

LANVAL

Marie de France, translated Judith P. Shoaf ©1991, 2005

The adventure of another lay,
Just as it happened, I'll relay:
It tells of a very nice nobleman,
And it's called Lanval in Breton.

King Arthur was staying at Carduel--
That King of valiant and courtly estate--
His borders there he guarded well
Against the Pict, against the Scot,
Who'd cross into Logres to devastate
The countryside often, and a lot.

He held court there at Pentecost,¹
The summer feast we call Whitsun,
Giving gifts of impressive cost
To every count and each baron
And all knights of the Round Table.
Never elsewhere so many, such able
Knights assembled! Women and land
He shared out with generous hand
To all but one who'd served. Lanval
He forgot: no man helped his recall.

For being brave and generous,
For his beauty and his prowess,
He was envied by all the court;
Those who claimed to hold him dear,
If Fortune had brought him up short,
Would not have shed a kindly tear.
A king's son, he'd a noble lineage,
But now, far from his heritage,
He'd joined the household of the King.
He'd spent all the money he could bring

¹ Here Marie assumes that her audience is familiar with the story and habits of King Arthur as described by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *History of the Kings of Britain*. (written around 1138). Geoffrey laid out the main lines of the legend for the Middle Ages, emphasizing Arthur as a king who ruled over a unified Britain, and who held great feasts, notably his "Pentecost court" at Carelon after subduing Norway, Aquitaine, and Gaul. Marie is more modest in depicting him as defending his own borders. Loegres (Geoffrey's Loegria) is the name for Arthur's British kingdom.

Already. The King gave him no more--
 He gave just what Lanval asked for.
 Now Lanval knows not what to do;
 He's very thoughtful, very sad.
 My lords, I don't astonish you:
 A man alone, with no counsel--or bad--
 A stranger in a strange land
 Is sad, when no help's at hand.
 This knight--by now you know the one--
 Who'd served the King with many a deed,
 One day got on his noble steed
 And went riding, just for fun.
 Alone he rode out of the town,
 And came to a meadow--still alone--
 Dismounted by a flowing brook.
 But his horse trembled now and shook,
 So he took off the tackle and let him go,
 Rolling free in the broad meadow.
 The knight took his own cloak, folded
 It into a pillow for his head.
 He lay thinking of his sad plight;
 He saw nothing to bring delight.
 He lay thus, in a kind of daze,
 Following the river-bank with his gaze.
 Then he saw coming two ladies,²
 The fairest he'd seen in all his days.
 They were both quite richly dressed,
 In deep-dyed tunics, of the best
 Silk, fastened with tight-tied laces;
 And very lovely were their faces.
 A bowl was borne by the elder maid,
 Golden, delicate, finely made
 (I tell the truth without fail or foul)
 --The younger maiden carried a towel.

² Lanval's adventure is similar to adventures of a number of other heroes of lais and romances, in particular the anonymous lais of *Desire*, *Graelant Mor*, and *Guingamor*. The latter two of these begin with an attempt at seducing the hero by his lord's wife, which occurs later in *Lanval*: in all of them, he meets and becomes the lover of a mysterious lady, with attendants, in a watery context, and she extracts from him a promise he then breaks. Some of these works were undoubtedly influenced by Marie's lai, but her integration of the story into an Arthurian context is unusual. Chretien de Troyes' story of Yvain, who also meets, marries, and breaks a promise to a lady of a fountain, seems to derive from a similar tale, possibly originally associated with Yvain/Owein in Scots legend. Yvain is among the knight of the Round Table in *Lanval*.

