

The power within women: a reading of "lanval"



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The story of Lanval is an uncommon one for its time. A helpless, outcast knight meets a beautiful, magical woman. The one term of their love, set down by the unnamed woman, is that Lanval can tell nobody about her. When he breaks that rule and offends Queen Guinevere, he must rely on his lover to save him, and she does. In this poem, the woman is the hero; the woman is in control of Lanval's fate. Lanval is an example of courtly love, a term used to describe certain values within medieval European literature. With courtly love, the woman is traditionally in control of the affair; however, I believe that the woman's control goes far beyond this subgenre. The woman's power, in Lanval, is shown through more than just the plot. After all, the final scene of Marie de France's Lanval utilizes common poetic conventions, such as word choice and imagery, to explore the power women held during a time when men were often the heroes.

Lanval's fate is entirely in the magical woman's control, an arrangement which shows her ultimate power. Lanval asks for her help when he says, " I care little who may kill me, / if she does not take pity on me" (599-600). Without this woman's compassion, Lanval is doomed. What is even more surprising is the fact that Lanval does not care about his fate if it does not include this woman. This state of mind reverses the common damsel-in-distress theme that was seen in the literature of the time. Not only is the woman in charge of their love affair, but she is ultimately in charge of Lanval's outcome. Instead of the woman needing Lanval, he needs her. By reversing the traditional roles and giving the woman immense power, Marie de France warns men not to underestimate the amount of power a woman can have; a man's life might be in a woman's hands one day.

Moreover, the woman's initial entrance at King Arthur's court demonstrates her power over the masses. Multiple lines point to the fact that the crowd is infatuated with her: "[S]uch a beauty had never come" to the palace before, a statement which speaks to the fact that this woman was far more beautiful than Queen Guinevere (602). Indeed, " All the [citizens] honored her / and offered themselves to serve her" (610). This woman's beauty quite literally commanded the room; it is as though the citizens take their loyalty to King Arthur and shift it towards her, so that her stature overwhelms that of the royalty present. Through this aspect of the narrative, Marie de France is saying that a woman could be as powerful as a ruler, or as any man. What is so important, though, is that this woman is bound to no man. Even King Arthur " who was very well-bred, / got up to meet her" (607-8). The king goes to her instead of vice versa, thus indicating how commanding the magical woman is, since even someone as powerful and well-regarded as King Arthur " cannot detain her" (631). Needless to say, if King Arthur cannot hold this woman back, nor can Lanval. Indeed, she saves Lanval because she loves him, not because she is desperate for his love (615). Another important aspect of the woman's power is shown when she requests Lanval's release. Without any objection, King Arthur " grants that it should be so," the " it" here being Lanval's freedom (625). King Arthur does not even ask Queen Guinevere, who is in some ways at the root of the dilemma, to restate what has happened. He instantly takes this beautiful woman's words as the sole truth and releases Lanval into her custody. This is the last that the reader sees of Lanval and the last that the story teller has to say.

In the final scene, turns of word choice are engineered to show the woman's authority over Lanval. This tactic begins in the final few lines, when Lanval jumps onto the horse " behind her" (640). She is taking the lead in controlling the horse; Lanval is simply following her as he goes " with her" to Avalon (641). Lanval is the accessory in the way this sentence is constructed, again showing the role reversal. The final image we are left with is Lanval being " carried off," and that is the last we ever hear of Lanval (644). These final lines of the poem depict Lanval as under this woman's rule; he was saved by her. Marie de France chooses to leave the reader with these words and images, lending them additional emphasis. The final impression that the reader gleans from Lanval is that of a woman with power over her lover, something that was uncommon for the era of Marie de France.

Marie de France was clearly a feminist of her time. This flawless woman depicted in Lanval not only commands Lanval, but also the court of King Arthur. Her role in this story goes beyond the plot. This woman just as easily plays the role of the savior as any man could. Marie de France is making a statement by not naming this woman; this woman could be any woman, and any woman could thus hold this amount of power, not just the specific woman in this story. Moreover, Marie de France seamlessly reverses the expected gender roles. In playing this new role, the woman becomes a main character in Lanval, rather than simply an object the man is fighting for. Through her narrative subtleties, Marie de France proves that women have more power than many men think.