

The intricacies of the
court and Ianval's
desire to escape



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Intricacies of the Court and Lanval's Desire to Escape In the Anglo-Norman lay Lanval, an eloquent and intricate account of the Arthurian courts, Marie de France develops an array of issues that include the hypocrisies and virtues of the court, the desire for escape, as well sex and gender. In this essay, I will investigate these topics by comparing the Queen, the fairy Princess and Gawain as they are examples of both the contemptible and noble qualities of the court system. I will also investigate the theme of escapism and how Lanval's status as an 'outsider' from the courts causes him to desire to escape his situation of courtly abjection. These investigations will further my understanding of Marie's views of the court system. Finally, by pursuing the issues of sex and gender, this essay will explore the lay's fascinating portrayal of the role of women as active agents in the Arthurian courts. This series of investigations will lead to the conclusion that the events and occurrences are completely the imaginings of Lanval himself. His psychological exile results from his estrangement from reality. Marie's own escapist fantasy; however, has been effectively manipulated to make for presentable courtly entertainment. Marie de France's portrayals of the injustices and hypocrisies of the court are tactful, ensuring that she will be able to read this lay aloud to the court. For example, Lanval's unhappiness at the beginning of the poem, while we are informed that he does not receive his due payment from King Arthur after the battles against the Picts and the Scots, is not fully explained.

Descriptions of Lanval reveal that he is obviously not on an equal level with the other knights. Marie does not explicate the reasons for these exceptional conditions, however, careful consideration reveals the corruption and irony of Arthur's round table. While the battles against Picts and Scots are grand

<https://assignbuster.com/the-intricacies-of-the-court-and-lanvals-desire-to-escape/>

endeavors whereby Arthur is able to simultaneously spread Christianity and his rule, this ironic power is viewed ironically due to failures to control his won wife and to fairly reward his knights. These are contradictions in Arthur's abilities as a leader prompt and they the reader to question the virtue of his rule, as well as the just nature of his court. It also serves to incite greater pity for Lanval. Lanval is described as an outsider. The other knights " were envious of his handsomeness,/ His strength, his courage, his largesse" (Lines 20-21). They pretend to love Lanval, but are secretly jealous of him and would not be devastated if anything bad happened to him. Lanval has no true friend or camaraderie and this isolation causes his estrangement. He is a foreigner and therefore suffers from loneliness. The narrator implores the readers to place themselves in Lanval's situation and to take pity on his suffering. " My lords, please do not think it rare:/ A foreigner is filled with care/ And sadness in a distant land,/ Finding no help at any hand" (Lines 33-36). Through the use of sympathy, Marie criticizes the prejudice against foreigners that characterizes Arthur's court. Lanval reacts to the ill treatment by isolating himself, " For pleasure's sake set on his way./ Outside the town he went to ride/ Alone into the countryside" (Lines39-41). This isolation from the town symbolizes self-removal from the difficult reality, attending all psychological experiences of personal exile. The subsequent occurrences that happen to the hero, including the coming of the fairy princess, may be construed as entirely fictitious. Marie displays great tact in portraying the weighty criticisms of Arthurian corruption and courtly prejudice against foreigners. She presents them in a short span of the text- all within the first fifty lines- and without any explicit explanations, although these criticisms arguably supply the motivations for Lanval's suffering, psychological

<https://assignbuster.com/the-intricacies-of-the-court-and-lanvals-desire-to-escape/>