These two ladies came straightaway
To the place where Lanval lay.
Lanval, mannerly, well-bred,
Quickly scrambled to his feet;
The ladies spoke, first to greet
Him, then with a message. They said,
"Lord Lanval, the lady we owe duty--
A lady of valor, wisdom, beauty--
It's for you our lady has sent
Us. Now come along with us, do!
Safely we'll conduct you through--
Not far--look, you can see her tent!"
The knight went with them, of course;
He forgot all about his horse,
Grazing in the meadow right in front of him.
They brought him where a tent rose above him,
A lovely, well-placed pavilion.
Semiramis, Queen of Babylon,
When her power was on the rise,
And she was so rich as well as so wise,
Or Octavian, who ruled the whole map,
Couldn't have paid for one tent-flap.
On top was set an eagle, pure gold;
How much it cost, more or less--
Or the cords or the poles to hold
Up the tent walls--I couldn't guess.
No King under heaven, with all his wealth,
Could ever buy any of this for himself.
This tent was the maiden's bower:
New-blown rose, lily-flower,
When in Spring their petals unfurl--
Lovelier than these was this girl.
She lay upon so rich a bed,
You'd pay a castle for the sheet--
In just her slip she was clothèd.
Her body was well-shaped, and sweet.
A rich mantle of white ermine,
Lined with silk, alexandrine,
Was her quilt, but she'd pushed it away,
On account of the heat; she didn't hide
Her face, neck, breast, her whole side,
All whiter than hawthorn blossom in May.

The knight took a step toward
The maiden; she called him forward;
Near the bed he sat down, near.
"Lanval," she said, "my friend, my dear,
I left my lands to come where you are;
To find you I have come so far!
Be valiant and courtly in everything,
And no emperor, count or king
Ever had joy or blessings above you;
For, more than any thing, I love you."
He looks at her; he sees her beauty;
Love pricks him, strikes in him the spark--
Now his heart blazes in the dark.
He answers gently, as is his duty,
"Beauty," he says, "If it please you,
And this great joy should befall
Me, that you grant your love,
I'll be at your beck and call,
To fulfill whatever needs you
Have, wise or foolish-- you are above
Me, my only commandant.
All others for you I abandon.
From you I never want to part:
That hope is strongest in my heart."
When the girl hears what he has to say,
This man so filled with love for her,
She gives him her love, and what's more, her
Body; now Lanval is on his way!
Afterwards, she gives a present:
Anything he may ever want
He'll get, as far as his needs extend;
Generously he may give and spend--
She will find the wherewithal.
Lanval has found a noble hostel:
The more he spends, in buying bold,
The more he'll have of silver and gold.
"Now I warn you," she says, "my fair
Friend--a warning, an order, a prayer:
Don't reveal yourself to any man!
I tell you, if you break this ban,
You will have lost me forever!
If this love is known, ever,
Never again of me you'll catch sight;

As for my body, you lose any right."
Lanval can sincerely say,
What she orders, he'll obey.
He's lain down beside her on the bed--
Now is Lanval well lodged and fed!³
He postpones rising from her side
Well into the shadows of evening-tide
And would have stayed longer, I guess,
If his sweet friend had said yes.
"Sweet friend," she says, "Get up! No more
Can you linger here--out the door
You go now. Here I will stay--
But this one thing I have to say:
If ever you want my conversation,
You won't be able to think of a place
Where a man may have his girl, and no eye chase
Them with reproach or accusation,
That I won't be with you--see if I shan't--
To do anything you want.
No man but you will see me when
I'm with you, or hear my words then."
Hearing this, his joy was beyond compare.
He kissed her, and then he arose.
The two maidens who'd brought him there
Furnished him with the richest clothes;
All dressed up, to tell the truth,
Heaven looked not down on a handsomer youth.
Nor was he foolish, like a peasant:
They gave him water--he didn't resent
Washing his hands, and drying them well
On the towel. Now they served a meal.
With his darling friend he dined--
Not the sort of thing that's declined.
Courteously the maidens serve;
He accepts gladly, without reserve.
There was plenty of one special dish
Which satisfied his dearest wish:

³ When Lanval is "well lodged and fed," and in a "noble hostel" with his lady, Marie's phrase is "bien hebergez," that is, housed in an inn. This phrase fits with his condition as a stranger in Arthur's kingdom, who lives not at his own house but in a hostel or inn. There are plenty of references to his hostel later in the poem.

Of sweet kisses there was no end,
And between courses he hugged his friend.

When they'd arisen from the last course,
The maidens brought him his own horse
Properly saddled, equiped with bridle--
The service here was never idle.
He mounts the horse, he takes his leave;
He rides off towards the city,
Looking back often. Pity
Lanval, who feels great fear and grief!
Thinking of his adventure, he goes
Along; doubts fill his heart; he knows
Not what to believe; dazzled, the youth
Can't believe that it's the truth.
Now home to his hostel he comes,
And finds his men wearing new costumes.
That night he holds a jolly feast,
But where it comes from, no-one has the least
Idea.

