

Female Agency, Eroticism, and Empowerment in Marie de France's *Lai de Lanval*

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Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
In  
English

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May 5, 2015

Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: agency, empowerment, eroticism, *bodytalk*, Marie de France, *Lanval*

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ABSTRACT

Since the early fourteenth century, scholars, playwrights and screenplay writers have translated and reinterpreted Marie de France's *Lanval*. This *lai* is the second most frequently translated throughout the medieval era and it continues to be reimagined and retold. All of the translations and reimagined renditions of the *Lanval* story have in common a strange tonality of otherworldly attraction, unusual gender dynamics, a curious new age aura, and elements of proto-feminism especially in terms of female agency, empowerment and eroticism. While some of these motifs seem to reflect more modern understandings of gender dynamics and conceptualizations of women, a critical analysis of Marie's original text in combination with an exploration of Celtic sources reveals that these motifs were always already present. These elements, stemming from Celtic oral traditions and finding their way across the often un navigable barriers of time, culture, language, re-adaptation, and genre, establish Marie's *Lanval* as forever translatable.

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## Dedication

I cannot see the features right,  
When on the gloom I strive to paint  
The face I know; the hues are faint  
And mix with hollow masks of night;

Cloud-towers by ghostly masons wrought,  
A gulf that ever shuts and gapes,  
A hand that points, and pallèd shapes  
In shadowy thoroughfares of thought;

And crowds that stream from yawning doors,  
And shoals of puckered faces drive;  
Dark bulks that tumble half alive,  
And lazy lengths on boundless shores;

Till all at once beyond the will  
I hear a wizard music roll,  
And through a lattice on the soul  
Looks thy fair face and makes it still.

Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, Canto LXX

I dedicate this thesis in memory of my mother, Lincie Ann Barnes Briscoe.

## Acknowledgements

I would first like to acknowledge the members of my thesis committee, Dr. Anthony Colaianne, Dr. Diana George, and Dr. Charlene Eska. I am sincerely grateful for the time each of you took to help me through the composition of this paper. I am particularly indebted to Dr. Colaianne and Dr. George, who were incredibly supportive and made sure to provide positive reinforcement especially during the more challenging portions of this project.

I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Peter Graham and Jen Mooney for valuable guidance and emotional support during the revision phase of this project. They were both able to take some of the anxiety and frustration off of my shoulders and place it precisely where it belonged.

I am forever indebted to Kenna Day, my best friend and partner in crime for half of my undergraduate career and all of my graduate career. Here's to endless nights of hookah, bad fast food, energy drinks, tears, reading the same pages aloud to each other multiple times, and typing and reading through innumerable sunrises together.

I would like to acknowledge Christopher Klein and Mr. Bates, the members of my immediate family. Thank you both for your patience, understanding, and unconditional love.

Finally, I would like to thank my father, John Briscoe, without whom graduate school would have been a complete impossibility on every level imaginable. Thank you for giving me the strength and will to get through this seemingly insurmountable obstacle.

## Introduction

Since the early fourteenth century, scholars, playwrights and screenplay writers have translated and reinterpreted Marie de France's *Lanval*. Barring *Yonec*, this *lai* in particular is the most frequently translated *lai* throughout the medieval era and it continues to be reimagined and retold to this very day. A Middle English translation of *Lanval*, entitled *Sir Landevale*, was composed in the first half of the fourteenth century and served as the primary source of Thomas Chestre's latter fourteenth century rendition, *Sir Launfal*. Two more reproductions of Marie's *lai* were composed in the sixteenth century: Bishop Thomas Percy's *Sir Lambewell* and a fragmentary text containing evidence of Scottish dialect entitled *Sir Lamwell*. Many years later in the early twentieth century, Thomas Scott Ellis, a British peer and patron of the arts, wrote the script for *Lanval: A Drama in Four Acts*. The most current reproductions of Marie's *Lanval* include a 2011 film produced by the Chagford Filmmaking Group entitled *Sire Lanval* and a series of webcomics written and illustrated by John S. Troutman simply called *Lanval*.

The primary version of *Lanval* is an enigmatic tale that requires ample involvement and interpretation on the reader's behalf. The manner in which Marie wrote this tale enables her readers and subsequent re-inventors to gloss, or interpret, the text for themselves. The products of these glossings vary wildly in their treatment of women specifically in terms of agency and eroticism. Each of the aforementioned translations, reproductions, and renditions of the *Lanval* story have in common a strange tonality of otherworldly attraction, unusual gender dynamics, a curious new age aura, and elements of proto-feminism. While some of these motifs seem to reflect more modern understandings of gender dynamics and conceptualizations of women, a critical analysis of Marie's original text reveals that these motifs were always already present.

Marie de France's *Lai de Lanval* is intricately stratified; she subtly weaves this erotic tale of empowered women and subservient men using conventions stemming directly from Breton oral tradition including the fairy mistress, the wealthy dowager, the *tabu* (injunction), and the offended fairy. This layered quality necessitates a critical feminist examination of her female characters, the mysterious fairy woman and the queen. Ultimately, the goal of this project is threefold: to provide a new feminist critical approach to the fairy woman and the queen in *Lanval*, to combine the knowledge created in this feminist critique with knowledge about the possible Celtic sources of Marie's conceptualizations and characterizations of women, and to hazard a guess at what makes *Lanval*, out of all the tales from the medieval era and before, a story that can stretch across time, cultures, and genres.

Chapter one begins with a thorough literature review. The first section lists the various Celtic motifs that Tom Peete Cross observes in *Lanval*. The second section cites the scholarship of Sharon Kinoshita and Peggy McCracken; their text supplies the great majority of dependable background information on Marie de France, the multilingual and multicultural qualities of twelfth century England, and *Lai de Lanval* that my critical feminist analysis functions within. The following section denotes the evolution of various methods of critical analysis applied to medieval literature with an emphasis on the relevance of feminist theory to this field within the context of the social positions and textual depictions of women in the middle ages. The subsequent section justifies the application of Walter Benjamin's theories on the mode and purpose of translation. The final section justifies the primary source material used in my analysis.

The latter half of chapter one consists of an explanation of the methodology used to construct the feminist critical frameworks applied to the female characters, their actions, words, and appearances throughout Marie's *Lanval*. The framework used to analyze female agency and

empowerment is built upon an intersection of the scholarship of several prominent medieval scholars including Sharon Kinoshita, Jacqueline Eccles, Benjamin Semple, Laurie Finke, and Martin B. Schichtman. Finally, the framework used to analyze eroticism in *Lanval*, a slightly reimagined approach to E. Jane Burns' *bodytalk*, is explained alongside a brief exploration of what constitutes the erotic in Old French Romance literature and the medieval era.

Chapter two provides background information on Marie de France in terms of both the authorship of *Lanval* and her mysterious identity. Background information on Marie's *Lais*, *Lai de Lanval* in particular, ensues, followed by a very brief synopsis of the *Lanval* plot.

Chapter three consists of my analysis the fairy woman and the queen in terms of agency and empowerment based on a feminist critical approach. The Celtic sources of some of these instances of female agency and empowerment are signified and summarized.

Chapter four consists of an analysis of the erotic nature of Marie's depictions of the fairy woman and the queen and their engagement in the act of *bodytalk*, as well as scholarship suggesting possible Celtic source material. I focus on how Marie's female characters work to dominate male characters using their bodies and beauty. This chapter concludes with a comparison of their methods of engagement in *bodytalk*.

Chapter five ties my feminist analysis, Cross' identification of Celtic sources, and Walter Benjamin's theories on translatability together in order to determine where these seemingly modern ideas about women and sexuality came from and what enables Marie's *Lanval* to stand the tests of time, translation, re-adaptation, and linguistic, cultural, and generic barriers and shifts.



## Chapter One: Literature Review and Methodology

### *Literature Review*

Tom Peete Cross identifies the Celtic sources and influences which structure the narratives of *Lanval*, including: the fairy mistress, the forth-putting woman, injunctions to silence in love, fairy gifts, the woman slighted in the name of honor, the offended fee, the loss of the fairy mistress, and the return of the fairy mistress.. Marie de France claims to be translating Breton lays from Celtic sources. Understanding the origin of these tales, and the motifs that shape the roles of the female characters, emboldens the similarities between the feudal Arthurian world and the mysterious, Celtic otherworld.

