson, 1960).
- 2 Those departures from *Landevele* that indicate familiarity with the *Graelent* story are pointed out by Bliss (1960), 24. For the text of *Graelent*, see Alexandre Micha (ed.), *Lais féeriques des XIIe et XIIIe siècles* (Paris: Flammarion, 1992).

- 3 *Landeval* (surviving in three manuscripts and two fragments of early printed books) outcores both on this count; on the manuscripts of both the English poems, see Bliss 1960, 3–5.
- 4 Bliss 1960, 1, 31. More recently, Spearing – in his chapter on ‘The Lanval Story’ in Spearing 1993, 97–119 – also assumes ‘social insecurity’ in Chestre and a probably ‘non-aristocratic public’ (97, 139).
- 5 See, for instance, Bliss 1960, 31–3, and Brunner 1961, 223.
- 6 Putter 1995, 62; see further Pearsall 1985 and Meale 1994, who concludes that the audiences ‘resist generalization and easy classification’ (225). On the question of audience, see also the Introduction to this collection.
- 7 See Bliss 1960, 42ff, and Spearing 1993, 97–119.
- 8 Wish-fulfilment or fantasy is sometimes argued to be what the story actually represents or is about: see Spearing 1993, 98–103.
- 9 See Freud’s essay ‘On Narcissism: An Introduction’ (1957) and the chapter entitled ‘Magic, Omnipotence and Anxiety’ in Modell 1968, 10–27.
- 10 Freud 1957, 74; Modell 1968, 105, 111ff.
- 11 Bliss 1960, 44; Spearing 1993, 109.
- 12 See, for instance, Chaucer’s *Parliament of Fowls*, 430, 457, and *Troilus III*, 264–329.
- 13 See Bollas 1989, 139; Modell 1968, 59–60, 105.
- 14 Spearing 1993, 102–5, takes the analogy with subjective fantasy further than I would in this respect.
- 15 Cf. Modell 1968, 107: ‘An infant may hallucinate the breast, but hallucinations do not provide nourishment.’
- 16 This feature of Chestre’s tale is emphasized by Spearing 1993, 112–13.
- 17 A similar link between bravery and *largesse* is discernible in another tail-rhyme romance, *The Avowing of Arthur*, ed. Roger Dahood (New York: Garland, 1984). In this romance Baldwin is required to entertain the whole court and to defy a planted ambush in tests devised (by Arthur) of three interlinked vows he had made, in which physical fortitude is joined with economic and domestic versions of the same virtue: never to be deflected from his road, never to deny any man hospitality, never to be jealous of his wife. See Burrow 1987 for a discussion of the connections between Baldwin’s three vows.
- 18 See Bliss 1960, 43; Spearing 1993, 143.
- 19 If Marie’s source resembled *Graelent*, a close analogue to *Lanval*, this would represent a deliberate screening out by her of royal misconduct as the primary cause of Lanval’s plight at court.
- 20 Cf. Marie’s own tale of *Laustic*; in the prose *Lancelot do Lac* – ed. Elspeth Kennedy, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980) – neither Guinevere’s acceptance of Lancelot as her *ami* nor Arthur’s own extramarital courting (II, 541–6) occasions any moral comment.
- 21 For the text of *Guingamor*, see Micha (ed.), *Lais féeriques* (n. 1 above).
- 22 See *Landeval*, 226; *Sir Launfal*, 689; cf. pp. 61–2 above.
- 23 The experiment conducted by the psychologist F. C. Bartlett went as follows: volunteers were given a short story to remember; they might also be asked to

pass the story on to others; at regular intervals Bartlett would ask his subjects to retell the story from memory. In the process of transmission and reproduction, the story usually acquired some predictable moral.

- 24 E.g. *Lancelot do Lac* or Chrétien's *Le Chevalier de la charrete*, ed. Mario Roques, CFMA (Paris: Champion, 1983). Disapproval of Lancelot and Guinevere's adulterous affair in the interest of 'family values' became especially widespread in the Renaissance (Adams 1959), though some early instances of moral attitudes towards Isolde and Guinevere occur in Dante, *Purgatorio*, XVI.15, and Chrétien's *Cligés*, ed. Alexandra Micha, CFMA (Paris: Champion, 1982), 3105–24.

# THE SPIRIT OF MEDIEVAL ENGLISH POPULAR ROMANCE

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