There's no poor knight in town
Who needs a place to lay his head down,
But Lanval invites him to his hostel
And has him served richly and well.
Lanval was now the richest donor,
Lanval ransomed all the prisoners,
Lanval dressed jugglers and jongleurs,
Lanval did all men every honor:
To stranger and to citizen
Lanval would gladly have given.
Lanval had great joy and delight:
Whether by day or in the night,
He could often see his friend.
Everything is at his command.

It was that year (I think I can say)
After St. John's or Midsummer's Day,
Some thirty knights--kighthood's flower--
Went out to do some playing
In the orchard near the tower

Where Queen Guinevere⁴ was staying.
Among these knights was Gawain,⁵
And his cousin, handsome Yvain.
Gawain said (valiant, frank and free,
The love of every man held he),
"In God's name, my lords, we sin
Against Lanval, our companion,
So courtly and generous in everything--
And his father's a wealthy king--
He should be here; we've done him wrong."
Right away they all turned back;
To his hostel they followed the track,
And begged Lanval to come along.

At a window, framed in stone,
The Queen leaned out--not alone,
But with three ladies. Lo and behold,
She spotted the knights of the King's household.
She recognized, and stared at, Lanval.
She gave one of her ladies a call.
She wants a group of maidens collected,
For beauty and manners they're selected,
To stroll and play with the Queen
In the orchard, where the knights were seen.
Thirty girls she leads, or more.
Down the steps and out the door.
Here to meet them come the knights,
Greatly gladdened by such sights.
Hand-in-hand, their conversations
Are free of low-class intimations.
Lanval goes off all alone,
Far from the others; for his own
Friend he just can't wait--not much--

⁴ Guinevere is not named in Marie's poem. The modern vision of this queen as Lancelot's mistress, the most refined and spiritual of all adulteresses, dates from Chrétien de Troyes's *Knight of the Cart*, written about the same time as Marie was working. Although her character here is extremely unpleasant, this strong woman finds echoes in later Guineveres--for example, in the admirable queen of Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*, who saves the life of a knight convicted of rape by setting him the riddle, "what do women most desire?" (The correct answer is "sovereignty", a say in their own lives.) This tale of Chaucer's is also, like *Lanval*, a story that one might summarize as "morally educational sexual encounter with a fairy lady."

⁵ Gawain, King Arthur's nephew, is the paragon of knighthood in many romances, particularly those of Chretien de Troyes. As has been noted, Chretien also wrote a romance about Yvain.

For her kiss, her embrace, her touch.
Little he cares about others' delight
When he can't enjoy his own!
The Queen saw him go off alone,
And she headed straight for that knight.
She sat near him, she called him over,
She spoke as her heart would move her:
"Lanval, I really do respect you,
I really care, I really love,
And you can have all my love.
Tell me what you want! I expect you
Must be happy at what I say.
I'm offering to go all the way."⁶
"Lady," he said, "Let me go!
I never thought to love you so!
I've served the King for many a day;
His faith in me I won't betray.
Not for you, your love, or anything
Would I ever act against my King!"
The Queen's heart filled with anger;
Furious, she spoke a slander:
"Lanval," she said, "I think they're right.
You don't care much for such delight;
People have told me again and again
That women offer you no pleasure--
With a few well-schooled young men
You prefer to pass your leisure.
Peasant coward, faithless sinner,
My lord the King is hardly the winner
In letting your sort hang around;
He's losing God's own grace, I've found!"

Lanval is anguished by these lies;
Quickly the accused replies.
He says a thing, in that angry moment,

⁶ "Going all the way," (and also "love-affair," and simply "love") are translations of Marie's word *druerie*. This seems to be Marie's term for a love relationship in which the woman has power over the man, but it also usually implies a physical relationship. The word occurs also in *Equitan*, to refer to the "courtly" but criminally overintellectualized affair between the king and his sensechal's wife; in *Lanval* it applies both to Guinevere's passion and to Lanval's imaginative relationship with his lover. In general, the word translated throughout the poem as "lover," "darling," "dear friend," etc.--the word the lovers use to refer to each other and the court uses to refer to the lady--is always "ami/amie," simply "friend," in the original.

