# “Ther fell a wondyr cas / Of a ley that was ysette”: Social Critique Enacted by Fairies in the Breton Lays of Lanval, Graelent, Guingamor and Sir Launfal

Kingma, Simone

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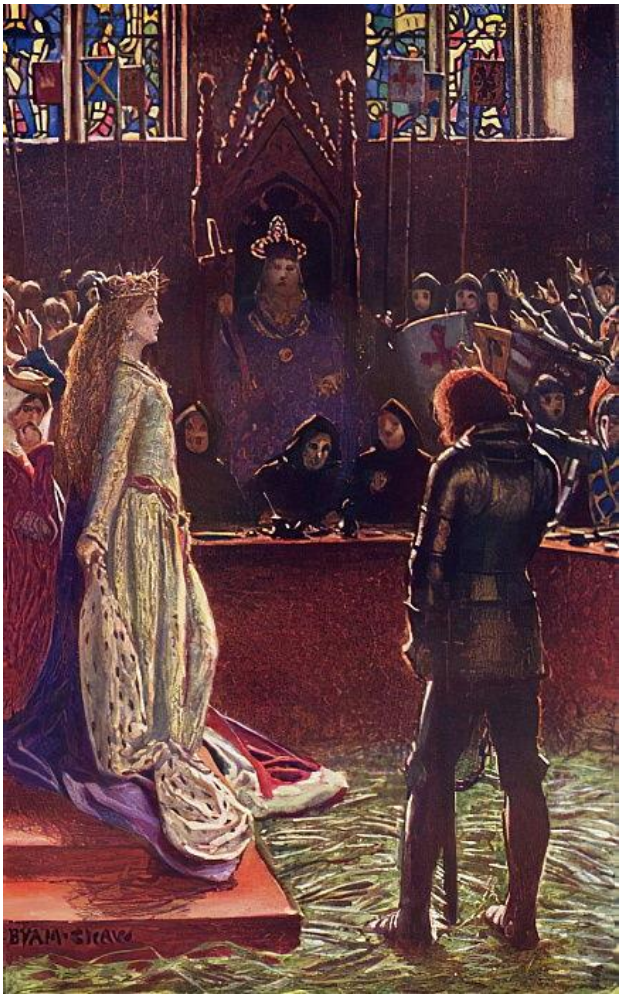

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Image courtesy: “Sir Lanval’s Lady Appeals to the Judges” by Byam Shaw, illustration from *Romance and Legend of Chivalry* by A. R. Hope Moncrieff

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

# INTRODUCTION

The world of fairies features in many medieval romances. Scholars such as Aisling Byrne and James Wade have argued that fairies in medieval romances serve not only as magical elements, but also as a means of establishing criticism of the human world, by raising questions about the established order of medieval society.[1] While the social critique enacted by fairies has been acknowledged, no comprehensive study has explored the ways in which this critique changed as medieval romances underwent the process of adaptation. Yet changes in the kinds of social critique enacted by fairies are worthy of further exploration; they can provide useful insight into corresponding changes in medieval perceptions of social and moral dilemmas.

In order to shed light on this important topic, this thesis will examine the social critique enacted by fairies in four Breton lays: *Lanval*, *Graelent*, *Guingamor* and *Sir Launfal*. These lays all draw on the same story that involves fairies and the Otherworld, but were written in different time periods and places. By comparing these stories, this study will explore the differences in the kinds of social critique these stories enact. The Anglo-Norman *Lanval* was written by Marie de France in England around the end of the twelfth century. The Old French *Graelent* and *Guingamor*, both anonymous, were composed in France, around the end of the twelfth century, or the beginning of the thirteenth century. The Middle English *Sir Launfal* was written by Thomas Chestre in late fourteenth-century England. Since these four lays are interconnected, but were composed during different periods and in different places, it is valuable to explore whether the social critique enacted by fairies differs between these lays.

As this thesis will explain, *Lanval*, *Graelent* and *Guingamor* were composed at a time when conflicts between the middle class and the aristocracy became increasingly pronounced. By the time *Sir Launfal* was written, these conflicts were even more pronounced. The social critique enacted by fairies in the four lays differs; it will be argued that the social critique is essentially strengthened as the date of composition proceeds. Therefore, the development of the story of *Lanval* into the lays of *Graelent*, *Guingamor* and *Sir Launfal* reflects the increasingly pronounced conflicts between the medieval aristocracy and middle class. By using fairies and their magical world, *Lanval* gives social critique on the limitations of courtly culture. *Graelent* adds more powerful critique on courtly life to the narrative of *Lanval*. Chestre made use of this

[1] Aisling Byrne, "Fairy Lovers: Sexuality, Order and Narrative in Medieval Romance," in *Sexual Culture in the Literature of Medieval Britain*, ed. by Amanda Hopkins, Robert Allen Rouse, and Cory James Rushton (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010), pp. 99–110; James Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, The New Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

new commentary of *Graelent* and extended the social critique given in *Lanval* in *Sir Launfal*. *Guingamor* gives similar social critique on the limitations of the court as in *Lanval*, but is primarily concerned with the magical elements as they were passed down by Celtic tradition.

Chapter 1 of this thesis will explore the reputation of fairies in medieval society and the ways in which fairies are used in medieval romance. Fairies held an ambiguous reputation in the Middle Ages. It will be argued that the pre-Conquest elf can be seen as a precursor to the fairy and the elf's negative reputation will be discussed. This unfavourable reputation resulted in the demonisation of fairies by the Church in the later Middle Ages. In romances, however, fairies are portrayed in a more positive light. This chapter will then discuss the most common representations of fairies in medieval romance.

Chapter 2 will explore the relationships between the four Breton lays that lie at the heart of this thesis. Because of the lays' complex interconnectedness, it is useful to identify which lay drew on which source; this examination will be important for the subsequent exploration of the lays' differing approaches to social critique. First, the plots of the lays will be described so that the various ways in which fairies are used in the lays are determined. Then, the relationships between the four lays will be explained in order to create a diagram that will be helpful for the analysis of the lays in the further chapters.

Chapter 3 will discuss the extensive descriptions of fairies and fairyland in the lays. First, the descriptions of fairyland in the texts are examined to define the social critique enacted in these scenes. This chapter will also discuss the descriptions of the fairy ladies of the lays according to the *descriptio* tradition. The wealth of the fairy ladies and their worlds is emphasised in the lays, which presents critique on the limitations of medieval courtly culture.

Chapter 4 will examine the wish fulfilment used in the lays, since fairies enacted a type of medieval upper class wish fulfilment in romances. First, the reasons for the heroes' poverty and their descriptions will be discussed. Then, this chapter will analyse the sexual wish fulfilment provided by the fairies. Furthermore, the gifts that the fairies grant the heroes will be examined according to their values. The forms of wish fulfilment discussed will depict the social critique given on the limitations of courtly culture.

Chapter 5 will discuss the taboos that the fairies impose on the heroes of the lays. The taboos themselves and the differences between them in the four lays will be examined. Additionally, this chapter will discuss the queen's advances, since in all four lays the queen tries to seduce the hero. Moreover, the disappearance of the fairy's gifts and its meanings in the lays will be analysed. Through this exploration, this chapter shows that the taboos portray the

limitations of the medieval court and seeks to shed new light on the ways in which fairies in medieval romances enacted a form of social critique.

## CHAPTER 1 – FAIRIES IN THE MIDDLE AGES

The representation of the supernatural is a defining feature of medieval romance. Fairies are part of the supernatural world and are used in different ways in romances; a well-known motif is the fairy mistress who offers herself to the human hero.[2] This motif is used in the four lays that concern this thesis: *Lanval*, *Graelent*, *Guingamor* and *Sir Launfal*. The ways in which fairies are represented in these lays differ from the negative reputation attributed to them by the medieval Church. Before examining the social critique enacted by the fairies in these lays, it is essential to explore medieval attitudes towards fairies and the ways in which fairies tend to function in medieval romance.

### *Pre-Conquest elves*

In order to identify the ways in which people viewed fairies at the times in which the four lays were written, it is useful to examine the origins of fairies. One of the earliest recorded references to fairies appears in pre-Conquest medical collections.[3] These collections constitute the Old English genre that touches upon fairies most frequently.[4] However, nothing called a "fairy" existed in Old English literature. The medical collections refer to the precursors of fairies: elves (Old English *ælf* or pl. *ylf*). The term 'elf' can be described as "a supernatural being having magical powers for good or evil; a spirit, fairy, goblin, incubus, succubus, or the like.".[5]

In pre-Conquest medical texts, or *leechbooks* as they were called, elves are depicted as causing mysterious conditions such as wasting illnesses, fevers and warts.[6] In these texts, a disease of being "elf-shot" is mentioned multiple times; being "elf-shot" meant that elves shot invisible arrows or spears at their victims inducing a disease with no other discernible cause.[7] Therefore, these medical collections do not provide a positive perspective on elves. Jean N. Goodrich argues that these texts portray the pre-Conquest attitude that invisible elves were just as physically and spiritually hazardous to people as demons, devils and witches.[8]

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[2] Byrne, "Fairy Lovers," p. 99.
[3] Katherine Mary Briggs, *The Fairies in English Tradition and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 4.
[4] Alaric Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England: Matters of Belief, Health, Gender and Identity* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2007), p. 96.
[5] "elf (n.)", in *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. by Robert E. Lewis, et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952-2001). Online edition in *Middle English Compendium*, ed. by Frances McSparran, et al., 2000-2018.
[6] Jean N. Goodrich, "Fairy, Elves and the Enchanted Otherworld," in *Handbook of Medieval Culture: Fundamental Aspects and Conditions of the European Middle Ages*, Volume 1, ed. by Albrecht Classen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), p. 433.
[7] Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 7.
[8] Goodrich, "Fairy, Elves and the Enchanted Otherworld," p. 434.

The negative views on elves can also be identified in other pre-Conquest texts. An example is the Old English poem *Beowulf*, which, according to Alaric Hall, reflects demonisation of elves that followed the Christianisation of pre-Conquest England.[9] In this poem, *ælfe* or elves are associated with monsters and demons. The poet of *Beowulf* mentions that the monster Grendel roams the wilderness together with *eotenas*, *ylfe* and *orcneas*. Goodrich explains that *eotenas* has been translated as giants, monsters or enemies and *orcneas* as demons or evil spirits.[10] Since *ylfe*, or elves, are grouped together with these monstrous creatures, elves obtain the reputation of belonging to the same evil and vicious group.

