



— Penrhyn Castle in Wales is a typical Anglo-Norman castle from Marie de France's era

Marie de France

Marie de France was a French-speaking poet and minstrel from the late twelfth century who wrote a number of texts called "Breton lais" as well as a number of beast fables, a popular medieval genre in which a certain moral lesson was explained by a story of a number of animals, whose interactions and experiences symbolized a usually clear and simple moral point.

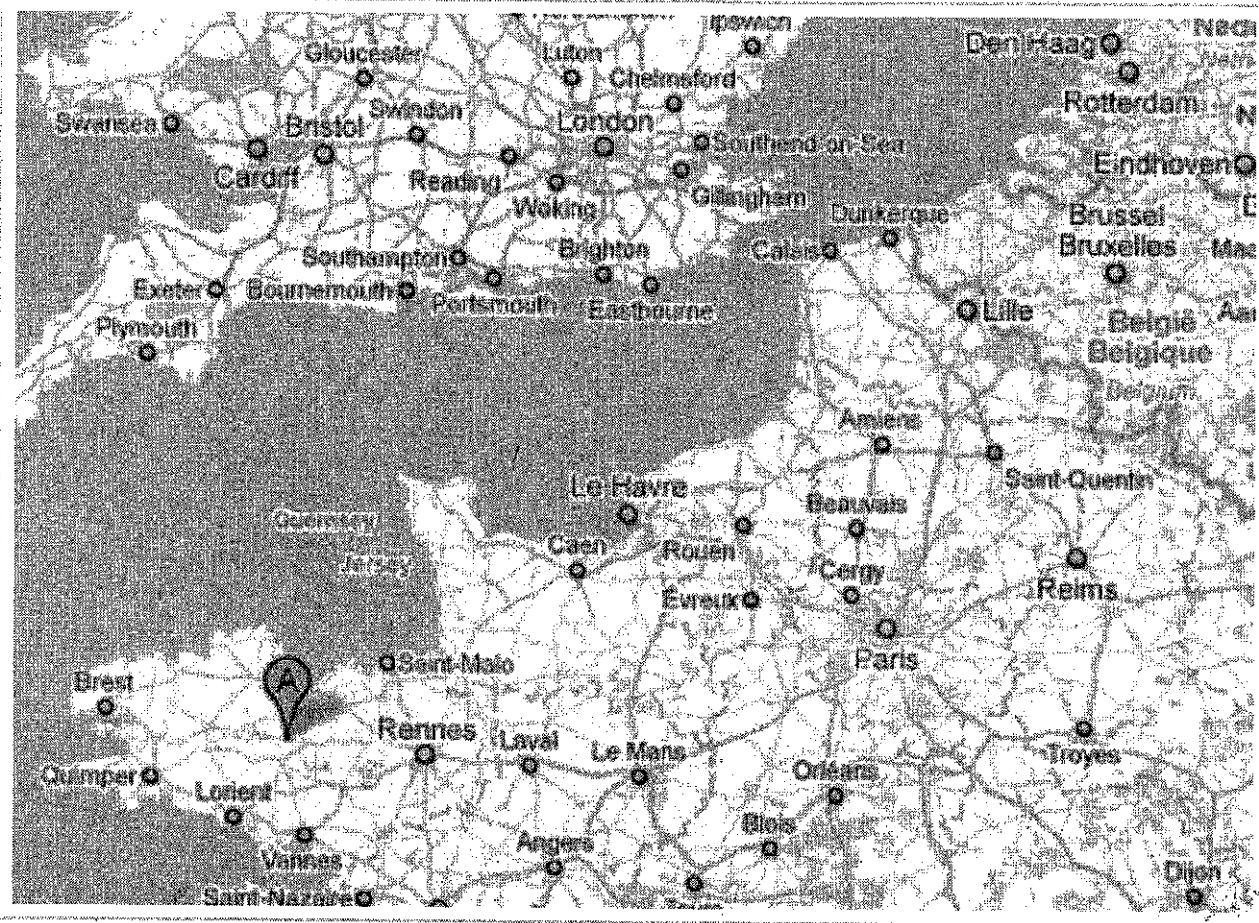
The Breton lai (or Breton lay), on the other hand, is a less moralizing genre involving a love story and usually young noble characters somewhere in Brittany, an area in northwest France:

<http://maps.google.com/maps?client=safari&q=brittany&oe=UTF-8&ie=UTF8&hq=&hnear=Brittany,+France&gl=us&t=h&z=7&vpsrc=0&ll=48.202047,-2.932643&output=embed>

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Brittany, both then and today, is a largely rural area dotted with castles along the countryside. You can see that the area

is close to England and not far from Paris:



The rural
locale
and the

proximity to both Paris and England made it an ideal site for noble fantasies, and it is a good setting for the sorts of clandestine and magical relationships that we see in the Breton lay.

A “lay” is literally a short song, and it is likely that Marie de France performed her lays to the accompaniment of a harp to a noble audience. This type of oral transmission of literature was common in medieval Europe and was a common form of entertainment in the twelfth century.