Sharon Kinoshita and Peggy McCracken coauthored *Marie de France: A Critical Companion*, a text that supplies dependable background information about Marie de France, the era in which she lived and wrote, and the afterlives of her works. They emphasize both the importance of analyzing de France's works within their proper socio-historical context and considering the implications of multiculturalism and multilingualism when examining translations, transmissions and interpretations of de France's *Lais*. The chapter entitled "Courtly Love and Feudal Society: A Historical Context" demonstrates how Marie's textual engagement with twelfth century social constructions, particularly the feudal and chivalric codes, depicts an imbalanced feudal system. In this chapter, Kinoshita and McCracken analyze the fairy queen and Guinevere characters and argue that beauty in de France's *Lai de Lanval* functions as a visible signification of noble, courtly qualities.

M. J. Walkley analyzes the evolution of the critical analysis of *Lanval* in his article "The Critics and *Lanval*." Walkley traces the progression of scholarly understanding and interpretation

of Marie de France's *Lais de Lanval* over time. It is worth noting, however, that he composed this article in the early 1980's and much new scholarship on Lanval has emerged since that time. While this does not render his input irrelevant, many novel critical approaches have been applied to the field of medieval literature since he investigated the various methods of critically analyzing Lanval. In this article, Walkley provides brief explanations of critical strategies being applied to Lanval during this era of medieval scholarship, including psychoanalyses of the characters within the *lai* and "discussions about the function of the Arthurian backdrop, the perspective from which Marie de France as an author views her characters, and the use of the theme of the "secret"" (17).

Feminist approaches are notably absent within Walkley's engagement with the various critical analyses of Lanval. While many may consider the application of contemporary feminist theories to medieval literature inappropriate for a variety of reasons, this method of reading Lanval creates opportunities for new understandings of the role of women not only as fictive characters in medieval literature, but as subjects in a patriarchal society. We are quick to assume that applying feminist ideals to female characters in literature issuing from this era is irrelevant and ultimately futile due to the social, economic, and sexual constraints perpetuated by a society seemingly dominated by men. However, applying feminist approaches to medieval texts enriches existing knowledge in the field and expands its horizons far beyond the middle ages.

In her 1994 article "Cherchez La Femme: Feminist Criticism and Marie de France's *Lai de Lanval*," Sharon Kinoshita engages in previous efforts at feminist criticism of the *lais* and suggests an alternate method of evaluating the feminist elements of Lanval. She begins by analyzing scholarship from the 1950's authored by William S. Wood. Kinoshita admonishes both his treatment of "'femininity'" as a totally natural and trans-historical phenomenon evident in

every aspect of the text” and his reliance upon a dangerous conflation of “biological sex and the social construction of gender” (264). With a few uncomfortable quotes drawn from Woods, she demonstrates how delimiting it is to universalize women’s tastes, character, and proclivities based on gendered stereotypes and the perpetuation of the notion of a symbolic and timeless “true woman” (264-265).

After drawing on Fuchet’s post-Derridean, post-Foucauldian scholarship from the 1980’s which signified the undeniably masculine elements of *Lanval*, Kinoshita explores critical approaches set forth in Michelle Freeman’s 1984 article “Marie de France’s Poetics of Silence: Implications for a Feminine *Translatio*” and Elizabeth Jane Burns’ 1993 book *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French*. She combines the concept of “poetics of silence,” or Marie’s “strategic deployment of understatement and elision,” from Freeman’s work with Burns’ method of analyzing how women’s voices in Old French literature “speak both within and against the social and rhetorical conventions used to construct them” (268). However, where Burns focuses solely on female characters as they function within texts written by men, Kinoshita complementarily focuses on the *male* protagonist of a *female*-authored text in order to “locate the woman’s voice less at the stylistic or thematic level than in Marie’s radical challenge to the structure of feudal society through her canny manipulation of literary codes” (268). Kinoshita analyzes Lanval’s actions throughout the plot in terms of how they serve to subvert feudal constraints regulating women, empower the fairy queen, and disempower Guinevere. She argues that though Lanval “plays the passive or subordinate role elsewhere assigned to courtly heroines,” he still wields power over the female characters because they are

objects of exchange grounding the homosocial feudal bond: Arthur’s mistreatment of Lanval consists in denying him his fair share of “femmes e teres” he distributes to his other vassals. The queen is a vain and spiteful adulteress, and

the enigmatic lady a construct of male fantasy: for Lanval a “rescuing female,” a “dream of possession,” and for the Arthurian Knights sitting in judgment of Lanval, the beautiful object of their appreciative gaze. (269-270)

Ultimately, Kinoshita argues that Lanval’s “dissent from the fundamental premises of patriarchy” demonstrates the truly “feminist” elements of the *lais* because in the rejection of patriarchal norms, “[Marie] imagines an alternative to the feudal order that relegates women to the status of objects of exchange underpinning the patriarchal system” (272).

In *Bodytalk*, E. Jane Burns draws on a range of contemporary feminist theorists including Luce Irigaray, Teresa de Lauretis, Denise Riley, and Nancy Miller in order to construct a method of

[hearing] within the dominant discourses that construct female nature in the French Middle Ages—the religiously-conditioned discourse of paraliturgical theater and the patristic commentaries that inform it, the idealizing discourse of courtly romancers in the twelfth century, and the more overtly misogynous discourse employed by writers of fabliau and farce in the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries—other voices that speak against and dissent from the dominant tradition (7).

While Burns carefully indicates that she does not correspond the biological state of being a female with female subjectivity, she refuses the “purely constructionist position that anatomy plays no part in the social construction of gender” and posits that “the specificity of femaleness can thus be tied to the body not as a biological entity but as a bio-cultural construct” (5). She offers that this method of reading women in Old French literature allows us to acknowledge the female body’s powerful position in the revision of oppressive cultural constructions (5). While Burns clarifies that she is focusing on female characters in Old French literary works composed by male authors, we can listen to the *bodytalk* deployed by female characters in female authored works and hear similar echoes of dissent within their voices.

In “Feminist Criticism and the Lay of Lanval: A Reply,” Jacqueline Eccles argues that the “unique quality of Lanval is not found in sexist criticism and a venomous attack on male dominance, but in a balanced challenge to feudal society where male and female weaknesses, and strengths, are presented alongside each other in an effort to criticize an unjust society” (285). Where Kinoshita bases her feminist criticism on the fictive females being submissive, powerless objects of exchange, Eccles posits that their beauty and position as chief manipulators of King Arthur’s court establish them as powerful depictions of women.

Laurie Finke’s 1999 text entitled *Women’s Writing in English: Medieval England* provides a comprehensive look at the social positions and textual depictions of medieval women both before and after the Norman Conquest. Finke argues against the monolithic Dark Ages stereotype in which attitudes toward women were static and unchanging; she spends a great deal of time explaining in detail how the expanding legal power of the Catholic church and hostile cross-cultural interaction between the conquered English and dominant Normans caused the dramatic shift in the social standing of women after the Norman Conquest (12-22). This knowledge not only enables us to understand Marie de France and the female characters in *Lanval* within their appropriate socio-historical context, it emphasizes Marie’s interest in addressing the exploitative behavior of the Norman aristocracy (158).

Walter Benjamin was a German philosopher and eclectic cultural critic associated with the Frankfurt School. His essay entitled “The Task of the Translator” offers valuable insight on the role and expectations of a translator working with older texts in foreign languages. Though this essay functions as an introduction to his translation of Baudelaire’s *Tableaux parisiens*, much of his theories about translatability and the authorial role in the mode of translation apply directly to Thomas Chestre’s efforts at adapting the Lanval story into his dialect of Middle English.

Though John Fowles' foreword of *The Lais of Marie de France* is pockmarked with sweeping generalizations and slightly condescending language about Marie's charm and femininity, Joan Ferrante and Robert Hanning's 1978 translation of Marie de France's *Lais* serves as an adequate modern English version of the Old French text. Prestigious medieval scholars, including Keith Burgess, JE Salisbury, and Albrecht Classen, rely on this version of the *Lais* in their critical analyses of de France's works. Ferrante and Hanning clarify that they adhered as closely as possible to the original text; where Marie repeats words of particular importance for emphasis, a common stylistic device in twelfth century French poetry, this repetition likewise occurs in the 1978 translation. Also, they translate polysemic words ("('aventure' can mean 'adventure,' 'chance,' or 'happening'") differently according to contextual clues (25). The transition from Old French to modern English necessitates some sentence-level adjustments in order to retain some semblance of clarity for modern readers. Ferrante and Hanning specify and justify the ways in which they altered the original text. Their translation: "[allows] for idiomatic differences between Middle French and modern English (e.g., *soz ciel* may be translated "on earth," rather than "beneath heaven")," respects Marie's use of paired synonyms (a common stylistic device in twelfth century French poetry) when they do not distort English usage, and regulates the inconsistent verb tenses within passages, another commonality in medieval French literature, into various forms of past tense.