More positive attitudes towards elves can be found in Old English glosses of Latin texts. Hall explains that in these texts, Latin words for nymphs, the beautiful supernatural female creatures of classical mythology, are glossed with the Old English *ælf*.[11] According to Goodrich, nymphs were viewed as nature spirits that reside in woods, fields, mountains and water sources.[12] In these contexts where elves were related to nymphs, elves were associated with femininity, beauty and the supernatural in these vernacular glosses. Furthermore, references to elves survive as parts of personal and place names; in these contexts, the elf references generally carry positive connotations.[13] Goodrich gives examples such as the personal names Ælfric (noble or rich as an elf) and Ælfred (elf-wise), and the place name *ælfrucge* (elf-ridge).[14] As these examples suggest, elves did not have an exclusively negative reputation in early medieval England.

Hence, the word "fairy" was not used in the pre-Conquest period. The word was introduced to the English lexicon after the Norman Conquest, derived from Old French *faerie* or *fay*.[15] For the purposes of this thesis, fairies can be defined as "a class of supernatural beings having human form, to whom are traditionally attributed magical powers and who are thought to interfere in human affairs (with either good or evil intent)".[16] Post-Conquest fairies were derived from the Old English elf tradition, but had a slightly different set of attributes associated with them. Fairies were thought to have a human form, whereas elves could sometimes denote creatures such as goblins or incubi, which did not necessarily have a human form. Additionally, elves were occasionally seen as being inferior to fairies or more malignant than fairies.[17]

[9] Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 54.
[10] Goodrich, "Fairy, Elves and the Enchanted Otherworld," p. 433.
[11] Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 76-77.
[12] Goodrich, "Fairy, Elves and the Enchanted Otherworld," p. 433.
[13] *Ibid*., p. 433.
[14] *Ibid*., p. 436.
[15] *Ibid*., p. 431.
[16] "fairy (n.) and (adj.)", *OED Online*, Oxford University Press. https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/67741.
[17] "elf (n.)", *OED Online*, Oxford University Press. https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/60431.

Therefore, the fairies from after the Norman Conquest can on some levels be seen as similar to pre-Conquest elves. Middle English *fairīe* could also refer to "the country or home of supernatural or legendary creatures".[18]

It is clear that elves occupied a complex position in pre-Conquest society. The fairies in the lays of *Lanval*, *Graelent*, *Guingamor* and *Sir Launfal* are depicted primarily as beautiful, supernatural and wealthy; it appears that the dark and demonic features attributed to elves disappeared in the later Middle Ages, when these lays were written. Nevertheless, many of the negative pre-Conquest attitudes towards elves or fairies remained after the Conquest.

### *Demonisation of fairies*

A belief in elves or fairies was a predominant part of the Celtic tradition. After the Norman Conquest, this belief crossed and recrossed the border between England and France.[19] In French literature, the Celtic tradition in Brittany introduced the type of fairy that can be found in *Lanval*, *Graelent*, *Guingamor* and *Sir Launfal*.[20] The fairies that belong to this type are known for their beauty, wealth and power; these are all positive characteristics. The positive reputation of fairies was then highlighted in medieval romances. The Celtic tradition emerged in Brittany after some of the Celtic speaking people from what is now southwestern Great Britain fled to Brittany. These people fled when the Scots and Picts arrived from the mid-fifth to early-seventh centuries.[21] The more positive type of fairy that emerged in Brittany started to appear in England when the tradition crossed the Channel after the Norman Conquest. Therefore, the characteristics assigned to fairies in English texts were influenced by continental traditions.[22] Anglo-Norman became the language of the court and literary works were preferred in French, and these works expressed French artistic and cultural interests with a particular interest in chivalric behaviour and courtly ideals.[23] The fairy mistress was the perfect motif to express the French concern with courtly love.[24]

Despite some favourable views of fairies, fairies were demonised by the Church due to their supposedly negative features. Throughout the course of the Middle Ages, fairies were

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[18] "fairīe (n.)", in *Middle English Dictionary*¸ed. by Lewis, et al. Online edition in *Middle English Compendium*, ed. by McSparran, et al.
[19] Briggs, *The Fairies in English Tradition and Literature*, p. 174.
[20] Helen Cooper, "Fairy monarchs, fairy mistresses: 'I am of ane other countree'," in *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs From Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2008), pp. 177-178.
[21] John Koch, *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, Volume I (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006), p. 275.
[22] Goodrich, "Fairy, Elves and the Enchanted Otherworld," p. 431.
[23] *Ibid*., pp. 446-447.
[24] Tom P. Cross, "The Celtic Elements in the Lays of *Lanval* and *Graelent*," *Modern Philology* 12 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1915), p. 643.

increasingly associated with demons and fairyland with hell.[25] Yet, as Richard Firth Green explains, positive attitudes towards fairies problematised their demonisation. He mentions four characteristics that caused particular difficulties: the unconcealed sexuality of fairies, their ability to interbreed with humans, their mortality and their prognosticative qualities.[26] These characteristics signified the opposite of the features attributed to devils: devils were not viewed as overtly sexual, they did not have sexual relations with humans, they were immortal and they could not see into the future. Therefore, the Church could not relate fairies to demons in any straightforward manner.

Green gives one example of the Church suggesting that fairies were devils. He refers to the *Lucydarye*, which is a late Middle English redaction and translation of the *Elucidarium*.[27] The *Elucidarium* is a theological handbook written in the late eleventh century by Honorius of Autun. An excerpt from the *Lucydarye* depicts fairies as devilish:

> And vnto the regarde of þe feyryes the which man sayth were wonte to be in tymes past, they were not men ne women naturalles but were deuylles þe whiche shewed themselfe vnto þe people of þat tyme, for they were paynyms, ydolatres and without fayth.[28]
>
> [And with regards to fairies, which that particular man says tended to be around in the past: they were neither normal men nor women but were devils that showed themselves unto the people of that time, because they were pagans, worshippers of idols and without faith.]

Fairies, then, are portrayed as devils in this text; they appeared to people in the past because these people did not know the Christian faith yet. The authors of Breton lays–the literary genre of the four lays discussed in this thesis–made use of this assumption. Breton lays commonly take place in the distant past; *Guingamor*, for example, begins with: "En Bretaingne ot .I. roi jadis, / La terre tint et le païs" ["There once lived a king in Brittany / Who ruled the land and the country"] (ll. 5-6).[29] Breton lays were, then, located in a pagan setting where fairies could still appear. Without this pagan setting, Breton lays could have been condemned by the Church. By citing a fragment from a sermon from 1400, Green shows that Church argued that people who believed in fairies "should know that they have forsaken the faith of Christ, betrayed their

[25] Richard Firth Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars: Fairy Beliefs and the Medieval Church* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), p. 2.
[26] *Ibid*., pp. 56-57.
[27] *Ibid*., p. 15.
[28] *Ibid*., p. 15. I have translated this excerpt myself.
[29] Glyn S. Burgess and Leslie C. Brook, eds. and trans., "Guingamor," in *French Arthurian literature: Eleven Old French Narrative Lays*, Volume IV, Arthurian Archives XIV (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2007), pp. 162-163.

baptism, and incurred the anger and enmity of God."[30] By employing the "once-upon-a-time" setting, as Green calls it, in Breton lays, these stories were protected from contemporary condemnation by the Church.[31]

As has been discussed above, both elves and fairies occupied a complex position in their respective time periods. However, the representation of elves in the pre-Conquest period and the representation of fairies in the High and Late Middle Ages did differ. In the pre-Conquest period, elves themselves were not integrated into imaginative literature; they appear, as has been explained above, only as a frame of reference alongside other monsters in *Beowulf*, and they were not developed as human-like figures that existed in a parallel world.[32] After the twelfth century, fairies were depicted in a strikingly different manner. James Wade argues that in the High and Late Middle ages, fairies in romances required to be taken seriously by a sophisticated audience, even if they believed fairies did not exist in the actual world.[33] Therefore, fairies occupied a unique position in romances that needs to be discussed further.

### *Fairies in medieval romance*

Fairies also held an ambiguous position in the medieval romance genre. Wade argues that in romances, fairies are neither angelic nor demonic; they are cast as the "ambiguous supernatural".[34] In romance depictions fairies' defining features include their unparalleled beauty and power. But despite their power, they are hardly ever portrayed as evil.[35] In romances, fairies rarely provoke judgement from their narrators, even if the fairies' intentions might be malevolent.[36] Their intentions are often hard to identify in the first place in romances, because fairies appear unexpectedly and their behaviour is neither logical nor predictable.[37] Therefore, the depiction of fairies in romances differs significantly from the exclusively negative attitudes that the Church tended to hold towards fairies.

The four texts discussed in this thesis belong to the literary genre of the Breton lay. Breton lays (or French *lais*) are poems that descend, or claim to descend, from Celtic stories about love and the supernatural that were sung by the men of Brittany and the best known Breton lays were written by Marie de France.[38] Due to this emphasis on the supernatural, fairies

[30] Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*, p. 1.
[31] *Ibid*., p. 67.
[32] Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, p. 5.
[33] *Ibid*., p. 5.
[34] *Ibid*., p. 1.
[35] *Ibid*., pp. 13-14.
[36] *Ibid*., p. 14.
[37] *Ibid*., p. 16.
[38] A. J. Bliss, (ed.) *Sir Launfal* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons LTD, 1960), p. 1.

frequently appeared in these stories. Breton lays were probably composed in both Great Britain and Brittany and permeated French literature through Brittany.[39] Sources for these stories were presumably Celtic, but were modified by French ideas and customs due to close contact between Great Britain and Brittany and constant immigration between the two countries.[40] Breton lays are often considered part of the romance genre.