Marie de France wrote and performed her lays to a noble household, and she dedicated her lays to a king—although this king is unnamed—and her lays were dedicated to a “count William”. The William may have been William of Mandeville or William Marshall, two English noblemen, while the king was probably Henry II, then king of England.

It should not surprise you that a writer would produce texts in French for an English king and English noblemen; remember that the nobility spoke French as their mother tongue in England after 1066 and the Norman Conquest, when French became the dominant language of England. This remained so until the fourteenth century, as the English nobility began to use English more than French, although the nobility remained effectively bilingual even after the end of the middle ages.

Lanval

Lanval is a unique Arthurian story; the eponymous hero does not appear in any other Arthurian legends, and the story of Lanval could have been placed in any other context. The Arthurian context seems unnecessary to the main story of a slighted knight and a conspiring queen. The story is also unusual in that it follows the conventions of the Breton lay but is not set in Brittany. Thus it is technically not a Breton lay and is more of a romance.

The story of *Lanval* is in many ways typical—it tells the story of a slighted knight who is overlooked by an incompetent king and who is rescued by a fairy lady who falls in love with him. That love, however, seems to have no real reason; we are told that Lanval is handsome and good, but the fairy lady seems to love him immediately and easily, suggesting that this story is a fantasy of wish fulfillment more than a sustained criticism of political disorder.

After Lanval returns to court, he is quickly seduced by Guinevere and rejects the queen's unwanted advances. As a result she lies and frames him, producing a corrupt trial in which he is unfairly convicted. Finally, his fairy lady comes to rescue him and he lives happily ever after in Avalon.

This ending is surprising and unconventional; usually, in medieval romances and Breton lays it is the knight who rescues the lady, not the other way around. Also, when the story ends happily, the knight and his lady usually live in this world, not in a fairyland like Avalon.

Arthurian Literature

The Arthurian court became a popular setting for romantic stories, with Arthur himself never experiencing much romance himself. This has an immediate appeal to any nobleman or lady living in a royal or noble household in which they are one of several noble figures obedient to and serving the head of the household. The adventures of Arthur's knights seem to closely reflect their own experiences; they are powerful, wealthy, noble, but not completely in power. At the same time, they experience adventures which are meant to augment their social capital by giving them fame and the love of a lady.

In Arthurian myths, Arthur is very often an incompetent knight, and Arthur's court is a site of corruption or moral malaise. In *Lanval*, we see quite clearly the knight abandoning this ungrateful and unfair society for the wilderness, and we also see a supernatural force coming to right wrongs and create justice where there originally was none. This is a common pattern of medieval Arthurian literature.

Lanval in English Literature

The story of Lanval was popular in medieval England, but then disappeared by the early modern period. The story was translated, adapted, and retold three times in the fourteenth century, where its themes and settings were expanded and altered for a new audience. Perhaps most telling is the inclusion of a mayorial scene in a fourteenth century adaptation of the story called *Sir Launfal*. This text expands on Marie de France's text in several ways, including the addition of a scene in which Launfal publicly shames a mayor who would not give Launfal hospitality after he abandoned Arthur's

court, because the knight looked poor in ragged clothes. After Lanval is given infinite wealth by the fairy lady, he returns to the mayor and publicly shames him for his lack of charity.

The appeal to this new version for an urban middle class is obvious, while it is harder to relate to Lanval in Marie de France's version. This adaptation of texts to new social and ideological contexts is quite typical of medieval Europe, which experienced many social and cultural changes over the centuries between the fall of Rome and the growth of Protestantism in the sixteenth century.

Questions

Lanval is a simple, short text with a recognizable plot structure not unlike fairy tales. However, there are a number of lingering questions about the text that I want you to consider:

Gentillesse

This Middle English word refers to the actions and attitudes that make a person noble. Because it is a code of behaviors and ideas, anyone can be noble in this sense—even if they are not noble by birth—and it is possible to be born noble but not act noble.

The text encourages us to ask questions about what *gentillesse* is and how Lanval enacts this virtue, such as:

- How does Lanval help travellers?
- Why does he do it?
- How does it change his reputation?
- Why is this important? (Socially and individually)

Gender

While nobility is a challenged notion in the text, gender is uprooted as well. The essay challenges our expectations about male and female behavior and encourages us to consider a number of points.

- Why does Guinevere love Lanval?
- What does she want from him?
- Why does the fairy lady love Lanval?
- How does she show her love?
- How are these women characterized?

Justice and the Fairy Lady

Arthur's court is not a just place.

- Why isn't the trial fair?
- Why do the barons find Lanval guilty?
- How is Arthur's court a just place? Injust? Why?

While Arthur's court seems decadent, corrupt, and unsatisfying, the fairy lady provides a reasonable alternative although she is a magical fantasy figure. I would encourage you to consider the following:

- Is the fairy lady more just than Arthur?
- What makes her defense of Lanval believable?
- Why does Lanval go to Avalon?
- How does Arthur's court appear at the end of the poem?

You can read more of Marie de France's lays here and read more about the poet here.

Finally, feel free to take the quiz here. This test will help you see the main points of the text and check to see if you understood everything.

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