### *Methodology*

The critical frameworks used to scrutinize the selected scenes are explained in detail in the following sections.

## Critical Feminist Approaches to Medieval Literature

The application of feminist criticism to literature and art before its time never fails to spark a flame of controversy within academe. In response to Sharon Kinoshita's "Cherchez La Femme: Feminist Criticism and Marie de France's *Lai de Lanval*" and Michelle Freeman's "Marie de France's Poetics of Silence: Implications for a Feminine *Translatio*," Jacqueline Eccles questions whether or not it is "wise to apply such a youthful concept as feminist criticism to the work of a twelfth century writer" (281). In response to this, I offer that although feminist criticism is adolescent within the lofty canon of critical approaches and perspectives, feminist attitudes and sympathies resonate throughout the annals of literary history. Works composed by prodigious male authors, such as Milton and Chaucer, are often subjected to contemporary feminist readings; these analyses offer new and rewarding lenses through which to analyze sections of *Paradise Lost*, *Canterbury Tales*, and other antiquated canonical texts. Dismissing feminist readings and criticism from the realm of medieval literature simply because it is a newer form of analysis is inflexible and it unfairly delimits new scholarship surrounding de France's female characters and their subversive habit of flipping the power binaries which constrain and define them.

Kinoshita problematizes the notion of applying feminist criticism to the voice of Marie de France and subsequently the fictive voices of both her male and female characters. She reminds readers that we know little about Marie de France outside of her vague, self-appointed eponym and explains that her "critical wager is to seek the medieval "woman's voice"... in the way a tale arguably lacking any "positive" female characters challenges patriarchal practices precisely by taking to its logical extreme the courtly discourse meant to mystify the project of the primogeniture" (263). Kinoshita furthers this by clarifying that she chooses to focus on the male

protagonist in order to “locate the “woman’s voice” less at the stylistic or thematic level” and more “in Marie’s radical challenge to the structure of feudal society through her canny manipulation of literary codes” (268). Essentially, Kinoshita analyzes the characters and plot of *Lai de Lanval* in feminist terms based on the presence of “dissent from the fundamental premises of patriarchy” (272).

Eccles concurs with Kinoshita’s methods to an extent; she recognizes that Marie’s problematization of feudal social structures through keen motif manipulation evinces an undeniable form of empowerment within the author and her female characters. Eccles diverges from Kinoshita’s train of thought in that she does not see women as “objects of exchange underpinning the patriarchal system” in *Lai de Lanval* (Kinoshita 272). Where Kinoshita argues that “despite the power they wield, the women in this text remain objects of exchange grounding the homosocial feudal bond,” Eccles cites the fairy lover’s arrival at Lanval’s trial and asserts that her beauty is simultaneously symbolic of female strength and purity (269; 283).

Navigating the dissonance between these two scholars provides the ideal critical lens through which to analyze Marie de France’s *Lai de Lanval* in terms of female empowerment and agency. The term ‘agency’ here specifically refers to the female character’s ability to assert control over her own circumstances. The term ‘empowerment’ refers to the female character’s ability to control others, especially male characters. This can be seen in any instance of a female character subverting the male>female gender power binary

While I concur with Kinoshita that female characters can be synchronously powerful and weak, I err on the side of Eccles in my conscious refusal to characterize the women as powerful yet powerless objects of exchange in an unforgivingly patriarchal society. It can be argued that Guinevere acts as an object of exchange as the wife of King Arthur in *Sir Launfal*. However, the



fairy mistress, in both versions of *Lanval*, is a provider of objects and an object of male desire, acting completely independently from the feudal system. Therefore, she is in no way an object of exchange. Additionally, Benjamin Sempé suggests that Marie de France does not characterize the female characters of *Lai de Lanval* as mere sexual objects bound within the controlling grasp of men and contends that they brandish a form of sexual power that male characters lack (173). Also, Schichtman and Finke offer that “women cannot so easily be reduced to ciphers—symbols of wealth” or objects of exchange and that “once they are no longer represented as prizes to be won...they become active participants in patronage networks” (“Magical Mistress Tour” 480). Their participation in these “patronage networks” allows them to negotiate their social status. The most direct symbol of this can be seen in the fairy queen’s *largesse*; she provides for Lanval, unlike King Arthur, and is ultimately able to disrupt the homosocial lord-vassal bond by winning Lanval’s allegiance. A shallow reading of the *lai* makes it appear as though the fairy queen’s beauty and the reciprocal, intense love shared between her and Lanval are the sole reasons he rejects the feudal values of the Arthurian court. However, Lanval is only capable of rejecting King Arthur and the feudal system because of the wealth provided to him by his mysterious fairy mistress. These fictive female characters demonstrate their dominance over men in markedly different displays of empowerment and agency throughout Marie de France’s *Lanval* and the subsequent translations and retellings here analyzed.

### Bodytalk- “a Biology redefined to subvert established hierarchies”

The fairy woman does not depend solely on overt exhibitions of dominance over male characters in order to demonstrate her agency and power. Often, her attractive appearance alone,

is enough to wield power over male characters. Her physical attributes act as sources of power; the varying levels of eroticism, sexualized details and descriptions, used to illustrate these women in Marie de France's *Lai de Lanval* can be read as subtle, and occasionally overt, power plays meant to reconstruct the position of women within power binaries.

It is necessary to analyze the erotic images present in *Lanval* within their respective socio-historical contexts. Though the middle ages are often conceptualized as a sexually rigid, dark era in which sex and the female body were taboo subjects, it is a grave mistake to assume that erotic images in medieval texts were considered risqué or inappropriate at the time. Sexual descriptions of women were surprisingly prevalent in twelfth century romance; Burns asserts that images of exposed female anatomy were quite common, and that descriptions of firm, round, and seemingly bare breasts appeared frequently (190). Also, where erotic images are often pornographic or sexual in nature in much of today's literature and film, they likely meant something entirely different in the middle ages. For example, breasts connoted maternal qualities and the potential for child-bearing more so than sexual pleasure and desire (McCloone 8).

In the 1993 text entitled *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature*, Elizabeth Jane Burns "provides feminist readers of Old French literature with a strategy for reinterpreting the female body as it has been encoded (stereotyped, fetishized, fantasized) within Old French" literature (7). She refers to her critical approach of the female body and voice in Old French literature as "a resistant doubled discourse, a way for feminist readers to hear the varied ways that female protagonists speak from the body within and against the social and rhetorical conventions used to constrain them" (6-7). With *bodytalk*, she attempts to "redefine femaleness in its relation to representation stemming from a desire to undermine the binary oppositions of phallogocentric logic" (8). Burns clarifies that "*bodytalk* is not something that authors--

consciously or not-- make their characters do, rather that it is something that feminist readers can choose to hear" (7).

Her method is informed by Luce Irigaray's contention that "the female body, as the site of patriarchy's construction of the feminine, also constitutes a locus of possible revision" (4). Burns offers that because the female body is "the direct empirical referent for all that has been theorized about femininity," it can also be interpreted as a strategic location from which to "begin constructing a powerful, speaking female subject on different terms" (4). Sexualized descriptions of an attractive female body and erotic imagery function as symbols of power in Marie de France's *Lai de Lanval* as "visible signifiers of a cluster of noble qualities" including wealth, power, and the potentiality for childbirth" (Kinoshita 60).

Burns analyzes how female characters fashioned specifically by male authors "speak problematically *from* their bodies" in order to redefine their roles and ultimately reshape the narratives in which they appear. My analysis centers on how the female characters in *Lai de Lanval* and its successor speak problematically *with* their bodies; essentially, I am analyzing scenes in which female characters use their beauty and bodies to captivate men, communicate their desires, and ultimately wield power.