Wade explains that romances, including Breton lays, are primarily concerned with the lives of human beings; in these texts, fairies are significant only when they interfere in the human world.[41] In romances, the central aristocratic society represents the contemporary medieval society. This society is alternated with an "Otherworld", which resembles but is recognisably different from the central society.[42] The fairy world is then used to explore issues and create narrative effects that can only be achieved because the fairy world is free from the normal physical laws of time and space, from the ordinary rules of logic and from the moral restrictions of standard human interaction.[43] Thus, fairy worlds unfold, according to Wade, 'adoxic' spaces. The term 'adoxic', in this context, means that fairies are neither orthodox nor unorthodox. Fairies live outside the established order of conventional customs and practices, so they can be used to reflect upon orthodoxies.[44] However, fairies do so without contradicting or even straightforwardly opposing these establishments.[45] They allow for certain actions to occur in a world that neutralises the social and moral dilemmas that would have normally arisen from these actions in the human world.[46]

Fairies in medieval romance often offer themselves to the hero by means of sexual intercourse. This offer comes with no demand for commitment of marriage or negative consequences. This aspect of the romance tradition might suggest a sexually repressed society; nevertheless, Aisling Byrne argues that romances should not be viewed as representing a sexually repressed society. Byrne believes that the motif of the fairy lover should rather be perceived in respect to its position within the overall structure of the plot of the romance story.[47] Romance plots frequently revolve around personal growth. Byrne explains that the narrator is

[39] Evie Margaret Grimes, *The Lays of Desiré, Graelent and Melion*, réimpr. ed. (Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1976), p. 9.
[40] *Ibid*.
[41] Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, p. 1.
[42] Jeff Rider, "The Other Worlds of Romance," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. by Roberta L. Krueger, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) p. 115.
[43] Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, p. 1.
[44] *Ibid*., p. 15.
[45] *Ibid*., p. 15.
[46] Byrne, "Fairy Lovers," p. 100.
[47] *Ibid*., p. 100.

often not interested in sexuality itself, but in the ways in which ultimate gratification is achieved through restraint and self-sacrifice, which are necessary for personal growth.[48] Occasionally, fairies pronounce an orthodox ethic by emphasising the potential problems that could arise from sexual satisfaction. These ethics are never expressed explicitly; they are articulated through the narrative.[49]

In these lays, the fairies' role in the depiction of sexual satisfaction also serves a political function. Wade claims that fairies can be viewed as vehicles for wish fulfilment, because of their ability to heal and grant great wealth and the potential for and attainment of ultimate sexual gratification.[50] The supernatural gifts that frequently accompany this sexual gratification help the heroes of romances in social, economic and political terms; they support the knights to flourish in their chivalric and feudal worlds.[51] Therefore, fairies act as a form of medieval upper class wish fulfilment. The gifts and sexual satisfaction that fairies provide represent accomplishments that the aristocracy in the Middle Ages wanted to achieve.

Nevertheless, a fairy's gifts are not attained in an uncomplicated manner. The difficulty of the medieval upper class to prosper in social, economic and political terms is demonstrated by means of the fairy lady's imposition of a taboo on the human protagonist. Byrne believes that sexual satisfaction and the infliction of a taboo are connected.[52] The taboo that the fairy imposes on the human establishes a bond between the fairy and her lover. Thus, the fairy's gift of sexual access is not completely free anymore. The human protagonist needs to keep his promise, otherwise he will lose the fairy's love. Wade explains that taboos can be used as a useful–or even necessary–narrative device; they complicate a story by introducing an element of danger as well as a potential for gratification.[53] Without the taboo, a story could be brought to a happy ending without obstacles on the way.

Thus, the depiction of fairies in medieval romance is rarely straightforward. Fairies are cast as the ambiguous supernatural that can reflect upon social establishments. They serve as a vehicle for wish fulfilment, but show that that wish fulfilment is not achieved unproblematically. The characteristics of fairies in medieval romance discussed so far can be found in the lays *Lanval*, *Graelent*, *Guingamor* and *Sir Launfal* and will be examined in the next chapters.

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[48] Byrne, "Fairy Lovers," p. 110.
[49] *Ibid*., p. 103.
[50] Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, p. 14.
[51] *Ibid*., pp. 109-110.
[52] Byrne, "Fairy Lovers," pp. 102-103.
[53] Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, p. 139.

## CHAPTER 2 – THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN *LANVAL, GRAELENT, GUINGAMOR* AND *SIR LAUNFAL*

The lays of *Lanval*, *Graelent*, *Guingamor* and *Sir Launfal* are connected; they draw on the same material. The relationships between them are complex with respect to which lay drew on which source. This chapter will examine these relationships. Scholars have argued that the order of composition of the lays is: *Lanval–Graelent–Guingamor–Sir Launfal*.[54] Because of the interconnectedness of the lays, it is essential to explore the relationships between them before moving on to examining the social critique enacted by fairies expressed in the lays.

### *The plots of the lays*

In order to explore the relationships between the four lays, their plots need to be discussed. Marie de France's *Lanval* is generally seen as the first recorded version of the main story.[55] In *Lanval*, King Arthur forgets to give Lanval the gifts he grants to all his knights: land and a wife. Feeling abandoned, Lanval goes to a meadow where two maidens approach him saying their lady wants to meet Lanval. The knight goes with them to the lady's tent, where she, almost naked, waits for him. The lady tells Lanval that she came from her land specifically for Lanval. Lanval sleeps with the lady and when he has to return to Arthur's court, she inhibits him from telling anyone of their love, otherwise he will lose her love. In an episode with notable resemblance to the biblical episode of Potiphar's wife, the queen–presumably Guinevere but her name is never mentioned–tries to seduce Lanval when he is back at Arthur's court.[56] When he rejects her, she accuses him of being homosexual. Lanval intends to prove he is not by saying that he loves a lady who is better and more beautiful than Guinevere. He also insults the queen by claiming that the poorest chambermaid of the lady is even better than Guinevere. Consequently, Lanval is brought to trial and he loses the lady's love. During the trial, he is unexpectedly saved by the lady. Since everyone can see she is the exquisitely beautiful, Lanval is freed from judgement. Lanval leaves with the lady to her land, Avalon.

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[54] Richard N. Illingworth, "The Composition of *Graelent* and *Guingamor*," *Medium Aevum* 44 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985) p. 31.

[55] The translated version used in this thesis is: Marie de France, *The Lais of Marie de France*, ed. and trans. by Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 1978). All Anglo-Norman citations from the manuscript, which in this thesis is MS Harley 978, are taken from: Marie de France, *Le Lai De Lanval*, ed. by Jean Rychner and Paul Aebischer, Textes Littéraires Français 77 (Genève: Droz; Paris: Minard, 1958).

[56] This episode from Genesis deals with Joseph, who is a slave in the house of Potiphar, an officer of the Pharaoh. Potiphar's wife tries to seduce Joseph and gets rejected. She then falsely accuses Joseph of attempted rape to her husband, who imprisons Joseph. This "Potiphar's wife scene" is used in all four lays.

*Graelent* resembles the story of *Lanval*.[57] The King of Brittany and his people hold the knight Graelent in high esteem. In contrast to *Lanval*, *Graelent* describes the queen's love for the hero early in the narrative. The queen hears of Graelent's praise and falls in love with him, but Graelent rejects her advances. The queen does not denounce the knight to the king, but she advises the king not to give Graelent any money. Feeling distressed due to money problems, Graelent enters the forest by crossing a stream, where he sees a white hind. He follows the animal and encounters a maiden bathing naked in a fountain with two maidens serving her. The knight seizes her clothes and forces himself upon her. After they made love, the lady tells Graelent she came to the fountain for him intentionally and she forbids him to speak of their love. Graelent leaves and when he is back at his lodging, he receives a white horse, a chamberlain, clothing, gold and silver from the lady. The knight shared his wealth with everyone and lived wealthy for a year. After this year, Graelent was summoned to the king's court, where everyone was required to praise the queen and declare that there is no one more beautiful than her. Graelent refuses to praise the queen, because he does know someone who is more beautiful than her. He is imprisoned and he loses his beloved, his horse and his chamberlain. Graelent is brought to trial, where he is saved by his lover. However, the lady does not forgive him for speaking of their love. When she leaves, Graelent follows her to the forest and almost drowns in a river. The lady saves him once more and takes him with her to her land. Graelent's horse was separated from him in the river and it is said that people could hear the horse neigh for a long time because of the loss of his master.

*Guingamor* differs somewhat from the aforementioned lays, but it contains similar themes.[58] This lay has been attributed to Marie de France for a long time, but her authorship has been definitely invalidated.[59] This lay begins with the queen offering Guingamor, the nephew of the king, her love, because her husband, the King of Brittany, is on a hunting trip. She tries to kiss the knight, but he pulls away and leaves. When the king returns, the queen proposes a dangerous quest for a white boar. Guingamor accepts the challenge and asked for the king's bloodhound, brachet, hunting horse and pack of dogs. During his hunt for the boar, Guingamor comes across a marvellous palace, but there is no one there. He continues his hunt and encounters a naked lady bathing in a fountain. He tries to hide her clothes, but the lady sees him. She promises the knight that she will deliver the boar and the brachet that was following

[57] The version used in this thesis is: Glyn S. Burgess and Leslie C. Brook, eds. and trans., "Graelent," in *French Arthurian literature: Eleven Old French Narrative Lays*, Volume IV, Arthurian Archives XIV (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2007), pp. 349-412.
[58] The version used in this thesis is the abovementioned book. It also includes *Guingamor*: pp. 141-195.
[59] Burgess and Brook, eds. and trans., *Twenty-Four Lays from the French Middle Ages*, p. 50.

the boar to him if he goes with her to her land for three days. Guingamor agrees and the lady takes him to the palace he already discovered; this time it is full of people, including the ten knights who had been lost from Guingamor's land while trying to hunt the boar. When he wants to leave the lady after three days, Guingamor discovers that he has been there for three hundred years. Everyone he knew had died and the cities he knew were destroyed. He goes back to his own land with the head of the boar. He can return to the lady's land, on the condition that he cannot eat or drink while he is in his own land. Returned to his land, Guingamor tells a poor man of his adventures and gives him the head of the boar as proof. The knight forgets his promise to the lady and eats apples, which makes him grow old rapidly. Two maidens of the lady save him and take him back to the lady's country. The peasant whom Guingamor told his adventure to remains telling it everywhere he goes.

