

The Portrayal of Women in 'Lanval'

The twelfth century poem Lanval is one of twelve lays in The Lays of Marie de France, concerned with courtly and chivalric romance¹ in which women are often essential to the narrative. Her true identity unknown, the name 'Marie de France' was first attributed to the author by Claude Fauchet in 1581,² from the Harley manuscript Epilogue which reads '...I...name myself Marie and I come from France'.³ Female authorship is also assumed from the topics and nature of the writing. This essay uses the Penguin Classics translation by Burgess and Busby (2003 ed.) to discuss the portrayal of women within Lanval.

Marie's writing often questions or reverses medieval female cultural values, with women presented as strong, central elements in the narrative. Bloch views Marie as 'both a disrupter of prevailing cultural values and a founder of new ones'.⁴ She touches on aspects often difficult for women to address in medieval society. This is evident in Lanval with the use of key female characters. Although of French origin, it is often presumed that Marie resided within the English royal court;⁵ a position which may have permitted more lenience for her treatment of gender and social norms. Many stories are set in Brittany and Normandy; regions governed by the English kings,⁶ with others, like Lanval, set in Britain. Lanval takes place within King Arthur's court in Carlisle. An understanding of Arthurian legend is identifiable, however, rather than focusing on Arthur, his knight, Lanval, is presented as the protagonist. In a further move from standard narrative, it is a woman, not the male protagonist who is essential to the course and resolution of events. Lanval is presented as a noble young man, far from his lands in Breton.⁷ This mirrors Marie's situation away from her foreign homeland, also serving in a royal court. The poem's main events occur in the mortal world; yet, it is the supernatural world which brings welcome resolution for Lanval due to the Faerie Mistress's actions. The author uses well known folklore traits which feature in Celtic literature.⁸ Evident in Lanval is the influence of the Breton folktales on Marie. Cross tells us '...Celtic Literature abounds with stories of supernatural women who visit the world of mortals in search of...lovers'.⁹ In this sense, the faerie mistress's characterisation adheres to popular and common female representations which help attract the reader. Lanval passes his allegiance from Arthur to the Faerie Mistress, who has enticed

¹ Dr. Emily Dalton and Toh Hong Jin, *The Lais Of Marie De France, The Medieval Kingfisher* (2021) <https://medieval-kingfisher.commons.yale-nus.edu.sg/thelaisofmariedefrance/#:~:text=In%20Marie's%20prologue%20to%20the,translating%20them%20into%20Old%20French.> [Accessed 24th November 2024].

² Marie, de France, *The Lais Of Marie De France*, 2nd ed., trans. by Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby (London: The Penguin Group, 2003), p. 7.

³ Ibid., pp. 7 and 14-15.

⁴ R. Howard Bloch, *The Anonymous Marie De France* (United States of America: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), Book Description.

⁵ Amy Morgan, 'Marie De France And Chaucerian Narrative', *Women's Literary Culture and Medieval Canon*, University of Surrey, (2015) <https://blogs.surrey.ac.uk/medievalwomen/2015/06/02/marie-de-france-and-chaucerian-narrative/> [Accessed 24th November 2024].

⁶ Dr. Laura Cleaver, *Reading Abbey And Marie De France* [n.d] <https://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/online-exhibitions/reading-abbey-most-famous-manuscript/reading-abbey-and-marie-de-france> [Accessed 16th November 2024].

⁷ Marie, de France, *The Lais Of Marie De France*, p. 73.

⁸ Tom Peete Cross, 'The Celtic Elements In The Lays Of 'Lanval' And 'Graelent.' *Modern Philology*, vol. 12, no. 10, (1915), pp. 585-644 (p. 9-10) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/432976> [Accessed 20th November 2024].

⁹ Ibid., pp. 585-644 (p. 9-10) [Accessed 20th November 2024].

him into her servitude with her manipulative and sensual feminine power and promises of love. Whilst this can be seen as an improvement for Lanval, it too brings struggle as he must not 'reveal this secret [love] to anyone', else 'you would lose [his mistress] forever'.¹⁰ He is not a free man in control of his own actions. The male is portrayed as weak and the female as strong and dominant. This reverses the contemporary representation of male dominance and heroism accompanied by obedient and loyal females. Elizabeth S. Leet has identified that the faerie women in Lanval use their 'body's visual impact' to seduce and later save their chosen lovers.¹¹ In participating in the male gaze the Faerie Mistress and her maidens 'circumvent the social expectations levied on many courtly women'.¹² Physical beauty is used alongside suggestions of wealth and status, such as the richly adorned faeries and the lavish tent of the Faerie Mistress. Lanval is enchanted by the device of empowerment and objectification with the promise of love and wealth. He is happy to promise to 'abandon all others' and 'henceforth...[wishes] for nothing'.¹³ His riches continue only because of his mistress. Once his promise of silence is broken and the faerie's efforts on him cease, we again see him humble and downcast.