Of which he'll many times repent.
"My lady: That job--don't doubt it,
I wouldn't know how to go about it.
But I do love--I alone love
A lady who'd win the prize
Over all women I've known of.
And I'll tell you this, without disguise,
Just because you need to know:
Her serving maids, a poor or low
One, even, the poorest in her train,
Is better than you are, Lady Queen:
In beauty of body and of face,
In goodness and in well-bred grace."
Away now went the Queen,
Up to her room, all crying.
Pain and anger drove her wild--
She'd been insulted and reviled.
Sick with it, she took to her bed.
Never would she get up, she said,
Unless the King her complaint oversaw,
And gave her justice according to law.

The King had just come home from the wood;
His day's hunting had been good.
He went into the Queen's chamber.
She cried out, loud, when first she
Saw him, fell at his feet, begged mercy,
Accused Lanval--he had shamed her!
He'd asked her for a love-affair,
She'd said no, with this result:
He'd offered her an ugly insult.
He boasted of a friend so fair,
So full of pride, breeding, honor,
That the chambermaid who waited on her--
The lowliest, poorest of the poor--
Compared to the Queen, was worth far more.
The King was angry, to the core.
His oath against Lanval he swore:
In court he'd prove he was no liar,
Or else he'd hang, or die by fire.
The King left the Queen's bedroom,
Called three of his barons to him,
Sent them to bring in Lanval.

Now sorrow and evil befall
Him: coming home to his inn,
He sees right away the trouble he's in.
His darling friend now is lost;
He told their love; this is the cost.
In his room alone he languished,
Sadly thoughtful, madly anguished;
Time after time he called her name,
But his dear friend never came.
He breathes out sighs and complaints,
Sometimes he even faints.
A hundred times he begs mercy of her--
Won't she speak to her dear lover?
He curses his tongue, the heart he couldn't hide--
It's a wonder he doesn't commit suicide.
All his crying and begging and braying,
Self-hatred, self-abuse, humble praying,
All bring no mercy from his dear,
Not even just the chance to see her.
Alas, will he ever find content?

The men whom the King sent
Arrive, the message they relay:
He must come to court without delay.
The King commands, no-one refuses him.
The Queen herself accuses him.
Lanval, in pain, does as they say--
They'd have killed him if he had his way.
Mute, he stands before the King;
In his sorrow, he can't say a thing,
But his sorrow is obvious.
The King speaks, angry, malicious:
"Vassal, against me is your crime!
You acted like a peasant this time.
You debase me, shame, demean
Me, by slandering my Queen!
Madness, foolishness to boast
A lover nobler than we've ever seen,
Whose chambermaid would seem the most
Fair and worthy, beside the Queen!"

Lanval begins his own defense:⁷
Against his lord's honor he's made no offense;
He refutes, word for word,
The demand for love the Queen says she heard.
But as for what he said afterwards,
He admits the truth of those words,
How he boasted of love and his lover--
It grieves him now; he's lost her forever.
For this crime, yes, pay he must
Whatever the court deems is just.
The King's anger still was strong;
He called a council of all his knights,
To tell him to act within his rights,
For he didn't want to be called wrong.
The men came to give advice,
Whether they thought it nasty or nice.
Into the council they all went,
And came up with this judgement:
Until his trial Lanval would go free,
If he gave hostages as guarantee
To his lord that he'd come back when
The court could convene on this case again.
For the trial, more lords would arrive in a hurry;
Today, only the King's household was the jury.
The knights went back to the King
And explained to him their finding.
The King demanded the hostages;
Lanval's alone, lost, without access
To parents or friends who might avail;
Gawain gave himself up as bail,
And all his companions then came forward, too.
The King said, "I give him to you,
But whatever fiefs and lands
You hold from me, are now in my hands."
Whatever they had, they pledged it all.
Now back to his hostel went Lanval,
And with him all the knights came.
They were ready to scold and blame

⁷ It should be clear from the action that the legal power of sworn testimony was very great; Lanval could clear himself of the Queen's charges simply by denying them under oath, though he did not dare deny the truth about his beloved.