*Sir Launfal* is the most elaborate version of the four lays.[60] The lay starts with Merlin convincing King Arthur to marry Guinevere. Sir Launfal, one of Arthur's knights, does not like Guinevere because of her promiscuous reputation. At the wedding feast, Guinevere gives away many gifts, but she gives Launfal nothing. After the wedding, Launfal leaves to Karlyoun because his father had passed away. He spends some time lodging in the mayor's house and spends all his money. When the daughter of the mayor proposes to have dinner with Launfal, he declines because of the shame for his poverty and he leaves. The knight rests near a forest in the shadow of a tree where two maidens pass him and tell him that their lady Tryamour wants to speak with him. The maidens take Launfal to a pavilion, where he meets the almost naked Tryamour, who is the daughter of the king of Fairyland. Launfal and Tryamour make love and she makes him wealthy and gives him her white horse Blaunchard and servant Gyfre. Launfal leaves and makes a promise to the fairy lady that he will keep their love a secret. He will lose her love if he boasts about her. Back in Karlyoun, Launfal holds rich feasts and feeds the poor. Lady Tryamour visits him every night. Launfal enters a tournament, where he beats Sir Valentyne in a joust. Afterwards, Launfal goes back to Arthur's court, where Guinevere confesses her love for him. The knight refuses the queen and she accuses him of being homosexual. Launfal then tells Guinevere he has loved a woman more beautiful than she has ever seen. Because he has boasted about Lady Tryamour, he loses all his weath, the horse Blaunchard and the steward Gyfre, as well as her love. Launfal is brought to trial due to insulting

[60] The version used in this thesis is: Thomas Chestre, "Sir Launfal," in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. by Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995). I decided to use this online edition, because it was the only one available with glosses. All Middle English quotations in the rest of this thesis are taken from this source.

the queen and during the trial he is saved by Tryamour. The fairy lady takes revenge on Guinevere by blinding her. Launfal leaves to Olyroun with Tryamour and once a year Launfal's horse can be heard neighing and he then returns to the real world to joust.

### *The Relationships between Lanval, Graelent and Guingamor*

The similarities between the plots of the aforementioned lays show that these lays are interconnected. All four revolve around a knight who encounters a woman who becomes his mistress and imposes a taboo on him, which he breaks, following the loss of the mistress' love.[61] Even if it is not mentioned explicitly, it is clear in all four poems that the mistress is a fairy. The relationships between the four lays have to be determined in order to examine which lay drew on which source. Even though these relationships cannot be determined with any certainty, it is nevertheless useful to examine them. After the relationships between the lays are established, the differences between the enacted social critiques by the fairies in these lays can be identified more clearly.

First, the dates of composition need to be discussed. Marie de France's *lais* have been dated to the period 1160 to 1199.[62] For the group of anonymous Old French lays, including *Graelent* and *Guingamor*, dates are suggested between the end of the twelfth century and the first decades of the thirteenth century.[63] Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal* was written at the end of the fourteenth century.[64] Since *Sir Launfal* is written much later than the other lays, it is clear that the Middle English lay did not have any influence on the composition of the other three lays. On the other hand, the remaining three lays could have influenced the composition of *Sir Launfal*. Since *Lanval*, *Graelent* and *Guingamor* were written in close proximity to each other, it is possible that these three texts affected each other's composition. Therefore, the relationships between these three lays will be examined next.

*Graelent* and *Guingamor* draw extensively on Marie de France's *Lanval* in terms of themes.[65] Both *Graelent* and *Guingamor* use the foundation of the plot of *Lanval*. This main plot revolves around the encounter between a hero and a fairy lady who become lovers, after which the hero breaks the fairy mistress's taboo and loses her love. Two scenes in *Graelent* cannot be traced back to *Lanval*: the scene that portrays how Graelent encounters the lady

[61] Cross, "The Celtic Elements in the Lays of *Lanval* and *Graelent*," p. 594.
[62] Hanning and Ferrante, eds. and trans., *The Lais of Marie de France*, p. 8.
[63] Burgess and Brook, eds. and trans., *Twenty-Four Lays from the French Middle Ages*, p. 2.
[64] Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, eds., "Sir Launfal: Introduction," in *The Middle English Breton Lays* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/laskaya-and-salisbury-middle-english-breton-lays-sir-launfal-introduction.
[65] Burgess and Brook, eds. and trans., *Twenty-Four Lays from the French Middle Ages*, p. 50.

bathing in the fountain and ravishes her and the scene that describes how Graelent almost drowns by following the lady into a river and how his horse grieves by neighing due to the loss of his master.[66] Richard N. Illingworth argues that the scenes that cannot be traced back to *Lanval* were probably derived from stories that belong to a Celtic tradition.[67]

This Celtic tradition includes the story of Gradlon Mor. At the end of the narrative, the author declares that the story of Graelent was called *Graalent Muer* (l. 756).[68] This name can be associated with the, to a certain extent historical, sixth-century king of Cornuaille, Gradlon Mor, who was the hero in many Breton folk stories.[69] A story was known in which this Breton hero surprised a lady who was bathing in a stream and raped her.[70] Gradlon Mor's story belongs to a broader tradition in Celtic literature in which a lady washes herself at a spring and is overpowered by a man and raped.[71] This tradition existed before the composition of the Old French *lais*. Tom Peete Cross shows that the motif of a fairy in a fountain who appears to a chosen mortal is common in stories about fairy mistresses in Celtic literature.[72] The fairy in the fountain scene in *Graelent*, as well as the one in *Guingamor*, thus probably originates from a Celtic account.

Apart from the fountain scene, *Guingamor* involves three unique episodes which cannot be derived from *Lanval*.[73] The first one is the hunt for the white boar which leads the knight to the empty magical palace and the fairy lady. The second scene is the supernatural time-lapse in which Guingamor has actually stayed at the fairy palace for three years instead of three days. The third one is the rapid ageing when Guingamor breaks his promise to the fairy to not eat or drink anything when he returns home. All three episodes are proven to be derived from Celtic tradition.[74] The hunt for the white boar, the dangerous forest and the empty palace are common features of the, as Cross calls it, conventional "Journey to the Other World".[75]

These Celtic influences in *Graelent* and *Guingamor* indicate that they were composed later than *Lanval*. Illingworth explains that an attempt to combine Celtic tradition and Marie de France's *Lanval* caused inconsistencies in *Graelent* and *Guingamor*.[76] In both lays, after the heroes meet the fairy lady in the fountain, the fairies explain that they intended to meet the

[66] Illingworth, "The Composition of *Graelent* and *Guingamor*," p. 31.
[67] *Ibid*., p. 32.
[68] Burgess and Brook, eds. and trans., *French Arthurian Literature*, "Graelent," pp. 408-409.
[69] Illingworth, "The Composition of *Graelent* and *Guingamor*," p. 31.
[70] *Ibid*., p. 32.
[71] *Ibid*., p. 33.
[72] Cross, "The Celtic Elements in the Lays of *Lanval* and *Graelent*," p. 608.
[73] Illingworth, "The Composition of *Graelent* and *Guingamor*," p. 38.
[74] *Ibid*.
[75] Cross, "The Celtic Elements in the Lays of *Lanval* and *Graelent*," p. 591.
[76] Illingworth, "The Composition of *Graelent* and *Guingamor*," p. 34.

heroes. These intentions of the fairies come across as improbable, since it appears that the heroes meet the fairies by chance. The fairy lady in *Graelent* is even ravished by the knight, which doubtfully would have been the mistress's objective. The fairies' intentions could have been taken from *Lanval*, in which the fairy lady, as opposed to the lady in *Graelent* and *Guingamor*, is evidently determined to meet Lanval. The inconsistent change from, what Illingworth describes as, "a 'timorous swan-maiden' to a 'forth-putting fée'" in *Graelent* and *Guingamor* shows that the authors combined Celtic traditions with Marie de France's *Lanval*. Therefore, *Lanval* is the poem that was written first.

Cross argues that remnants of a fountain scene can be found in *Lanval*. The two maidens who appear when Lanval is lying in a meadow are carrying a gold basin and a towel. These items could have been used by the maidens to wash their lady, just as is done by the maidens in the fountain scenes of *Graelent* and *Guingamor*. However, the maidens in *Lanval* are presumably retrieving water so that her lady could wash her hands for dinner.[77] Since there are numerous Celtic analogues described by Cross that involve supernatural women in fountains or large bodies of water, it seems probable that the fairy lady in *Lanval* appeared in the original story with two maidens bathing in a stream. In the twelfth century, Marie de France transformed the fairy mistress into a contemporary elegant lady resting in a magnificent pavilion, with her maidens being drawers of water so that their lady could was her hands for dinner.[78]

Therefore, it is plausible that the three lays of *Lanval*, *Graelent* and *Guingamor* all derive from a lost Celtic source that included the hero's encounter with a supernatural woman bathing in a fountain. Since *Graelent* and *Guingamor* contain many of the same themes as *Lanval*, it is likely that these texts, potentially by mediated influence, drew from Marie de France's lay. *Graelent* and *Guingamor* also draw on a nucleus of Celtic traditions. Since *Guingamor* includes more elements that cannot be traced back to *Lanval* than *Graelent*, it may follow that *Guingamor* is influenced more by its Celtic sources than *Graelent*.

### *The Relationships between Lanval, Graelent and Sir Launfal*

*Sir Launfal* has a complex relationship to its sources. It is clear from the identical names of the heroes and similar themes in the narratives that Thomas Chestre's Middle English story is related to Marie de France's *Lanval*. However, *Sir Launfal* is not based directly or exclusively on the Anglo-Norman narrative. Chestre used three sources while writing his narrative poem. The immediate source of *Sir Launfal* is the Middle English *Sir Landevale*, which is an

[77] Cross, "The Celtic Elements in the Lays of *Lanval* and *Graelent*," p. 608.
[78] *Ibid*., p. 609.

adaptation of Marie de France's *Lanval*.[79] Chestre copied whole lines or fragments from *Sir Landevale*. Another source that was used, which is now lost, probably contained the episode of the tournament at Karlyoun, where Launfal fights with Sir Valentyne. Scholars have argued an analogue of this episode can be identified in *The Art of Courtly Love (De Amore)* written by Andreas Capellanus.[80] The other source that Chestre drew on is the Old French *Graelent*.

Four episodes in *Sir Launfal* find parallels in *Graelent*: the explanation of Guinevere's conflicts with Arthur's knights, the section with the mayor and his daughter, the arrival of gifts to Launfal's lodging and the disappearance of Gyfre and Blaunchard.[81] In *Lanval,* the adulterous behaviour of the queen is not mentioned explicitly at the beginning of the narrative. In this respect, *Graelent* and *Lanval* differ from *Lanval*. In *Graelent*, the queen makes her advances on Graelent before he leaves the court. The queen's behaviour shows her promiscuity, which Chestre uses in his text. In *Sir Launfal*, the hero does not like Guinevere's promiscuous reputation from the start. During the trial scene, it is clear that the other knights do not approve of Guinevere's reputation either.