## Chapter Two: Marie de France's *Lai de Lanval*

### *Authorship*

Scholars and bibliophiles have been writing about Marie de France since the thirteenth century. However, there exists very little dependable biographical scholarship that accurately details the life and literature of this elusive twelfth century French poet. Marie is “among the earliest attested female poets in the Romance vernacular,” and scholars accredit her with authorship of three major works, all composed in the decades preceding and following the Third Crusade: a collection of fables entitled *Ysope, L'espurgatoire saint Patriz*, and the *Lais* (Kinoshita 1). She is also the putative author of *Vie seinte Audree*, but this topic remains highly debated among scholars because the text is simply “attributed to a ‘Marie’” (Kinoshita 1).

This debate over authorship is illustrative of the major obstacle scholars of Marie de France must face when attempting to analyze her works in light of her life; her name, as we know it, is simply a *nom de plume* coined in 1551 by French philosopher Claude Fauchet in *Recueil de la langue et poesie francoise*. Scholars offer several different historical Marias as the possible elusive author (Freeman 878). While any scholarship working to identify Marie de France is purely provisional, Kinoshita offers some hope. She posits that Marie de France was obviously “literate and had access to a library” (3). She lived and composed during the rule of Henry II, Richard Lion Heart, and Philip Augustus and possibly dedicated the *Lais* to Henry II (3). Her written works exhibit knowledge of courtly traditions and royal institutions, and her familiarity with religious texts suggests that she was either a nun or came from a very privileged background (Kinoshita 3).

Precisely determining the actual identity of Marie de France is complicated scholarship. Modern medievalists and historians cope with stringent requirements based on shifting textual, historical, linguistic, and critical analyses of the work believed to be authored by de France. Marie appears to assert her identity and origin in several instances throughout her entire body of works; the most memorable example is observed in a line near the end of *Ysope* in which she states, “Marie is my name, I am of France.” Therefore, in order to satisfy the criteria modern medievalist scholars set for the author Marie, potential candidates must not only exist between the *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem* constraining Marie de France’s writing, but they must also be documented as being from France (which could mean the Continent or the Ile-de-France) but moving to or living in England, and they must have courtly ties, preferably to the Angevin court of Henry II. The initial requirement is based on Marie’s multiple claims of being “of France” and the majority of her texts surviving in England (Kinoshita 18). The latter requirement stems from Marie’s dedication of the *Lais* to a “noble King” (43); most scholars contend that this individual is Henry II of England who reigned between 1154 and 1189 (Kinoshita 4). However, Ezio Levi suggests that she could have been referring to Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine’s eldest son, likewise named Henry (Kinoshita 5).

Working within these exhaustive and frustratingly malleable boundaries, scholars offer numerous historical women as potential contenders for the twelfth century poet. Albrecht Classen suggests that Marie, abbess of Shaftesbury, half-sister to Henry II, is a viable nominee for obvious reasons. Peter Grillo, Yolande Pontfarcy and William Kibler agree that Marie de Meulan, wife of Hugh Talbot, is also a likely match for the historical Marie. Perhaps the most popular and scholarly accepted candidate is Marie Beckett, sister of Thomas, the Archbishop of Canterbury. King Henry II designated Beckett abbess of Barking in 1173; with these two

affiliations in mind, connections to both church and royal court, Beckett is certainly a worthy contender for the title of Marie de France (Kinoshita 3). Add to this knowledge that Beckett is the daughter of a Rouen merchant and was raised in London, the numerous linguistic and cultural requirements set forth by de France's twelfth century Anglo-Norman *oeuvre* are more than satisfied; Beckett would have likely spoken Continental French but would have doubtlessly been familiar with the dialects, culture, and oral history of Anglo-Saxons and Bretons (Kinoshita 3).

Despite the confidence with which many individuals identify Marie's perspective as uniquely female, the lack of reliable evidence surrounding Marie de France's true identity forces modern scholars to reconcile with the fact that Marie de France's gender is uncertain; today, we encapsulate her as a shadow in possession of a vague name and a collection of translations and narratives. Most contemporary scholarship surrounding feminism and the female voice as it presents itself in medieval literature centers on feminist reexaminations of Christine de Pizan and Marie de France, but Kinoshita poses a resonating question in her when she queries the intentions of critics who analyze the "female voice" of an author who exists as little more than a name" (263).

While one can be a feminist without being biologically female, having no dependable scholarship guaranteeing de France's gender complicates feminist readings of her works in terms of voice. According to Kinoshita, the facets of feminism observed in Marie de France's jewels of medieval romance must be carved out of her subversive treatment of patriarchal and courtly discourses rather than how Marie's assumed biological gender shapes the voices and qualities of the characters nestled within her various texts (263). Kinoshita and McCracken assert that Marie:

imagines new possibilities in the form of worlds in which women could choose their own lovers, as in *Yonec*, or rescue men, as in *Lanval*. The *Lais* imagine ways in which women can manipulate and exploit feudal social structures, and they imagine the ways in which

those structures may be changed through women's desires and even women's agency, if only in a limited way. (11)

McCracken and Kinoshita contend that Marie de France's "position as a subject situated in late twelfth century culture is crucial to understanding her treatment of institutions, social relations, and gender" (11). They do not attempt to apply Marie's gender as a critical lens, but they suggest that certain "textual effects" could reflect the "gendered perspective" of the elusive author; that is, Marie de France does not seem to be necessarily preoccupied with gender or writing with a woman's voice, but her gender certainly informs her subversive treatments of medieval institutional and social structures, especially as observed in the *Lais* (11). Many of Marie de France's female characters "negotiate path[s] through courtly or chivalric worlds that only thinly veil the feudal and patriarchal constraints that regulated the lives of medieval women"; these paths typically required them to challenge and sometimes successfully subvert dominant patriarchal practices (Kinoshita, "Cherchez La Femme," 263). Jacqueline Eccles, citing Maggie Humm, argues that "women become feminists by becoming conscious of, and criticizing, the power of symbols and the ideology of culture" (282).

### *Marie de France's Lais*

Marie de France's *Lais*, assumed to have been composed around 1170, is a collection of twelve octosyllabic Anglo-Norman poems (preceded by a prologue), including: *Guigemar*, *Equitan*, *Le Fresne*, *Bisclavret*, *Lanval*, *Deus Amanz*, *Yonec*, *Laustic*, *Milun*, *Chaitivel*, *Chevrefoil* and *Eliduc* (Busby 7). There are five extant manuscripts of the *Lais*, only one of which presents the tales as a comprehensive collection, the mid-thirteenth century manuscript classified as "Harley 978" (Hanning, Ferrante 25).

Each of these episodic narrative poems recounts a tale surrounding an *aventure*, or a significant event in one's life. Once a particular *aventure* became popular, the Bretons composed a *lai*, or "a short lyrical composition sung to the accompaniment of an instrument," detailing the plot (Busby 8). Marie de France claims to retell these *lais* in her native language, Anglo-Norman, and includes her own perspectives and commentary on the events and characters within the story in addition to the cultural norms associated with Norman and Anglo-Norman societies.

Because there are no extant Breton *lais*, Marie's claims of transcribing and translating directly from them cannot be substantiated (Hanning, Ferrante 3). In fact, there is much debate as to exactly what the classification "Breton Lay" means; Cross argues that these stories are typically understood to be of Celtic origin, but that numerous medieval poems identified as "Breton Lays" exhibit "no discernable similarity to early Celtic literature" (589). He explains this phenomena by positing that the popularity of Breton folk stories among the twelfth and thirteenth century Western European elites inspired poets to adapt the label as a literary device as a means of intriguing a larger audience (Cross 589-90).

Marie's masterful avant-garde re-imagination of love as a literary subject in her *Lais* establishes this collection of short romances and narratives as a major achievement. Courtly romances composed during Marie's era were typically fixated on knights striking a harmonious balance between love and chivalry; Marie's *Lais*, however, each in some way focus on the personal desires of both knights and ladies (Hanning, Ferrante 11). Each of the tales in Marie's *Lais* explores the complex nature of love and its problematic entanglement with chivalric social obligations from various perspectives; she navigates this subject with artistic ease through "quasi-symbolic representation" and detached, sometimes comedic, social commentary



(Hanning, Ferrant 4-5). The tales related in the *Lais* involve “lovers forced to live in a hostile world—a court that rejects, a marriage that enslaves, social conventions that constrain—and love offers the only opportunity to escape that world” (Hanning, Ferrante 11). Her narratives, while often fanciful and occasionally comedic, challenge preconceptions about love, chivalry, feudalism, and female agency.