Lanval for being still so sad.
They cursed such a love as mad.
Every day at his house they'd meet,
Checking on him, just to find
If he'd drunk water, if he'd still eat;
They feared Lanval might lose his mind.

On the day set for the trial,
The barons have travelled many a mile
To be there; the Queen's there, and the King,
And now Lanval's hostages bring
Him in. They're so sorry for him.
A hundred knights or more, I guess,
Would have done anything for him
So he could walk free away from this case,
So wrongful are the accusations!
The King asks a verdict of his barons,
Based on the charge and defense plea.
Now it's all up to the lords' jury.
They have gone to find their verdict
But they wonder, a little panicked
About this noble foreign knight
Who finds himself in such a plight.
More than one is ready to bring
Him in "guilty," to please the King.
Hear the Count of Cornwall speak:
"Never let us be so wrong, so weak!
Whoever weeps or laughs, it's all one--
Justice, always, must be done.
The King has spoken against his vassal,
The man I hear you call Lanval;
The King has made the allegation.
A felony's the accusation:
His crime is that he had a tiff
With the Queen, boasting of a fair love.
The King is the only plaintiff.
Now by any law I'm aware of,
And by my faith as a lord in this isle,
Lanval should not even be on trial--
Except that honor in everything
Is owed by all men to their king.
We will make him swear an oath,
And the King will pardon him for us.

And, if he can prove the truth,
And his lady appears before us
So that it is clearly seen
It was no lie that upset the Queen,
Then Lanval is vindicated:
No malice there is indicated.
But if he can't prove his defense
Then we must pronounce this sentence:
He loses his right to serve the King,
And the King will send him packing."
They sent word to the accused knight
And told him how he must defend
Himself: he must make his dear friend
Come into court, to prove he's right.
He can't do it, is Lanval's answer;
He will never get any help from her.
Back to the judges the messengers go,
But will they get get help there? No.
The King is pushing on the jury--
The Queen's the one who's in a hurry.

As they got ready to pass sentence,
Two maidens rode into their presence,
On two lovely ambling palfreys.
Very attractive they were, these ladies:
Silken garments, scarlet, thin,
Were all they wore over naked skin.
Everyone enjoyed these sights.
Gawain, and with him three knights,
Went to tell Lanval, and show
Him the lovely maidens two.
Gladdened, he begs Lanval to declare
Which of these is his friend so fair.
Lanval told them he doesn't know
Who they are, whence they come, where they go.
The pair meanwhile passed by, riding
On horseback still; in the same tone,
They dismounted before the high throne
Where sat the lord Arthur, the King.
Their beauty was a great delight,
And their speech was most polite:
"Make ready several rooms, O King,
Hang all the walls with silk covering,

So that my lady may come in;
She wishes to make your home her inn."
Gladly he granted this request;
Two knights he called, to show them the best
Rooms above; they led them away.
Just then they had no more to say.

The King calls his barons, and now he
Demands the verdict and penalty.
They've angered him, he lets them know,
By their delays--they're just too slow.
"Lord, we lost our judgement of the law,"
They said, "because of the maidens we saw.
We've not looked into a decision, then,
And now we'll just have to begin again."
Thoughtful, they got back together,
But then they heard some noise and bother.
They went and saw what caused the to-do:
Prettily equipped maidens, two,
Dressed in silk with a fresh finish,
And riding on two fine mules, Spanish.
They saw them riding down the road.
The knights were filled with greatest joy;
They told each other this must bode
Well for Lanval, that brave fine boy.
Now Yvain went, and with him all
His companions, to find Lanval.
"My Lord," he said, "Now rejoice!
For the love of God, find your voice!
Two young ladies are coming here,
Very refined, so very fair.
Truly this is your friend, your dear!"
Lanval was quick to declare
He recognized neither of them;
He didn't know them, didn't love them.
The ladies rode at a steady pace,
And dismounted before the King's dais.
Most of the courtiers praised them for
Their bodies, their faces, their color.
Either of these girls was worth more
Than the Queen was now, or ever before.
The older was polite and good;
Sweetly she made herself understood:

"Let us be given the rooms, O King,
Set aside for our lady's lodging:
She comes to you with something to say."
The King has them led away
Up to the rooms to join the others.
About the mules, neither bothers.⁸

When he's got rid of the maidens,
The King sends for his barons:
They must pass sentence right away;
Too long they've stretched this trial-day.
The Queen's anger won't abate,
When she's made to wait and wait.