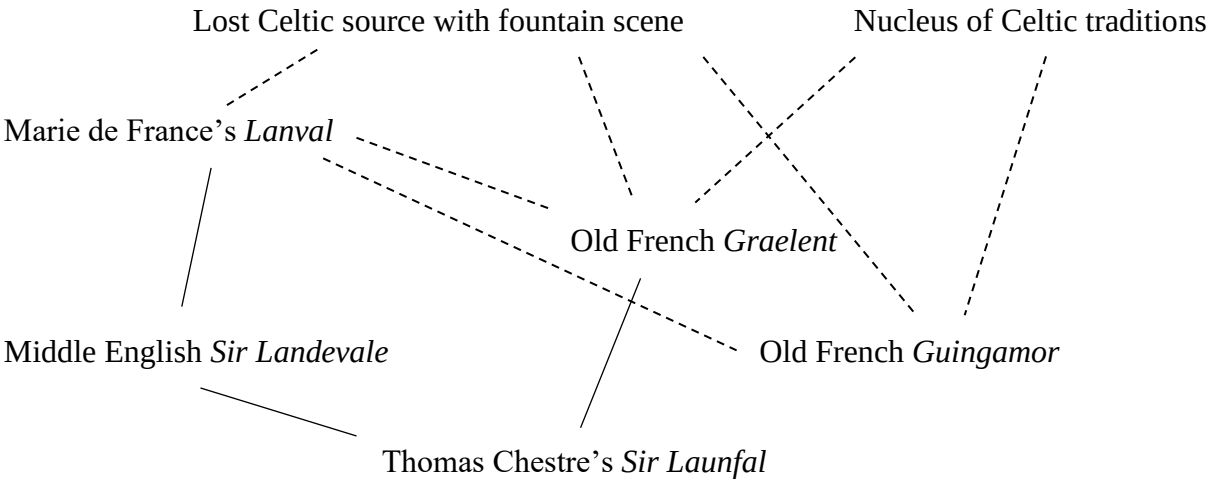
In *Graelent*, the hero spends some time at a lodging. When the host is gone, the host's daughter offers him dinner, but he refuses. Chestre adopted this scene and transformed it into a lodging at the house of the mayor of Karlyoun and the mayor's daughter offering him dinner, which Launfal declines because he is ashamed of his poverty. A. J. Bliss argues that this scene smooths the sudden transition from the knight's realisation of his poverty and his encounter with the fairy lady.[82]

In both *Graelent* and *Sir Launfal*, the gifts of the fairy–a horse, a knave and wealth–are sent to the hero's lodging and in both poems the gifts disappear after the hero breaks the taboo of the fairy. The episode at the end of *Sir Launfal* in which Launfal's horse can be heard neighing can also be associated with *Graelent*. In the Old French poem, Graelent loses his horse after he almost drowns in a river while following the fairy back to her land. Graelent's horse can be heard neighing because of the loss of his master. Launfal's horse also remains neighing each year when Launfal comes back from the Otherworld to joust.

Hence, the relationships between the four lays are complex. Nonetheless, the explanation of their interconnectedness will be helpful for the analysis of the enacted social critique in the lays. The differences discussed here can be summarised using a diagram. The

[79] Bliss (ed.), *Sir Launfal*, p. 2.
[80] *Ibid*., p. 25.
[81] *Ibid*., p. 24.
[82] *Ibid*., p. 30.

solid lines indicate direct relationships and the dashed lines indicate potentially mediated influence:




As this discussion illustrates, the roles of fairies differ considerably between these four texts. How these the roles of fairies differ, and the significance of these differences, will be explored at greater length in the next chapters.

## CHAPTER 3 – DESCRIPTIONS OF FAIRIES AND FAIRYLAND

*Lanval*, *Graelent*, *Guingamor* and *Sir Launfal* all make use of extensive descriptions of fairies and fairyland. This chapter argues that the transmission of the social critique in the four Breton lays is developed through these extensive descriptions of fairies and their worlds. Byrne indicates that these detailed descriptions create worlds that function as suspension of disbelief for the audience.[83] This chapter shows that all four lays enact a social critique of medieval society through the representation of fairies and their lands. Since, as Chapter 1 argues, fairies live in adoxic spaces, fairies and their worlds are able to reflect on social establishments such as courtly culture. In some of the lays explored here, descriptions of fairies and fairyland can be seen as a form of social critique, because they portray a kind of beauty and wealth that medieval society would not be able to achieve. As this chapter shows, the social critique enacted by fairies in the *Lanval* tradition becomes increasingly pronounced over time.

### *Fairyland*

In all four Breton lays explored here, the encounter with a fairy takes place in a distinctive setting. Helen Cooper explains that fairies are most often encountered in the real world and that there are certain places where a meeting with a fairy is more likely.[84] Conventional locations are trees and forests or liminal settings close to wood or water.[85] The boundaries of fairyland are commonly marked by a river, tree, orchard, meadow or even the sudden fearful trembling of a hero's horse or hot weather.[86] In the broader Middle English tradition, fairies are sometimes associated with the west.[87] All four lays discussed here use these locations in which fairies are likely to be encountered. The otherworldly environments that are described portray the wealth of the fairy world. These descriptions enact a form of social critique, because they show that the wealth of worldly aristocracy is limited.

In *Lanval*, the magical environment is established when the hero dismounts from his horse by a stream in a meadow, where his horse trembles badly. These elements are all signs that the hero is on the border of fairyland. Two fairy maidens appear and take Lanval to their lady, whose wealth is emphasised by the pavilion she is lying in. Marie de France describes one

[83] Byrne, "Fairy Lovers," p. 104.
[84] Cooper, "Fairy monarchs, fairy mistresses," p. 181.
[85] *Ibid*.
[86] Lee C. Ramsey, *Chivalric Romances: Popular Literature in Medieval England* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), p. 141.
[87] Corinne Saunders, "Otherworld Enchantments and Faery Realms," in *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010), p. 186.

of the flaps of the tent as too expensive for even Queen Semiramis or emperor Octavian to afford. A golden eagle is placed on top of the tent, which no king on earth could buy "Pur nul auer kil i donast" ["no matter what wealth he offered."] (l. 92).[88] In the poem, the king's court is never portrayed similarly. As a result, the fairy's pavilion looks much more remarkable than the king's court does. Marie de France refers to historical rulers who were extremely wealthy. If even these rulers are not able to afford items of the Otherworld, nobody in the actual world would be able to. This contrast between the wealth of the fairy mistress's pavilion and Arthur's court can be perceived as social critique; it shows the limitations of the worldly aristocracy.

In *Graelent*, the hero goes to a clearing which is "D'une forest grant et pleniere, / Par mi coroit une riviere" ["Part of a large, dense forest; / Through which ran a stream"] (ll. 205-206).[89] Since a river or a stream frequently marks the border of fairyland in medieval romance, it is no surprise to the reader or listener of the poem that Graelent encounters the fairy lady in the fountain afterwards. Besides the forest and stream, Graelent sees a pure white hind which is "Plus que n'est noif qui gist sor branche." ["Whiter than snow lying on a branch."] (l. 212).[90] White animals, especially white horses, are often used to signal the fairy world in medieval romance.[91] Therefore, the white hind is another hint at the magical setting of *Graelent*.

A white animal also appears in *Guingamor*: the white boar. The hunt for this magical animal is the first hint at a fairy encounter. Guingamor enters a dense forest and crosses a dangerous river; both signs of the border of fairyland. Instead of running into the fairy in the fountain immediately, Guingamor first passes a mighty palace. It is instantly clear that the hero is dealing with a fairy palace; the outside is made of green marble, a tower is made of silver, the doors are made of ivory, everything inside is made of pure gold and the rooms were made of stones of paradise.[92] *Guingamor* uses a comparison that is similar to that of *Lanval* to enact social critique, yet the social critique is strengthened in *Guingamor*. The fairy's palace is described in much more impressive terms than the king's court. This comparison shows that the aristocratic court cannot compete with the wealth of the palace of the Otherworld. Thus, the limitations of the medieval court are depicted in this scene. Since the description of the fairy palace in *Guingamor* is more detailed than the description of the fairy's pavilion in *Lanval*, the social critique is even more powerful.

[88] De France, *Le Lai De Lanval,* p. 28; De France, *The Lais of Marie de France*, p. 107.
[89] Burgess and Brook, eds. and trans., *French Arthurian Literature*, "Graelent," pp. 384-385.
[90] *Ibid*.
[91] Cross, "The Celtic Elements in the Lays of *Lanval* and *Graelent*," pp. 631-635.
[92] Burgess and Brook, eds. and trans., *French Arthurian Literature*, "Guingamor," pp. 178-179.

In *Sir Launfal*, it is clear that Launfal is in a magical setting that marks the borderland of the Otherworld. He first "rood toward the west" [rode towards the west] (l. 219), where in the morning "the wether was hot" [the weather was hot] (l. 220) and he dismounted beside a forest and rested "In the schadwe under a tre" [In the shadow under a tree] (l. 227).[93] All the elements here are elements associated with the fairy world. Lady Tryamour's tent is described with reference to what medieval people called "the wonders of the East"; the pavilion is portrayed as being the "werk of Sarsynys" [work of Saracens] (l. 266). Carol F. Heffernan argues that medieval romances frequently draw on concepts of the Orient.[94] This fascination with the Orient was instigated by crusades and pilgrimages to and trade with North-Africa and the Near and Middle East.[95] As Heffernan explains, trading with the Orient provided expensive commodities for Western Europe.[96] Therefore, the reference to the Orient reinforces the depicted excessive wealth of the fairy world. By including these references, *Sir Launfal* enacts a stronger critique of the limitations of the worldly court than does *Lanval*.

Besides the reference to the Orient, Lady Tryamour's pavilion is described in other wealth-related terms–some of which are similar to the ones used in *Lanval*. On the top "an ern ther stod / Of bournede golde, ryche and good," [there stood an eagle / Made of burnished gold, rich and good," (ll. 268-269). The eyes of the eagle were made of "carbonkeles bryght" [bright rubies] (l. 271); neither Alexander the Great nor King Arthur possessed such a jewel. Chestre uses the same reference to historical–or perhaps doubtfully historical in King Arthur's case–rulers as Marie de France. The fairy's pavilion is depicted as a place of excessive wealth, which no one in the real world would be able to afford, not even the mentioned great rulers. As a result, the actual world is critiqued, since the prosperity of the earthly world is limited.