### *Marie de France’s Lai de Lanval*

*Lai de Lanval* is a medieval episodic narrative poem detailing the story of a dispossessed Arthurian knight caught within an imbalanced feudal system and a supernatural romance. This is the only *lai* in Marie’s collection that unfolds within an Arthurian setting; additionally, Walkley signifies this as “one of the earliest attempts to integrate the world of the Round Table into a story” (8). Patrick Ireland draws on G.V. Smithers and offers a delineation of the four main identifying stages of the Lanval story: the obstructive circumstance, the amorous liason with a fairy, the breach of the taboo, and the resolution of the crisis (131).

Throughout this *lai*, Marie de France skillfully weaves Celtic myth with medieval courtly ideals. Echoes of numerous eminent Celtic oral traditions resonate throughout *Lanval*, including the otherworld, the offended fairy, the *tabu*, the wealthy dowager, the forth-putting woman, and the mysterious fairy woman. The fairy woman motif that constitutes the whole of *Lanval*’s female protagonist can be traced back to a plethora of ancient Celtic literature. Some of the most prominent Celtic fairy mistress stories include: *Aislinge Oengusso* (The Vision of Angus), in which an incredibly attractive fairy mistress appears to Oengus in his dreams for a year; *Aidead Muirchertaig maic Erca*, where Sín, an otherworldly woman of unmatched beauty seeks out

King Muirchertaig and commands him to abandon his wife for her; and the tales contained in the *Acallamh na Senórach*, in which Aillenn Fial-chorcra and Aillenn Ilcrothach, two fairy princesses of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, seek out kings for the purposes of getting romantically involved (Cross 595-597).

It is necessary to keep in mind that Marie de France claims to be translating and transcribing from Breton lays because her female characters, specifically the fairy queen, demonstrate possession of agency, power, and captivating beauty; these are qualities that are derived from the aforementioned Celtic progenitors and more. While Marie de France's *Lai de Lanval* offers a markedly different sense of enigmatic charm compared to its Celtic predecessors, "the bones are Celtic; the flesh is French" (Cross 644). In other words, Celtic motifs comprise the skeleton of *Lanval* while the outer layers of the narrative are constituted of French concepts including courtly love and the setting, King Arthur's court.

Though Kinoshita maintains that the number of feminist re-readings of Marie de France's works is steadily increasing, she claims that "Lanval has been least subject to feminist recuperations" (268). She classifies this *lai*, along with *Yonec*, as a "male Cinderella story"; Lanval is passive and subordinate to superior and noble females and the marginalizing effects of his economic and social disenfranchisement is alleviated by the *largesse* granted to him by an endlessly wealthy female patron. Sarah Goers furthers this idea by explaining that *Lai de Lanval* is a "male escapist fantasy" in that the narrative demonstrates the dream of being removed from the hardships of feudal life by an erotic and wealthy female figure (34).

### *Lai de Lanval: A Synopsis*

Marie de France's *Lanval* begins with an attractive, generous, and valorous knight by the name of Lanval who is unappreciated and ignored by King Arthur and his court because of envy. Reportedly the son of a king of high decree, Lanval spent all of his wealth and received neither land nor wives from King Arthur. The exact cause of Arthur's initial displeasure with Lanval is at no point clarified. Lanval leaves Cardoel, the city in which Arthur and his court are currently staying while the Scots and Picts ravage the borders of Logres, on horseback and lays down to contemplate his misfortune. Two mysterious, beautiful, and extravagantly clad women approach him, command him to follow them, and lead him to their mistress who resides in a nearby tent.

Lanval enters the opulent tent and is immediately entranced by the crippling beauty of a mysterious fairy woman. She explains that she came to Cardoel to seek him from afar because she loves him, and Lanval seems to fall in love with her instantaneously. After Lanval expresses his desire to stay with her, she grants him her body and they make love. The fairy woman reveals that she will be his lover forever and he will have anything he wishes for, including endless wealth, if he promises not to tell anyone about her. She explains that they can be together any time he thinks of her as long as he keeps her a secret. He returns to King Arthur's court and is approached by the Queen (Guinevere) while he pines for his fairy lover. The Queen offers Lanval all of her love but he refuses her and explains that he cannot betray King Arthur. Not a woman used to refusal, Lanval's refusal angers the Queen and she questions his sexuality. In the heat of argument and under enormous pressure, Lanval insults the Queen and offers that he loves and is loved by the most beautiful woman alive, a woman whose poorest servant exceeds the Queen in appearance, lineage, and goodness. Alas, Lanval breaks the vow of secrecy! The queen

is insulted; she questions his sexuality and wonders how Lanval's reprehensible sins have not discredited her husband in the eyes of God. Guinevere then lies to King Arthur and manipulates him into putting Lanval to trial.

Lanval, now incapable of summoning his fairy lover, refuses to summon her or even discuss her existence, even at the cost of his own life. Suddenly, two mysterious, attractive women appear on handsome palfreys and instruct King Arthur to prepare his chambers for the imminent arrival of their lady. Arthur consents to their demand and asks his barons for their judgment of Lanval; due to the beauty of the fairy woman's attendants, they request to reconvene the trial. Gawain asks Lanval if either of the women are his lover, but Lanval claims that he does not recognize them. In the meantime, two more of the fairy woman's alluring handmaidens appear and reiterate her aforementioned demands. Gawain exclaims that one of these women must be Lanval's love, but Lanval once again confirms that he does not recognize them. Finally, a lone woman atop a white palfrey emerges from the city; she is described in both physical and pecuniary terms as the most beautiful woman in the world. Lanval identifies her as his love and claims that he does not care whether he lives or dies, as long as his fairy love forgives him for his trespass against her wishes. The fairy woman saves Lanval in a few short lines; as she exits the gates of Cardoel on her white palfrey, Lanval leaps onto the back of the horse and rides with her to Avalun. Lanval is never seen nor heard from again.

## Chapter Three: Female Agency and Empowerment

### *The Fairy Woman*

The Fairy Woman demonstrates agency over her circumstances and exhibits indicators of female empowerment: she maintains agency by choosing not to identify herself by name, she takes initiative and seeks Lanval out instead of waiting for him, she plays the role of the wealthy dowager, and she makes commands of male characters and demands their loyalty.

The mysterious fairy woman does not relinquish her name at any point during Marie de France's *Lai de Lanval*. This may seem minute, but readers must keep in mind that this story stems from an era during which title meant everything in terms of social status. The fairy woman's lack of nominal identity is a subtle play against social norms and it is also demonstrative of her maintaining some semblance of agency. Namelessness elevates her above humanity; she requires no title or social standing to exercise agency in social situations or dominance over male characters.

While namelessness, especially within a narrative, implies a lack of identity and thus a lack of importance or relevance, Marie's fairy queen uses it to her advantage. After she and Lanval are intimate, the fairy woman says to the knight:

...when you want to talk to me,  
 there is no place you can think of  
 where a man might have his mistress  
 without reproach or shame,  
 that I shall not be there with you  
 to satisfy all your desires.  
 No man but you will see me  
 or hear my words. (164-170)

Essentially, all Lanval has to do in order to convene with his enigmatic lover is think of her in a private, secluded area. The fairy woman is only seen by those she seeks out and only accessible to those who know her and are capable of thinking of her; relinquishing her name to anyone could conceivably grant them the power to summon her against her will. If a lowly knight such as Lanval cannot keep her mere existence a secret, the implications of a pack of savage mortal men knowing her name are frightening. Cross notes that, in Celtic tradition, “one’s name is regarded as being in a very emphatic sense a part of one’s self, and as such it must be guarded with the greatest care lest it become known to an enemy, who may use it to the detriment of the owner” (622).

The fairy woman grants Lanval a considerable amount of power over her by instilling within him the capacity to summon her at will. Marie de France writes that she “was completely at his command” (218). Yet this is problematic for two reasons. The fairy woman retains agency in her refusal to equip Lanval with the tool that could lead to her abuse by mortal men-- her name. She also provides strict regulations for when he may summon her—it must be in a private place where no one is able to see her, which could also potentially detract from her agency. Perhaps the most compelling evidence of the fairy woman’s conservation of agency is demonstrated by the condition that Lanval does not stumble upon or purposely quest for the fairy woman; she *chooses* to take the initiative and reveal herself to him.