Another female used as a key story component is Queen Guinevere, instrumental in Lanval revealing and losing his love. Guinevere, here, is presented as another woman character using her position and femininity in order to entice a male. Portrayed differently to her usual presentation in Arthurian Legend, Marie's depiction paints her as powerful and strong, but also vain and wicked. Her actions are made 'in the fury of a woman scorned'.¹⁴ Here, male weakness is shown through Lanval and Arthur. Lanval is strong in refusing the queen's advances and asserting his loyalty to the king, however, weakness is shown in his betrayal of the Faerie Mistress by revealing their secret. He tells the queen 'I love and am loved by a lady who should be prized above all others...even the poorest girl is worth more than you, my...queen'.¹⁵ He not only rejects her, but insults her. An unthinkable action for a knight in real world society. Built as a shock moment for the reader, creating dislike for Guinevere for cruelly accusing him of sodomy, increasingly treated as treason in contemporary society.¹⁶ Lanval is given no choice but to reveal his secret to defend himself. The queen is then shown to use feminine manipulation and dominance of Arthur. His anger is understandable, but his power appears to submit to that of his queen. He believes her lies that Lanval had made improper advances to her, but as Kinoshita points out his putting Lanval on trial appears to be for 'having dared to impugn her beauty' rather than 'having made advances to the

¹⁰ Marie, de France, *The Lais Of Marie De France*, 2nd ed., trans. by Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby (London: The Penguin Group, 2003), p. 75.

¹¹ Elizabeth S. Leet, 'Objectification, Empowerment, And The Male Gaze In The Lanval Corpus'. *Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historiques*, Vol 42, no 1, Mar. 2016, pp. 75–87. <https://research-ebsco-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/c/onvpsy/viewer/pdf/sb4ktydshf?route=details&auth-callid=06bfd878-39a1-439e-9055-3e9dc376ae87> [Accessed 20th November 2024].

¹² Ibid., pp. 75–87. <https://research-ebsco-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/c/onvpsy/viewer/pdf/sb4ktydshf?route=details&auth-callid=06bfd878-39a1-439e-9055-3e9dc376ae87> [Accessed 20th November 2024].

¹³ Marie, de France, *The Lais of Marie de France*, p. 74.

¹⁴ Stefan Jurasinski, 'Treason And The Charge Of Sodomy In *Lai De Lanval*'. *Romance Quarterly*, 54(4), 2007 (published online 2010), pp. 290-302 (p. 290) <https://www.tandfonline-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/doi/epdf/10.3200/RQTR.54.4.290-302?needAccess=true> [Accessed 26th November 2024].

¹⁵ Ibid.2., pp. 76-77.

¹⁶ Stefan Jurasinski, 'Treason And The Charge Of Sodomy In *Lai De Lanval*', p. 290.

queen'.¹⁷ Women's attributes and actions are put above those of men, even if male behaviour is unacceptable. Throughout *Lanval* women are in control of the men, much due to the cunning use of feminine wiles. The trial and conclusion cannot reach resolution without female intervention. The arrival of the Faerie Mistress and her maidens, all proven more beautiful than the queen, leads the courts verdict of *Lanval*'s innocence. Every crucial moment of this story relies on women utilising their beauty as power. An element perhaps used as in contemporary society woman, regardless of intellect or standing, may have had little else to use to their advantage. The ending overturns the classic 'knight in shining armour' narrative with a female, the Faerie Mistress, riding in to save the male, *Lanval*. He is saved and enslaved as her vassal once more, but is controlled willingly. A final portrayal of role reversal shows *Lanval* who mount the back of his mistress's horse to be transported to the supernatural otherworld of Avalon. We are told he is not heard of again, and one might assume the faerie's power over him reigns everlasting, perhaps representing women's hope of lasting success over men.

Marie de France presents feminist ideas whilst carefully adhering to the expectations and restrictions of women in twelfth century society. Marie may identify with her female characters, using them to express contemporary male dominance of women. Kinoshita identifies that despite wielding power, the women in *Lanval* 'remain objects of exchange' keeping them grounded in feudal society.¹⁸ The poem tells us that Arthur 'apportioned wives' to his vassals.¹⁹ Could the poem's narrative then be interpreted as a suggestion of women asserting freedom from feudal servitude?

In conclusion, feminine and feminist voices are heard in *Lanval*. Familiar and contemporary settings and narratives are used to present alternative portrayals of characterisation and power. This is evident in the role-reversals of strong women and weak, controlled men. Women are key in this cleverly written poem presented as an entertaining folktale of its time, whilst expressing social and political ideas from a female stance.

¹⁷ Sharon Kinoshita. "Cherchez La Femme: Feminist Criticism And Marie De France's 'Lai De Lanval.'" *Romance Notes*, vol. 34, no. 3, 1994, pp. 263–73. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43802247> [Accessed 22th November 2024].

¹⁸ Marie, de France, *The Lais of Marie de France*. 2nd ed., trans. by Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby (London: The Penguin Group, 2003), p. 74.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

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