The descriptions of the wealth of the Otherworld in *Lanval*, *Guingamor* and *Sir Launfal* call into question the wealth of earthly aristocratic courts. The extensive detail of these descriptions is needed in order to conceal the, as a medieval audience could argue, brutality of the social critique on medieval aristocracy. Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante point out that the twelfth century witnessed a cultural renaissance in Western Europe with an expansion of urban life.[97] Due to this expansion of urban life, a mercantile class emerged that was able to provide

[93] Unless otherwise noted, all translations of the Middle English *Sir Launfal* are my own, with the help of the glosses given by Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury and the *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. by Robert E. Lewis, et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952-2001). Online edition in Middle English Compendium, ed. by Frances McSparran, et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2000-2018).
[94] Carol F. Heffernan, "Introduction: Romance and the Orient," in *The Orient in Chaucer and Medieval Romance* (Boydell & Brewer, 2003), p. 1.
[95] *Ibid*., pp. 1-2.
[96] *Ibid*., p. 20.
[97] Hanning and Ferrante, eds. and trans., *The Lais of Marie de France*, p. 8.

for themselves. The descriptions of the Otherworld in the lays of *Lanval*, *Guingamor* and *Sir Launfal* depict the conflicts that arose between this mercantile middle class and the aristocracy. By portraying the excessive wealth of the fairy world, these lays enact critique on the limitations of courtly culture. These depictions of wealth could also illustrate the wealth that the new middle class wanted to achieve.

Due to the reference to the Orient, the social critique is enhanced more in *Sir Launfal* than in *Lanval* and *Guingamor*. The middle class consisted of the people who took part in the trade with the Orient. Therefore, it is the middle class that would be able to obtain foreign expensive commodities rather than the aristocracy. This trading with the Orient was more common at the end of the fourteenth century, when *Sir Launfal* was composed, than at the end of the twelfth century, when *Lanval* and *Guingamor* were written. As a consequence, the references to the "wonders of the East" are used in the Middle English lay and not in the other three lays. Therefore, the richness of the Otherworld is emphasised even more in *Sir Launfal* than in *Lanval* and *Guingamor*. Because the wealth of the Otherworld is not given much detail in *Graelent*, this form of social critique is not found in the depictions of the fairy world in *Graelent*.

### *The fairy lady*

According to D. S. Brewer, medieval descriptions of women's faces and bodies conformed to a certain conventional type which originated in Greek and Latin classical literature.[98] This type involved a 'milky' whiteness, a complexion that is white as snow as well as red as a rose and golden hair that is contrasted remarkably with dark eyebrows.[99] Brewer argues that this conformity shows the cultural consensus of medieval Europe and the common goal of medieval writers to attain a uniform, unrealistic ideal.[100]

One of these medieval writers who valued the description of this conventional type of female beauty is Matthew of Vendôme. Vendôme was a French author writing in the twelfth century and is known for his *Ars Versificatoria*, a theoretical work on the art of poetry.[101] Ernest Gallo explains that Vendôme considered the art of *depictio* or depiction to be central to poetic writing.[102] Vendôme believed that while describing an object, a poet should use epithets which

[98] D. S. Brewer, "The Ideal of Feminine Beauty in Medieval Literature, Especially "Harley Lyrics", Chaucer, and Some Elizabethans," *The Modern Language Review* 50, no. 3 (1955), pp. 257-269.
[99] *Ibid*., p. 258.
[100] *Ibid*., p. 258.
[101] Ernest Gallo, "Matthew of Vendôme: Introductory Treatise on the Art of Poetry," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 118, no. 1, 1974, p. 51.
[102] *Ibid*., p. 55.

symbolise its essence.[103] The more epithets a poet used, the more authority the description gained.[104] Vendôme himself gives a description of Helen in his *Ars Versificatoria*; he employs the epithets similar to those mentioned above to describe her–red and white complexion, striking eyebrows, white teeth, swollen lips– and he uses the standard order from head to toe.[105] The use of common epithets for ideal female beauty can be distinguished in the portrayals of the fairy ladies in the lays of *Lanval, Graelent, Guingamor* and *Sir Launfal*.

When Lanval first meets the fairy lady, her beauty is compared to flowers. This comparison is a stock feature of the *descriptio* tradition. The fairy lady is extremely beautiful, since even "Flur de lis rose nuuele / Quant ele pert al tens deste / Trespassot ele de beaute" ["the lily and the young rose / when they appear in summer / are surpassed by her beauty." (ll. 94-96).[106] Her cloak is described in detail; it is made of "blanc hermine / couert de purpre alexandrine" ["white ermine / covered with purple alexandrine"] (ll. 102-103).[107] The richness of the fairy lady and her world is emphasised here, because both ermine and purple cloth indicate wealth. The lady's white skin is highlighted; she is described as being "Plus ert blanche que flue despine" ["whiter than the hawthorn flower."] (l. 106).[108] This comparison to the hawthorn is a stock feature of the depiction of the ideal lady that the French vernacular contributed to the *descriptio* tradition.[109] During the rescue of Lanval by the fairy lady, her whiteness is emphasised once more: her neck is "plus blanc que neif sur branche" ["whiter than snow on a branch"] (l. 564).[110] The common feature of the contrast between the eyebrows and hair is also used: she has "Les surcilz bruns" ["dark eyebrows"] (l. 567) and "Fil dor ne gette tel luur / Cum sun cheual cuntre le iur" ["golden wire does not shine / like her hair in the light."] (ll. 569-570).[111] Due to the use of these stock features of the depiction of the ideal woman, the audience of *Lanval* would have recognised the beauty of the fairy lady instantly.

The first time Graelent meets his fairy mistress, she is described as being "Blanche, rovente et colorie" ["Fair-skinned, pink and fresh-complexioned"] (l. 230) and having "bel le front" ["a beautiful brow"] (l. 231).[112] Both of these features are typical of the *descriptio* tradition. When the lady arrives at the King's court to save Graelent from his judgement, she is

[103] Gallo, "Matthew of Vendôme," p. 55.
[104] *Ibid*., p. 56.
[105] *Ibid*., p. 56.
[106] De France, *Le Lai De Lanval*, pp. 28-30; De France, *The Lais of Marie de France*, p. 107.
[107] De France, *Le Lai De Lanval*, p. 30; De France, *The Lais of Marie de France*, p. 108.
[108] *Ibid*.
[109] Brewer, "The Ideal of Feminine Beauty in Medieval Literature," p. 259.
[110] De France, *Le Lai De Lanval*, p. 68; De France, *The Lais of Marie de France*, p. 120.
[111] De France, *Le Lai De Lanval*, p. 68; De France, *The Lais of Marie de France*, pp. 120-121.
[112] Burgess and Brook, eds. and trans., *French Arthurian Literature*, "Graelent," pp. 386-387.

again portrayed as being extremely beautiful and having no blemish, but her wealthy attire is also emphasised. She is dressed in red silken material, which was embroidered with gold; both these colours are conventionally associated with the fairy kingdom.[113] Just like in *Lanval*, the costliness of the lady's cloak is highlighted in *Graelent*; it is described to be "valoit .I. chastel" ["as valuable as a castle"] (l. 625).[114] The bridle, saddle and harness of the palfrey on which she rides "Valoit mil livres de chartains." ["Were worth a thousand pounds in Chartres coins."] (l. 628).[115] The moment the fairy lady arrives at court, everyone sees in an instant that the queen cannot compete with her beauty. A medieval audience would acknowledge the fairy lady's beauty as well because of the use of the stock features of the depiction of the ideal woman.

Even though the fairy lady in *Guingamor* is not given an extensive description, an epithet of female beauty is used. This epithet is a comparison to flowers: there was nothing as beautiful, "Ne fleur de liz, ne flor de rose" ["Neither the lily nor the rose in bloom"] (l. 432), as the lady.[116] Brewer explains that great poets needed to mention only a few essential details, because the ideal depiction of a woman was so well known in medieval literature.[117] The depiction of the beauty of the fairy lady in *Guingamor* is not as strong as in *Lanval* and *Graelent*, but since a common epithet is used, the reader or listener of *Guingamor* is aware of the fairy lady's beauty.

Lady Tryamour in *Sir Launfal* is described in similar terms to the fairy lady in *Lanval*; Chestre also used stock features of the *descriptio* tradition to portray Tryamour. As a result, the audience of *Sir Launfal* recognises Tryamour's ultimate beauty. Her skin is "as whyt as lylye yn May, / Or snow that sneweth yn wynterys day" [as white as a lily in May / Or snow that snows on a winter's day] (ll. 292-293). Her complexion is also described with common elements: "The rede rose, whan sche ys newe, / Agens her rode nes naught of hewe" [The red rose, when it first blooms, / Is, in comparison with her complexion, of insignificant colour] (ll. 295-296). When Tryamour arrives at Arthur's court, her hair is depicted as "gold wyre that schynyth bryght" [gold wire that shines brightly] (l. 939). Again, the costliness of her cloak is emphasised; it was "furryd wyth whyt ermyn, / Yreversyd jolyf and fyn / No rychere be ne myght" [trimmed with white ermine / Lined splendidly and fine / There could be none richer" (ll. 946-947). As in the descriptions of Tryamour's pavilion, her wealth is highlighted due to a reference to the Orient. The fairy lady arrives on a palfrey and its saddle is described in detail:

[113] Ramsey, *Chivalric Romances*, p. 141.
[114] Burgess and Brook, eds. and trans., *French Arthurian Literature*, "Graelent," pp. 402-403.
[115] *Ibid*.
[116] Burgess and Brook, eds. and trans., *French Arthurian Literature*, "Guingamor," pp. 180-181.
[117] Brewer, "The Ideal of Feminine Beauty in Medieval Literature," p. 267.

"In the arsouns, before and behynde, / Were twey stones of Ynde, / Gay for the maystrye" [In the saddle bows, on the front and the back, / Were two stones of India, / Exceedingly brilliant for the rulership] (ll. 955-957). This reference to India underlines the wealth of Lady Tryamour. This wealth is appealing to the middle class because they are the ones who trade with India for expensive commodities, such as jewels.

In all four lays, the fairy lady is portrayed as someone who is unsurpassably beautiful and wealthy. This chapter has shown that stock features of the depiction of the ideal woman are used in the lays when the fairy ladies are described. As a consequence, a medieval audience would have immediately been aware of the beauty these women possessed. These fairy mistresses are being described in the same excessively beautiful way that noblewomen of the time were being described. Due to the conventionality of their descriptions, these fairies do not seem to be extraordinary compared to medieval noblewomen. However, other women in the lays are never portrayed using this kind of excessive description. The beauty of the queen, for example, is never described in detail in the lays. Therefore, the fairy ladies seem to surpass the queens in terms of beauty; given the medieval emphasis on beauty standards, this aspect of the text calls the queens' supremacy into question.