The fairy woman’s initiation of her relationship with Lanval compensates for her subordinate gender role during an era in which the characterization of the vast majority of fictive females seldom advanced beyond static. Weiss argues that the few strong female characters in medieval literature do not come across as remotely passive or powerless; rather, they “impress

[readers] by their initiative and resourcefulness” (13). The fairy woman demonstrates agency over herself by deciding the appropriate time and place to reveal herself to Lanval. Additionally, the fairy woman possesses and strategically utilizes the element of surprise to her advantage.

When the fairy woman’s handmaidens initially approach Lanval, they inform him that “...[their] lady,/ who is worthy and wise and beautiful,/ sent [them] for [him]” (71-73). After they lead him to her tent, the fairy woman says, “...because of you I have come from my land;/ I came to seek you from far away” (111-112). The fairy woman upholds complete control over when, where, and how Lanval will meet her; much like a siren, she lulls Lanval to him.

Lanval’s reaction to the fairy woman’s sudden, timely, and unanticipated arrival is perhaps the most compelling evidence of the fairy woman’s power over him. She wields the element of surprise during the initial encounter, thus the combination of her intoxicating beauty and unimaginable wealth renders Lanval powerless. He immediately submits to her by offering to obey her (121-130). Lanval is stunned, caught up in the moment, and sees her as a force that he cannot dominate, much less comprehend.

The fairy woman’s decision to boldly seek out Lanval and overpower him with her appeal, both sexual and pecuniary, on her own terms is a resonance of the forth-putting woman motif observed frequently in ancient Celtic written works. For example, in the *Aidead Muirchertaig maic Erca*, after King Muirchertach is immediately lovestruck by the fairy woman Sín, she tells him that she came to the mortal realm to seek him out (Cross 613). Rhiannon, in the ancient Welsh story of *Pwyll, Prince of Dyved*, overpowers Pwyll with her beauty and tells the young prince that she came to him of her own accord to find him (614). Cross also signifies the story of the fairy woman Etain seeking out the lovestruck Eochaid as told in *Tochmarc Étaine*

and Aillenn pursuing the king of Connacht in one of the narratives from the *Acallamh na Senórach* (612-613).

The fairy woman acts as a wealthy dowager in the escapist Cinderella story of *Lai de Lanval*. When describing the fairy woman's tent, Marie de France relates,

Queen Semiramis,  
however much more wealth,  
power, or knowledge she had,  
or the emperor Octavian  
could not have paid for one of the flaps.  
There was a golden eagle on top of it,  
whose value I could not tell,  
nor could I judge the value of the cords or poles  
that held up the sides of the tent;  
there is no king on earth who could buy it,  
no matter what wealth he offered (82-93).

As though the luxurious quality of her living quarters is not proof enough of her extensive wealth, Marie de France continues by describing the fairy woman's extravagant attire; our first visual encounter with her illustrates her as draped in "a precious cloak of white ermine, covered with purple alexandrine" (102-103).

After they make love, the fairy woman offers Lanval a generous gift: "he would never again want anything, he would receive as he desired; however generously he might give and spend, she would provide what he needed" (135-139).

In the opening of the *lai*, Lanval is economically and socially marginalized by King Arthur and his court: "Far from his heritage," Lanval has "spent all his wealth, for the king gave him nothing" (28-31). Marie describes him as "a strange man, without friends" who does not know where to look for help" (36-39). After the fairy woman arrives and graces him with



*largesse*, Marie exclaims that “now Lanval is well cared for” (140). The fairy woman ultimately displaces King Arthur, Lanval’s feudal lord, by providing him with wealth that the king, for reasons unknown, fails to provide.

There exist numerous Celtic sources exhibiting fairy women acting as wealthy dowagers. *Noinden Ulad*, in which Macha blesses Crunniuc with great wealth, *Fled Bricrend*, in which Morrígu gives Cuchulainn all of her livestock and possessions, and the story of O’Cronogan, who is blessed by his fairy lover with a new house in place of the ashes of his former house, each depict mysterious otherworldly females doling out possessions, food, livestock, even real estate to their often disenfranchised mortal significant others (Cross 629). The two most similar stories to Marie’s *Lanval* in terms of gifts bestowed by a wealthy fairy lover include that of the fairy woman Nar and her husband Crimthann and *Tain Bó Dartada*. In the six weeks that they are married, Nar gives Crimthann a wealth of gold and luxurious clothes; in later renditions, she gives him weapons that make him invincible, including a spear and a sling (Cross 629-630). In *Tain Bó Dartada*, King Eocho Beg is blessed with gifts extremely similar to those given to Lanval: the fairy woman and man that visit him in his dreams one night provide him, the very next day, with horses, gold and silver bridles, and opulent garments from *sid Cuillni*, the fairy mound from which they hail.

The fairy woman’s most aggressive assertion of empowerment occurs after she summons Lanval to her tent and confesses that she loves him. Lanval is stunned and consumed by her beauty; he immediately pledges fealty to her:

Lovely one...if it pleased you;  
if such joy might be mine  
that you would love me,

there is nothing you might command,  
 within my power, that I would not do,  
 whether foolish or wise.  
 I shall obey your command;  
 for you, I shall abandon everyone. (121-128)

To this she replies, “Love, I admonish you now, I command and beg you, do not let any man know about this” and he assures her that she will remain a secret (143-145). While her use of the term “beg” implies subservience, it is embedded within dialogue fraught with imperative language. When she commands that Lanval refrain from telling anyone about her, she is issuing a *tabu*, or an injunction that if broken will lead to dire consequences. The fairy woman asserts dominance a final time before her temporary disappearance from the narrative by ordering Lanval to leave her tent and return to Arthur’s court (159-161).

Near the end of the *lai*, the fairy woman and her handmaidens appear at Lanval’s trial and she informs Arthur that the queen misled him. “If [Lanval] can be acquitted through me, let him be set free by your barons,” she boldly instructs King Arthur (623-624). After her presence, speech, and beauty win Lanval’s freedom, he mounts the back of her palfrey and the couple hastily departs from court. Marie de France explains that “the king could not detain her though there were enough people to serve her” (631-632).

The fairy woman’s *tabu* is yet another common convention across ancient Celtic literature. For example, in *Noinden Ulad*, Macha forbids her lover from uttering her name. Similarly, Sín, in *Aidead Muirchertaig maic Erca*, imposes upon Muirchertach the an injunction against speaking her name, summoning her anywhere near the mortal mother of his children, or allowing priests to enter her home (Cross 626). The fairy woman returning to save her mortal lover is less common in Celtic literature, but Cross identifies two instances of this happening: in *Aislinge Oengusso*, the fairy woman from Oengus’ dreams returns to him from the otherworld to

rescue him from crippling lovesickness after her long and unexplained absence and in *Noinden Ulad*, Macha returns long enough to save her mortal lover from peril.

The fairy woman, like her Celtic progenitors, is dominant in terms of agency and empowerment. In choosing to remain nameless, she retains agency over her circumstances; she equips Lanval with knowledge of her existence and physical appearance and grants him alone the power to summon her. Her initiative in seeking Lanval out rather than passively waiting to be found demonstrates empowerment uncharacteristic of most female characters in twelfth century courtly romance. The fairy woman's ability to act as a wealthy dowager figure and provide Lanval with more riches than he could spend or give away in a thousand lifetimes enables her to displace King Arthur as lord in his homosocial lord-vassal bond with Lanval. Finally, the commanding language she uses with both Lanval and King Arthur places her at the top of a typically patriarchal construct above knights and kings alike.

### *The Queen*

Marie de France's nameless queen acts as a foil to the fairy woman character. Sarah Goers delineates the criteria by which this occurs: the queen simply lusts after Lanval while the fairy woman genuinely loves him; where the queen is likely very beautiful if she was selected for marriage by King Arthur, the fairy woman is the most beautiful, evinced through descriptions of her body and her ability to win Lanval's life during the trial; the queen is dishonest and merciless, yet the fairy woman is honest and merciful (42). This foil theory is furthered by my approach to analyzing female agency and empowerment and comparing them. The same qualities and actions that empower the fairy woman serve to disempower the queen. However, Marie de France does not present us with a wholly impotent version of the queen.

The empowering effect of the fairy woman's refusal to supply Lanval with her name is heightened in light of Marie de France's decision to omit Guinevere's name from the narrative. Where the secrecy of the fairy woman's identity serves to reinforce her agency, it has an adverse effect on the character of the queen. Here, Kinoshita's aforementioned supposition rings true; referring to Guinevere as simply 'the queen' further embeds her as an object of exchange in the feudal system in that it establishes her as nothing more than King Arthur's wife, his property and the continuation of the Arthurian primogeniture. This furthers Sarah Goers's theory that the innominate queen acts as a foil to the cryptic fairy queen (42).