estrangement and escapist fantasy. Marie critiques the court system in an even more obvious way through the character of Arthur's Queen. The Queen is highly corrupt and vile, as depicted by her attempt to seduce Lanval and condemn him for treason. His refusal of her sexual offers constructs a testament to his devotion and loyalty to his fairy mistress and his king. The conversation after his refusal of the queen depicts her narcissistic temperament and her grave misuse of courtly courtesy. The Queen is short, curt and cruel when talking to Lanval, accusing him of many things including that he sleeps with boys. It causes Lanval to become furious with her, the court she controls and, finally, to speak back to her. The criticism of the Queen is incredibly blunt, unlike the criticisms of Arthur's court. She is heavily criticized, especially when she is compared to the fairy princess. This fictitious princess, read as Lanval's amorous fantasy, offers companionship and adoration to Lanval and starkly contrasts the political reality of the Queen. While fairy's love is pure, secretive, rewarding and sensitive, the Queen's physical demands are sinful. The fairy princess' beauty exceeds all bounds and she portrays perfect manners as an exemplary figure of courtly behavior. These figures can also be seen to represent binary examples of Lanval's most and least ideal woman. These two characters can also be compared involves their restriction by the rules of court and society. The fairy princess is not restricted by the conventionalities of female modesty and courtly protocol, as she wears a revealing dress to Lanval's trial. She is not restricted by the rules of reality either as he is able to take off his mantle and roll it into a pillow. The Queen, on the other hand, is governed completely by the social and legal conventions of the real world. Her only means of punishing Lanval involves an organized trial. The fairy princess'

<https://assignbuster.com/the-intricacies-of-the-court-and-lanvals-desire-to-escape/>

supreme freedom from reality is portrayed in her brilliant beauty and purity. In essence, it is necessary that she leave the real world because she cannot be tainted by the influences of society. The Queen, in contrast, instantiates the social corruption and hypocrisy of the court. Marie does not suggest that the court is devoid of all virtue. On the contrary, the character of Gawain serves as the ultimate example of the court as sincere and decent. His righteousness bridges the gap between Lanval's foreignness and the hegemonic unity of the other knights. As a well-respected knight, Gawain helps them to support Lanval during his trial. His character is a valorization of the worldly court; therefore it is less controversial to a courtly audience. Gawain also serves as an outstanding example of a worldly court member, whom Marie's audience should follow. While the interpretation that Lanval's fairy princess is fictitious may be debatable, the psychological model of fantasy and wish fulfillment are not. His desperate need for acceptance, and the instant gratification when he meets his mistress seems too great a coincidence for one to dismiss the possibility of her being a fantasy. First, Lanval is upset that he has not been rewarded by King Arthur, the fairy princess professes her love for him and then attends to his every need: " He should get whatever he wanted-/ Money, as fast as he can spend it,/ No matter how much, she will send it" (Lines 132-134). Furthermore, since many other of Marie's lays contain elements of " magic and mystery" (Norton Anthology, 127), it is not surprising to assume that Lanval represents a version of psychological fantasy and the interaction between the magical and real worlds. Indeed, there are some explicit identifications of the author, Marie de France, with Lanval. Marie was a foreigner from France who lived in present-day England. She experienced the loss of community and identity

<https://assignbuster.com/the-intricacies-of-the-court-and-lanvals-desire-to-escape/>

living in this distant land, since it is commonly believed that she was a nun, she probably had very little tolerance for the injustices of the court. In light of this historical, generic and textual evidence, I believe that the story of Lanval is a modified account of Marie's personal fantasy of escaping the English court, skillfully manipulated it to make it suitable for the gender and political standards of society. While Marie de France probably dreamed about returning to her French homeland, her lay seem more powerful and interesting because the destination of escape is of another world, therefore one free from all courtly regulations and perfect in every imaginable way. In essence, the other world of Avalon is desirable to all, including the court to which she is reading. This would not necessarily be true had Lanval simply dreamt of going to France. The lay is also modified from Marie's personal fantasy in that the marginalized protagonist is a man. This gender conversion is necessary for the lay to have been taken seriously in court. The worthiness and valor of his character is the result of his noble status as one of Arthur's knights, allowing him to venture into the inner dealings of the court system. Lanval as a male gives Marie the license to comment fully on the inner political dealings of the court. Also, it would have been scandalous for a woman's fantasies to be described in such detail during Marie's time. A proper reading of Marie's Lanval, as an outsider, must include investigation into the court as a virtuous system of rule. This allows us to follow the driving factors which cause Lanval to desire escapism so greatly that he develops a fantasy to deal with his suffering. France, Marie De. "Lanval." The Norton Anthology of English Literature. New York: W W Norton & Company, 1962. 126-140. Moritz, William E. Guingamor, Guigemar, Graelentmor, Lanval and

Desire: A Comparative Study of Five Breton Lays. Diss. Univ. of Southern California, 1968. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms, Inc., 1968.