When the fairies are described in *Lanval*, *Graelent* and *Sir Launfal*, their wealth is emphasised. As this chapter has explained, the richness of the fairies' clothes is highlighted in the three lays. Similarly, the richness of the attire of the fairy's horses is underlined in *Graelent* and *Sir Launfal*. These features, taken together, suggest that the wealth of the earthly aristocracy is limited. This social critique portrays the increasingly pronounced conflicts between the middle class and aristocracy and their unequally distributed wealth. The mercantile class was able to provide for themselves and gain their own wealth. They criticised the aristocracy for their undeserved wealth and perceived this wealth to be limited. *Sir Launfal* presents these conflicts most evidently. This poem was written in the fourteenth century, when the conflicts between the middle class and aristocracy were more clearly pronounced than at the end of the twelfth century, when the other lays were composed. Accordingly, *Sir Launfal* describes the fairy's riches in terms drawn from the "wonders of the East" tradition. Therefore, the social critique enacted by the fairy ladies in these scenes is more powerful in *Sir Launfal* than in *Lanval* and *Graelent*.

## CHAPTER 4 – MAGICAL WISH FULFILMENT

As was introduced in Chapter 1, fairies often acted as a form of upper class wish fulfilment in medieval romances. Wade illustrates that the favours of a fairy's love are frequently accompanied by gifts that help a knight by means of social, economic and political progress.[118] The fairies give the heroes the life that they would not be able to attain themselves in the real world. This chapter shows how this magical wish fulfilment can be seen as a form of social critique; it demonstrates that the medieval court, which is represented by the king's court in the lays, is markedly limited. The limitations depicted in *Lanval* and *Graelent* concern the conventions of courtly love, whereas the limitations depicted in *Sir Launfal* concern socio-economic problems.

### *The hero's poverty*

In *Lanval, Graelent* and *Sir Launfal*, the heroes' wishes are fulfilled when they are the most in need. The three knights are mistreated at their kings' courts, and this mistreatment underlines the limitations of these courts. The later the poem was written, the more the hero's poverty is emphasised. In *Lanval*, King Arthur "Asez […] duna riches duns" ["gave out many rich gifts"] (l. 13), but he forgot Lanval; he "Femmes e tere departi / Par tut fors un kilo t serui" ["distributed wives and lands, / to all but one who had served him."] (ll. 17-18).[119] The reason for Arthur's decision to neglect Lanval is unclear, which makes King Arthur's forgetfulness seem arbitrary and unfair. Despite Lanval's reputation for displaying valour and being generous, he is mistreated at the king's court.[120] Therefore, Arthur is put in a negative light and his court is portrayed as limited. Due to Arthur's mistreatment, Lanval spends all his wealth and acquires financial problems.

In *Graelent*, the reason for Graelent's poverty is made clear. At first, Graelent "n'ot pas molt granz heritages" ["did not possess great domains"] (l. 9), but is described as "cortois et sages, / Bons chevaliers et de grant pris" ["courtly and wise, / A good knight and of great reputation"] (ll. 10-11).[121] In this poem, the hero becomes poor because the queen convinces the king to hold back Graelent's pay after Graelent rejects her advances. Dinah Hazell indicates

[118] Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, pp. 109-110.
[119] De France, *Le Lai De Lanval*, p. 22; De France, *The Lais of Marie de France*, p. 105.
[120] Hanning and Ferrante, eds. and trans., *The Lais of Marie de France*, p. 123.
[121] Burgess and Brook, eds. and trans., *French Arthurian Literature*, "Graelent," pp. 376-377.

that the queen contributes to either the preservation or disruption of a fair and constant rule.[122] Because the queen, along with the king, is at the head of the court, she affects the entire court if she acts unjustly. The behaviour of the queen disrupts the justice of the court, since she convinces the king to hold back Graelent's for the wrong reason: because he insulted her. Graelent rejected her to remain faithful to his lord. The knight is being mistreated here even though he has acted properly. The restrictions of the medieval court are illustrated in this scene; the scene illustrates that wealth cannot even be attained with a respectable reputation.

After this incident, Graelent spends all his money, loses his servants and falls into debt. His poverty is explicitly depicted when he rides through town on his horse wearing "Unes viez piaus […] / Que trop par ot longues portees" ["an old skin cloak, / Which he had worn for a very long time"] (ll. 199-200) and the people who see him "L'escharnissoient et gaboient" ["Jeered and mocked him"] (l. 202).[123] Here, the hero's poverty is emphasised more than it is emphasised in *Lanval*.

In the beginning of Chestre's version of the story, Launfal is described as being wealthy and giving away gold, silver and rich clothes. The knight is known for his largesse: "Of alle the knyghtes of the Table Rounde, / So large ther nas noon yfounde / Be dayes ne be nyght." [Of all the knights of the Round Table, / There was none found so generous / Neither by day nor by night." (ll. 34-36). Largesse or generosity was viewed as an important knightly virtue.[124] Hazell explains that this virtue was the foundation of the social system of the courtly world and was used to "wield power, support or destroy relationships, and to maintain status, in addition to the pragmatic function of providing life's physical needs".[125] Although Launfal displays this largesse, and would be expected to be appreciated for it, Launfal's generosity is not rewarded. Indeed, the queen refrains from granting Launfal gifts–simply because Launfal disapproves of her promiscuity. Launfal's unfair treatment shows the limitations of medieval court; knights who practice with virtuous knightly behaviour are not rewarded.

When Launfal resides in the room in the orchard of the mayor of Karlyoun, he spends all his money and he falls into debt. The hero's poverty is described in more detail in *Sir Launfal* than in *Lanval* and *Graelent*, since Launfal even "fawtede hosyn and schon, / Clenly brech and scherte" [lacked hose and shoes, / Clean breeches and shirt] (ll. 200-201). The change in his

[122] Dinah Hazell, "The Blinding of Gwennere: Thomas Chestre as Social Critic," *Arthurian Literature* 20, 2003, p. 126.
[123] Burgess and Brook, eds. and trans., *French Arthurian Literature*, "Graelent," pp. 384-385.
[124] James T. Stewart, "Thomas Chestre's "Sir Launfal" and the Knight in Need," *Arthuriana* 25, no. 2, 2015, p. 116.
[125] Hazell, "The Blinding of Gwennere," p. 130.

reputation is emphasised when "Hys hors slod, and fel yn the fen, / Wherefore hym scornede many men / Abowte hym fer and wyde" [His horse slipped, and fell in the mud, / For this reason many men / About him far and wide / scorned him] (ll. 211-216). It is at this moment of decline that Launfal meets Lady Tryamour.

The hero in *Guingamor*, standing in sharp contrast to the heroes in the three other poems under discussion, does not become poor. When Guingamor is described at the beginning of the narrative, his generosity is emphasised: he "Biau sot promestre et bien doner, / Mol[t] ennoroit les chevaliers, / Les serjanz et les escuiers" ["made fair promises and gave generously, greatly honouring knights, men-at-arms and squires"] (ll. 18-20).[126] The queen proposes the dangerous quest for the white boar instead of refraining from giving Guingamor gifts after he rejects her love. Hence, *Guingamor* is less focused on the wealth of the hero than the other three lays.

Thus, *Lanval*, *Graelent* and *Sir Launfal* portray the poverty of their heroes as a consequence of the restrictions of the kings' courts. These restrictions are criticised in the three lays; it is clear that the knights are mistreated even though they show the correct behaviour. This mistreatment demonstrates the limitations of medieval courtly culture. As Chapter 2 argues, *Lanval* was written at the end of the twelfth century, *Graelent* somewhat later in the same century and *Sir Launfal* much later in the fourteenth century. As the date of composition proceeds, more emphasis is put on the hero's poverty. It can therefore be concluded that *Sir Launfal* emphasises the hero's poverty more powerfully than *Lanval* and *Graelent*, and *Graelent* more powerfully than *Lanval*.

The emphasis wealth inequality in *Sir Launfal*, which is notably more powerful than the depictions of inequality in *Lanval* and *Graelent*, may reflect the time in which *Sir Launfal* was composed. The poem was written during the Peasants' Revolt in England, when there were middle class uprisings in England due to socio-economic problems caused by, inter alia, the Black Death and high taxes.[127] During this period, conflicts surrounding the middle class and aristocracy were particularly pronounced. The marked tensions surrounding the wealth of the middle class in this period is reflected in *Sir Launfal*; it depicts such tensions more vividly than in the other versions of the *Lanval* story.

In *Guingamor*, the hero does not become poor and his wealth is not emphasised. One possible explanation for the difference from the other versions of the *Lanval* story could be the background of the lay. As Chapter 2 has shown, *Guingamor* is more influenced by Celtic

[126] Burgess and Brook, eds. and trans., *French Arthurian Literature*, "Guingamor," pp. 162-163.
[127] Nigel Saul, "The Great Revolt, 1381," in *Richard II*, Yale English Monarchs (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 56-61.

traditions than the other three lays. These Celtic traditions were more focused on magical and less on social critique regarding wealth, and may help to explain why *Guingamor* is relatively uninterested in the main character's wealth. *Guingamor*, then, stands in contrast to *Lanval*, *Graelent* and *Sir Launfal*, which are clearly concerned with directing social critique at the unequal distribution of wealth in their time periods.

### *Sexual wish fulfilment*

The scenes in the four lays in which the hero meets the fairy lady can themselves be seen as operating as forms of wish fulfilment.[128] Elizabeth Leet explains that these fairies style their bodies in a way that specifically attracts the male gaze.[129] The fairies whom the heroes in the lays meet, whether they reside in a fountain or a pavilion, are either almost or completely naked. The way that the fairies display themselves fulfils the heroes' sexual desires.

These scopophilic moments in the four lays do not remain parts of the imagination of the knights. The fairies also facilitate the sexual gratification of the love that the heroes feel for them.[130] Thus, their bodies are the first gifts that the knights receive from the fairies. Even though the heroes are all sexually satisfied in the lays, the way in which this gratification is received differs. The fairy ladies in *Lanval* and *Sir Launfal* are quite straightforward about their love. In *Lanval*, the fairy lady admits to the knight that she came from another land for him and she says: "Se uus estes pruz e curteis / Emperere ne quens ne reis / Not unkes tant ioie ne bien / Kar io uus aim sur tute rien" ["If you are brave and courtly, / no emperor or count or king / will ever have known such joy or good; / for I love you more than anything"] (ll. 113-116).[131] This form of wish fulfilment portrays the limits of the actual world by means of the comparison with emperors, counts and kings. Hence, there is no one in the actual world that would be as fortunate in love as Lanval.