Additionally, the queen's attempt at initiating a romantic encounter with Lanval fails miserably. Like the fairy woman, she observes him from afar and surrounds herself with subservient yet refined and lovely handmaidens (237-245). The queen confidently approaches him when he is alone in the courtyard at Cardoel. Marie de France narrates

she went straight to the knight.  
 She sat beside him and spoke,  
 revealing her whole heart:  
 "Lanval, I have shown you much honor,  
 I have cherished you, and loved you.  
 You may have all my love;  
 just tell me your desire.  
 I promise you my affection.  
 You should be very happy with me! (261-269)

Lanval refuses to reciprocate her love, first citing his allegiance to her husband, King Arthur.

Shortly thereafter, the queen accuses him of pederasty, to which he replies that he is loved by and loves a prized woman. Lanval then insults the queen and clarifies that

any one of those who serve [the fairy woman],  
 the poorest girl of all,  
 is better than you, my lady queen,  
 in body, face, and beauty,

in breeding and in goodness. (298-302)  
Where the fairy queen's initiative, beauty, and wealth inspire Lanval to pledge fealty and devotion to her, the queen's initiative provokes him to disempower her by rejecting and severely insulting her.

Furthermore, the queen is unable to act as the wealthy dowager because she is constrained by feudal constructions regulating marital property ownership. While she is unarguably wealthy as King Arthur's wife, she is incapable of distributing this wealth, especially to knightly paramours. She cannot function as the wealthy dowager because even if Lanval were to submit to her advances, she could not provide him with wealth that does not belong to her.

Finally, the queen's inability to successfully assert dominance over Lanval through verbal command reaffirms her lack of power. When she corners Lanval in the courtyard, she directs him to tell her his desires and instructs him that to be happy with her (266-268). As mentioned previously, he refuses her outright and then disrespects her by calling into question her physical beauty, lineage, and morality (301-302). Rather than exercising her authority as queen, she retreats to her quarters to sulk and nurse her wounded ego.

Though the queen is grounded as an object of exchange belonging to her husband, she still technically maintains a position of power as the wife of King Arthur. Her request for sexual relations with Lanval threatens Arthur's power by introducing the possibility of tainting his bloodline, ultimately violating the premises of the primogeniture. Despite her failure to seduce Lanval, the queen has the power to potentially subvert the lord-vassal binary by procreating with one of his knights.

After Lanval bitterly rejects her, the queen is sickened by the rage of rejection and the sting of his injurious remarks. She goes to bed and claims that she will never get up unless the king satisfies her (307-309). Marie de France writes

when she saw [Arthur],  
she began to complain. She fell at his feet, asked his mercy,  
saying that Lanval had dishonored her;  
he had asked for her love,  
and because she refused him  
he insulted and offended her. (315-319)

Although she underpins the patriarchal superiority of her husband by lying prostrate and appealing to him for mercy, it is worth noting that she is “the chief manipulator of Arthur’s court” (Eccles 284). Eccles even likens her to Eleanor of Aquitaine, the powerful, land-owning queen consort of France notorious for manipulating the royal court and the patriarchal constructs binding most women in the middle ages (284).

Arthur’s aggressive pursuit of Lanval should not be misread as a gallant attempt at defending the honor of his wife. Though the text states that “the king got very angry; he swore an oath: if Lanval could not defend himself in court he would have him burned or hanged,” his anger and oath do not serve to empower the queen (325-328). Contrarily, Lanval’s imprisonment and trial should be interpreted as Arthur simply trying to defend his own integrity and pride by demanding that he produce a woman more beautiful than his—a disempowering and ultimately damning prospect for the queen.

Eccles reads the queen as a “cautionary symbol” which simultaneously “[portrays] female weakness and cunning” (284). She refutes Kinoshita’s notion that the queen is entirely powerless and is nothing more than a “vain and spiteful adulteress” (“Cherchez La Femme” 270). The queen, synchronously powerful and powerless, serves as a female balance for the

plethora of weak male characters in *Lai de Lanval* and “nullifies the argument that Marie de France’s text might be sexist in favor of women” (Eccles 284).

Marie de France’s queen is the forth-putting woman motif flipped on its head; the queen may have the courage and be empowered enough to approach Lanval and instruct him to be in love with her, but it backfires and she is rejected. Cross identifies a Celtic source entitled *Fingal Ronain* where a similar situation occurs. In *Fingal Ronain*, Ethne, the wife of King Ronan of Leinster, dies and is replaced with a young queen despite the disapproval of Ronan’s only son, Mael-Forthartaig. The young queen pursues Mael-Forthartaig and he refuses her on the grounds that she is married to his father, the king. Just like Marie’s queen, this young queen in a fit of rage tells Ronan that his son made inappropriate advances toward her. Ultimately, Mael-Forthartaig is put to death despite the fact that he spurned the young queen in the name of his father’s honor (Cross 637).

The unnamed queen in *Lai de Lanval* is a complex amalgamation of female weakness and strength. The omission of her actual name, Guinevere, combined with her inability to pose as the wealthy dowager for Lanval, entrench her as an object of exchange. Her failed attempt at initiating a relationship with Lanval, along with her subsequent inability to command him to submit to her desires supplement her powerlessness. Though she is a foil to the dominant fairy woman, she retains some semblance of power as she is written in Marie de France’s text because she is the wife of King Arthur and her lecherous behavior is a threat to the untainted continuance of his bloodline.

## Chapter Four: Eroticism through *Bodytalk*

In her critical analysis of how male authors typically construct female characters, E. Jane Burns reminds us that “twelfth century romance narrators often paint portraits of idealized feminine beauty that suggest posed statues rather than living flesh” (109). She furthers this notion of the statuesque idealized woman in her assertion that they are “typically frozen in descriptions of isolated body parts...[which] descend from an initial focus on the woman’s hair to a sustained look at the face and its features, passing quickly past the neck and chest to glimpse the hands and hips” (109). Finally, she claims that in the majority of twelfth century romances, the bodies of female characters are “dismembered and objectified by the gaze of the male narrator and/or protagonist” (109). While these concepts may hold true in regards to male-authored twelfth century texts, Marie de France’s erotic descriptions of female characters simultaneously conform and resist these misogynistic structures. Though in some instances she deconstructs the fairy woman by vividly describing the same individual physical aspects that her male analogues focus on, she does not allow the fairy woman to be objectified by the male gaze of Lanval, King Arthur, or his knights. She constructs enticing and alluring female characters and imbues them with a powerful, sensual beauty-- a beauty that enables them to captivate and control men.

### *The Fairy Woman*

Marie de France’s elegant yet erotic imagery embedded throughout *Lai de Lanval* serves to empower the attractive fairy woman. According to Kinoshita and McCracken, authorial emphasis of physical beauty functions to emphasize “a cluster of noble qualities” within the



otherworldly woman; her physical appearance implies that she possesses desirable courtly and chivalric qualities (60). The sensuous fairy woman is conscious of the intoxicating effect that her appearance has on King Arthur and his knights; she uses her appealing body to communicate her desires and to wield almost hypnotic power over the dominant male figures in the rigid, patriarchal Arthurian court.

Perhaps the most striking erotic scene in *Lai de Lanval* occurs when the wandering knight initially encounters the fairy woman. Marie de France writes that

the lily and the young rose  
when they appear in the summer  
are surpassed by [the fairy woman's] beauty. (94-96)

She subsequently specifies that the fairy woman was "...dressed only in her shift" (99). In the following passage, Marie skillfully provides an extremely erotic description of the fairy woman without making it pornographic or carnegraphic; she amplifies desirable sexual traits of the fairy woman's body without being vulgar or overly-detailed (Goers 33).

Her body was well shaped and elegant;  
for the heat, she had thrown over herself,  
a precious cloak of white ermine,  
covered with purple alexandrine,  
but her whole side was uncovered,  
her face, her neck, and her bosom/;  
she was whiter than the hawthorn flower. (100-106)

The fairy woman awaits Lanval's arrival in her tent, statuesquely posed. She premeditates her provocative garb and position in order to be as captivating and sexually appealing as possible. She communicates her desire to love, and make love, to Lanval through the willing and calculated exposure of her body—through *bodytalk*.