They'd have passed sentence then and there,
When there came wandering a horse laden,
Ambling through town, with a maiden;
Never in this world was maid so fair.
A gentle white palfrey she rode;
Sweet and soft he carried his load--
His beautiful head and neck pleased
All; under heaven, he's the fairest beast.
Richly adorned were all his trappings:
Under heaven, all counts or kings
Could only afford such saddle or reins
By sale or mortgage of their domains.
This was how the maiden dressed up:
Of white linen, her camisole
Was made so that it showed both whole
Sides, shining where it laced up.
Her body was slim, long-waisted, tall,
Her neck was whiter than fresh snow-fall.
Grey were her eyes, white her face,
Lovely her mouth, nose in the right place,
Brown eyebrows, forehead smooth and fair,
Bright blond, crisply curling hair--
The radiant light of pure gold thread
Fades by the brightness of her head.
Deep purple-red silk is her cloak,
Which she's draped in folds all around;

⁸ Another manuscript adds a couple of lines about the mules being properly stabled. Thanks to Antonio Furtado for correcting my earlier translation of this line.

On her fist she bears a hawk,
And behind her runs a greyhound.
In the whole town, great men and small,
Old men and babies, one and all
Came running just to watch this show.
When they saw her riding, these folk
Knew her beauty was no joke.
Still she rode on, so very slow.
The judges spot her; on their honor,
She is a marvel, they all say,
Any man who sets eyes on her,
Pleasure warms him straightaway.
Those who love the knight Lanval
Come running to him now to tell
Him about the maiden come to court
Who will free him, please the Lord.
"My lord, a maiden's come to town,
But she's neither tawny nor brown,
No--just the most beautiful girl
Of all girls living in the world."
Lanval hears them; he lifts his eyes;
He knows her well; deeply he sighs.
The blood mounts up into his face.
He speaks with the greatest haste:
"My faith," he cries, "It is my friend!
I don't care if my life should end,
Or who kills me, if she has mercy;
I'm healed again, when her I see."
The lady rides in at the palace door,
Lovelier than any, since or before,
To come there. Up to the King she rides,
And dismounts, so she can be seen from all sides.
She drops her cloak upon the floor,
So that they all can see her more.
The King, well-bred and most polite,
Stands up to meet her, as is right.
The others, after they observe her,
Crowd up to honor her and serve her.
Once they've all tired out their eyes,
And praised her beauty to the skies,
She began to have her say there,
For she didn't want to stay there:
"Arthur," she said, "Now listen to me!"

And all your barons whom here I see.
O King, I have loved your vassal,
This one, here! I mean Lanval.
In your court he's accused of crime.
I didn't want him to have a bad time
For what he said; all along,
You know, the Queen was in the wrong;
He never asked anything of her;
As for his boasting of his lover,
If the law's satisfied by what you see,
May your barons set him free!"
The King approves in advance
Any judgement the barons make.
They decide--and it doesn't take
Long--Lanval's made the perfect defense.
He is freed by their verdict,
And the maiden makes her exit.
The King can't keep her there at all
She has enough servants of her own.
There was set, outside the hall
A great dark marble mounting-stone,
For an armed knight to climb on his horse,
When from the castle he set his course.
Lanval had climbed up there to wait.
When the maiden came out the gate
Lanval made his leap, at full speed,
Up behind her, onto her steed.
With her he's gone to Avalon⁹--
Or so say the poets in Breton--
To the fair island far away
She ravished that noble youth;
No-one can say any more with truth,
And I have no more to tell of this lay.

⁹ Geoffrey of Monmouth was interested in Avalon, which he mentions as an island where Arthur's sword was forged, and to which he was carried when he was mortally wounded, "to be cured of his wounds." In a later work, the *Life of Merlin*, Geoffrey identified Avalon as the home of Morgan le Fay, Arthur's half sister, a sorceress or fairy. Marie here associates the name with her powerful fairy queen, an antagonist of sort to Arthur's court and to Guinevere in particular, as Morgan was to be in later Arthurian legend. Whether Marie thought of her fairy lover as Morgan or not, we don't know.