Her overwhelming beauty immediately hypnotizes and overpowers the unsuspecting knight:

He looked at her and saw that she was beautiful  
Love stung him with a spark  
that burned and set fire to his heart. (117-119)

In a pledge of steadfast devotion that, as Ireland points out, “closely parallels a vassal’s plight of servitude to his lord,” Lanval immediately pledges his devotion to her (121-130). In this instant, the fairy woman’s beauty alone inspires Lanval to capitulate his devotion to King Arthur and proclaim his allegiance to her.

The fairy woman essentially disappears from the narrative until the trial near the end of the *lai*. When she makes her unforgettable debut in King Arthur’s court, she appears dressed “in a white linen shift/ that revealed both her sides/ since the lacing was along the side” (560-562).

Marie de France thoroughly describes the fairy woman’s stunning physical attributes:

Her body was elegant, her hips slim,  
her neck whiter than snow on a branch,  
her eyes bright, her face white,  
a beautiful mouth, a well-set nose,  
dark eyebrows and an elegant forehead,  
her hair curly and rather blond;  
golden wire does not shine  
like her hair in the light. (560-570)

The anatomical details provided both in this scene and the initial encounter with Lanval articulate the maternal possibilities of the fairy woman. The emphasis on her breasts, mouth, and hips are sexually appealing, but they also exhibit her potential for childbearing, a symbol of power in the patriarchal dynastic system that depended upon the birth of children, particularly sons who underpin the notion of the primogeniture (McCloone 8). Therefore, the inherent power in the erotic nature of the fairy woman’s beauty is twofold: her beauty is captivating, and her

voluptuous anatomy implies that she retains the capability of producing an heir, an act that no man, despite how much power he holds, can achieve without the help of an “inferior” female.

The fairy woman mesmerizes the entire town with nothing more than her pulchritude: “In the town, no one, small or big/ old man or child/ failed to come look/ as they watched her pass/ there was no joking about her beauty” (575-579). The judges in King Arthur’s court marvel at her shapeliness and call her “the most beautiful woman in the world” (592). After she dismounts her white palfrey before King Arthur, she “[lets] her cloak fall/ so they could see her better” (605-606) Again, the fairy woman demonstrates that she consciously wields power through *bodytalk*; she selects an opportune time at which to further reveal her appealing body in order to reaffirm her dominance. She flagrantly exhibits her figure with the avowed intention of garnering the admiration of King Arthur and his court—this admiration, elicited by her tactful partial disrobement, is the tool by which she liberates Lanval.

The king and his men are stunned by her beauty; Arthur rises to meet her and his knights offer to serve her. After “they had looked at her well” and “greatly praised her beauty,” the fairy woman engages in refined, courtly speech and, in a pithy and candid rebuttal to the queen’s false accusations, conveys to King Arthur that “if [Lanval] can be acquitted through [her]/ let him be set free by your barons” (622-624). Although McCloone posits that “the fairy woman’s defense of Lanval is sufficient to convince the king and his court of his innocence,” it is truly a combination of her refined speech *and* her desirable anatomy that exonerates him (3). Ultimately, the decision to absolve Lanval rests upon whether the barons agree with his boasts of the fairy woman’s supreme beauty or not. When she suggests that Lanval can be acquitted through her, she means that he can be acquitted through her physical superiority over the queen.

While there are several instances in early Celtic literature of men publicly displaying their bodies, King Niall in *King Niall of the Nine Hostages* and Alexander in *Togail Troi*, Cross identifies one Celtic source containing a fairy woman displaying her body, engaging in *bodytalk*, that matches the scene in *Lanval* almost exactly (640). In the story of Aillenn Ilcrothach in *Acallamh na Senórach*, the fairy woman visits the king's court to confirm her lover's boast and purposely allows her mantle to fall to the floor before the assemblage of nobles in order to prove that her lover's claims of her beauty were unquestionably true (Cross 640).

### *The Queen*

The nameless queen also seemingly appears bodiless in *Lai de Lanval*. Marie de France does not provide any physical description of her throughout the narrative, much less any erotic imagery. Just as her lack of identity in nominal terms disempowers her, so too does her apparent lack of sexual appeal. The idea that the queen functions as a foil to the fairy woman is strengthened in that she is not equipped with the powerful tool of *bodytalk*; the only references to her body suggest her inferiority to the allegedly perfect beauty of the fairy woman.

The queen's attempted seduction of Lanval is an utter failure because she does not possess any of the desirable, erotic powers that the fairy woman effortlessly wields. After Lanval rejects the queen's advances and she accuses him of pederasty, he proclaims that even his secret fairy lover's poorest handmaiden is vastly superior to her "in body, face, and beauty" (301). Though he subsequently mentions "breeding" and "goodliness" as other criteria the queen fails to meet, sexually appealing physical attributes dominate his criticism of Arthur's lascivious wife (302). Shortly before the trial, the fairy woman's alluring handmaidens appear in Cardoel. Marie writes

most of those who saw them praised them  
for their bodies, their faces, their coloring  
each was more impressive  
than the queen had ever been. (529-532)

Indeed, Lanval's boasts ring true; even the handmaidens are more attractive sexually appealing than the queen.

Kinoshita and McCracken assert that, "correspondingly, depreciating the queen's beauty [serves] not just to insult her personal physical appearance, [but] to question her possession of the attributes naturally marking those at the summit of feudal society" (60). In rejecting the queen, Lanval questions not only the quality of her physical appearance, but her overall nobility.

### *Bodytalk: The Fairy Woman versus The Queen*

Where the fairy woman succeeds as a dominant figure through *bodytalk*, the queen fails. Marie provides ample, vivid description of the fairy woman and emphasizes her erotic qualities and the power retained within them. However, at no point in the narrative does she present any physical, much less erotic, descriptions of the queen. In fact, the only instance in which the reader sees the queen in physical terms occurs when she lays prostrate on the ground and begs Arthur to punish Lanval. Lanval pledges loyalty to the fairy woman after being mesmerized by her beauty and *bodytalk*, and he refuses to submit to the queen's lascivious advances because of her physical inferiority in comparison with the fairy woman. Where the fairy woman possesses potentially maternal, nurturing qualities, Marie provides no physical description of the queen that suggests that. Also, the queen is afforded no opportunity to flagrantly expose her body, and even if she was, it would likely only serve to harm her case. The fairy woman dominates through

*bodytalk* in that she captivates and controls men and ultimately exonerates Lanval in King Arthur's trial whereas the queen, in terms of the erotic, fails entirely.

## Chapter Five: The Translatability of Lanval

Marie de France's *Lai de Lanval* is one of the most frequently translated and reinterpreted Anglo-Norman Romance poems. Since its conception in the late twelfth century, Lanval has reappeared in numerous translation and adaptations, including the *Sir Landevale*, *Sir Launfal*, *Sir Lambewell*, and *Sir Lamwell* texts. Later, it crosses the barriers of genre and reemerges many centuries later in the 1908 play entitled *Lanval: A Drama in Four Acts*, the 2011 cinematic production entitled *Sire Lanval*, and Troutman's 2010 webcomics series, *Lanval*. Though the key themes observed in the depictions and actions of the female characters evolve in response to authorial intent and historical context, many elements of *Lai de Lanval* resonate throughout its literary successors. Walter Benjamin theorizes

Translatability is an essential quality of certain works, which is not to say that it is essential that they be translated; it means rather that a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatability. It is plausible that no translation, however good it may be, can have any significance as regards the original. Yet, by virtue of its translatability the original is closely connected with the translation... (71)

Benjamin's notion of translatability offers a possible answer to why Marie's *Lai de Lanval* has managed to resurface time and time again, and it reminds readers of the necessity of recognizing the connection between her *lai*, the plethora of Celtic sources beyond an oral retelling of *Lanval*, and all of the modern renditions of this timeless Breton *lai*. He emphasizes the importance of the connection between a translation and its original text by explaining that

Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its afterlife. For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life. (71)

Each transformation that Marie de France's *Lai de Lanval* undergoes in the process of translation and re-adaptation breathes new life into the ancient text, renews it, and renders it unforgettable, perhaps even born anew. Though each reproduction diverges markedly from Marie's original text, they all have in common a seemingly new age aura of unusual gender dynamics and elements of proto-feminism, especially in terms of female agency, empowerment, and eroticism. These elements, stemming from Celtic oral traditions and finding their way across the often unnavigable barriers of time, culture, language, re-adaptation, and genre, establish Marie's *Lanval* as forever translatable.



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