Tryamour makes a similar remark to Launfal in Chestre's poem: "Ther nys no man yn Cristenté / That y love so moche as the, / Kyng neyther emperour!" [There is no man in Christendom / Whom I love so much as you / Neither king nor emperor!] (ll. 304-306). She also comments on his poverty by saying: "I wot thy stat, ord and ende; / Be naught aschamed of me!" [I know your situation, beginning and end / Be ashamed of nothing in my presence!] (ll. 314-315). Even though Launfal lost all his money, he is still worthy of Lady Tryamour's

[128] Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, p. 113.
[129] Elizabeth S. Leet, "Objectification, Empowerment, and the Male Gaze in the Lanval Corpus," *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 42, no. 1, 2016, p. 75.
[130] Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, pp. 113-114.
[131] De France, *Le Lai De Lanval*, p. 30; De France, *The Lais of Marie de France*, p. 108.

love; she even loves him more than anyone in the world. This comparison is similar to the one used in *Lanval*. The wish fulfilment of attaining Tryamour's love is the portrayal of the limitations of medieval society; there is no one in the real world that could be as fortunate in love as Launfal.

Unline the heroes in *Lanval* and *Sir Launfal*, the heroes in *Graelent* and *Guingamor* receive the fairies' love in a forced way. It seems that the knights demand the fairies to carry out their wish fulfilment. In both *Graelent* and *Guingamor*, the main character seizes the fairy's clothing while she is bathing in the fountain. Graelent will not even give her clothes back until she comes out of the fountain. The fairy lady is clearly upset with Graelent and judges him because of his poverty by saying: "Il n'avient pas a ton parage / D'amer fame de mon lignage." ["It is not fitting for someone of your lineage / To love a woman of my rank."] (ll. 287-288).[132] In this moment, the fairy lady is reluctant to grant Graelent sexual satisfaction, but he "A fet de li ce qu'il li plest" ["did with her what he pleased"] (l. 296) in the thick of the forest.[133] Accordingly, Graelent forces the fairy to give sexual gratification.

Guingamor, on the other hand, gives the fairy lady her clothing back when she asks him to. The fairy grants him her love afterwards. This deviation from the Lanval story in *Graelent* and *Guingamor* can be traced back to the stories' Celtic origins. The fountain scene is derived from the Celtic tradition, which contains stories in which a lady washes herself at a spring and is overpowered by a man and raped. Since the encounters with the fairy ladies in *Graelent* and *Guingamor* are different from the encounters with the fairy ladies in *Lanval* and *Sir Launfal*, the social critique that is enacted in *Lanval* and *Sir Launfal* is absent in these moments of sexual wish fulfilment in *Graelent* and *Guigamor*.

Sexual wish fulfilment is as an important element throughout *Lanval*, *Graelent* and *Sir Launfal*. In these three lays, the fairy lady of the lay promises to keep loving the knight whenever he wishes her to be with him. In *Lanval*, the fairy declares to the knight:

> Quant vus uodrez od mei parler
> Ja ne sauerez cel liu penser
> V nuls puist auer sa amie
> Sanz repreoce sanz uileinie
> Que ieo ne uus seie en present
> A fere tut uostre talent
> Nul humme fors vus ne me uerra
> Ne ma parole nen orra

[132] Burgess and Brook, eds. and trans., *French Arthurian Literature*, "Graelent," pp. 388-389.
[133] *Ibid*.

[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.] (ll. 163-170)[134]

Due to the way the fairy lady treats Lanval, Lanval feels as if he is more special than he ever was at Arthur's court. This sense of extraordinariness is depicted in *Graelent* and *Sir Launfal* as well. When the fairy lady offers her love to Graelent, she says: "Mort ert l'amor bone entre nos, / Nuit et jor serai pres de vos; / A moi poirrez rire et joer" ["The love between us will be very good, / Night and day I shall be near you / And you will be able to laugh and sport with me"] (ll. 321-323).[135] Lady Tryamour makes a similar promise to Launfal as the one Lanval receives:

Syr gentyl knyght,
And thou wylt speke wyth me any wyght,
  To a derne stede thou gon.
Well privyly I woll come to the
(No man alyve ne schall me se)
  As stylle as any ston.

[Sir noble knight,
If you wish to speak to me any time,
  Go to a secret place.
I will come to you very secretly
(No one alive shall see me)
  As still as any stone.] (ll. 352-357)

The, what at first seems extraordinary, sexual gratification that the knights receive from the fairy ladies can later, thus, be obtained whenever they wish to. Therefore, the fairies' promises can be seen as the ultimate forms of wish fulfilment. Since this sexual gratification is long-lasting, the benefits of the Otherworld are enhanced even more.

Hence, *Lanval* and *Sir Launfal* depict the limitations of courtly culture by describing the love between the hero and the fairy as a love that would be unattainable in the real world. *Graelent* and *Guingamor* do not enact this type of social critique; the heroes in these poems force the fairies to give them their love. The limitations of courtly culture are highlighted even

[134] De France, *Le Lai De Lanval*, pp. 34-36; De France, *The Lais of Marie de France*, p. 109.
[135] Burgess and Brook, eds. and trans., *French Arthurian Literature*, "Graelent," pp. 390-391.

more in *Lanval*, *Graelent* and *Sir Launfal* by the long-lasting sexual gratification that the heroes obtain.

### *The fairy's gifts*

The sexual gratification provided by the fairies in the lays results in more forms of wish fulfilment. At the beginning of the lays, the knights do not obtain expected gifts of wealth at their kings' courts. In sharp contrast, the knights receive everything they desire in the fairy world. This contrast between the actual world and the Otherworld enacts a form of social critique by demonstrating the limitations of the king's court and, through it, the contemporary medieval court. This contrast is significant when it is connected to the poverty of Lanval, Graelent and Launfal. According to Cross, the type of gifts bestowed by the fairy upon her lover differs to conform to the social milieu in which the stories appear.[136] Accordingly, the fairy gives the knight the items that are most desired by contemporary medieval upper class.

The fairy ladies of *Lanval*, *Graelent* and *Sir Launfal* provide gifts of medieval socio-economic aid.[137] As a consequence, the three knights rapidly rise in their chivalric worlds. The socio-economic value of the gifts increases in *Lanval*, *Graelent* and *Sir Launfal* respectively. The lay of *Lanval* does not specify Lanval's gifts. The fairy lady does promise Lanval that he "Ja cele rien ne uudra mes / Que il nen ait a sun talent / Doinst e despende largement / Ele li trouerat asez" ["would never again want anything, / he would receive as he desired; / however generously he might give and spend, / she would provide what he needed"] (ll. 136-139).[138] Afterwards, Lanval shows his largesse by spending his wealth and granting many gifts; "Ni ot estrange ne priue / A ki lanual nen ust done" ["There was no stranger or friend / to whom Lanval didn't give"] (ll. 213-214).[139]

Unlike Lanval's gifts, Graelent's gifts are described explicitly. Graelent is offered "Deniers et dras, or et argent" ["Money and clothing, gold and silver"] (l. 320) in great abundance and he receives the fairy's servant and her pure white horse.[140] Furthermore, the servant frees Graelent of his debt to Graelent's host. Due to this specification of the gifts in *Graelent*, the socio-economic value of the gifts is highlighted more than it is highlighted in *Lanval*. After Graelent receives these luxurious gifts, he acts according to the knightly code that

[136] Cross, "The Celtic Elements in the Lays of *Lanval* and *Graelent*," p. 630.
[137] Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, p. 138.
[138] De France, *Le Lai De Lanval*, p. 32; De France, *The Lais of Marie de France*, pp. 108-109.
[139] De France, *Le Lai De Lanval*, p. 38; De France, *The Lais of Marie de France*, p. 111.
[140] Burgess and Brook, eds. and trans., *French Arthurian Literature*, "Graelent," pp. 390-391.

he is supposed to follow. This code involves the virtue of largesse, so Graelent spends his wealth by giving it to others.

Launfal receives gifts that are similar to the ones that Graelent obtains. Lady Tryamour grants him "an alner / Ymad of sylk and of gold cler" [a purse / Made of silk and bright gold] (ll. 319-320) which gives him a mark of gold every time he puts his hand in it, as well as her loyal steed Blaunchard, her servant Gyfre and a banner of her coat-of-arms. She also promises him: "In werre ne yn turnement / Ne schall the greve no knyghtes dent, / So well y schall the save" [In war or tournament / No knight's blow shall harm you, / I shall save you so well" (ll. 331-333). The never-empty purse emphasises the socio-economic value of the fairy's gifts. This value is highlighted more in *Sir Launfal* than in *Lanval* and *Graelent*. The servant Gyfre repays all Launfal's debts and Launfal, because of his largesse, holds rich feasts and grants many people gifts.

In these three lays, the knights receive the wealth they did not obtain in the courts of their kings. The socio-economic aid that the fairies provide, which is accompanied by erotic favours, represents the ultimate wish fulfilment of the medieval upper class. Wade argues that the audience of these lays presumably included landless young men who were bachelors, just like Lanval, Graelent and Launfal.[141] These bachelors probably were frustrated socially, economically and sexually and the fantasy of the fairy ladies in the lays would have presented, as stated by Wade, "an imaginative solution to all such frustrations".[142] These frustrations would have probably been greater in the time when *Sir Launfal* was written, due to the socio-economic problems caused by the Peasants' Revolt and the Black Death in the fourteenth century. Socio-economic problems like these were not pronounced as clearly at the end of the twelfth century, when *Lanval* and *Graelent* were written. Given the differing economic environments in which these lays were written, it would make sense that the socio-economic aid that Lady Tryamour provides in *Sir Launfal* is more pronounced than that provided by the fairy ladies in *Lanval* and *Graelent*.

Additionally, a contrast is established between the noble behaviour of the knights and the unfavourable behaviour of the king or queen. The socio-economic wish fulfilment in these lays encourages the right type of knightly behaviour, which is generosity. Due to the focus on the knights' largesse, the malevolence of the king and queen is emphasised in the lays. Thus, *Lanval*, *Graelent* and *Guingamor* demonstrate the problems with medieval kings and queens who behave unjustly.

[141] Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, p. 137.
[142] *Ibid*., p. 137.

*Guingamor*, however, does not revolve around the same type of wish fulfilment as the other three lays. Apart from the sexual wish fulfilment that Guingamor receives, which is not stated explicitly, the only wishes the fairy lady fulfils are the repossession of the king's brachet and the obtainment of the white boar. These gifts do not provide socio-economic aid and can actually be viewed as negative. Because Guingamor agrees to the fairy's proposal to come with her to the Otherworld, he stays there for three hundred years rather than three days. He does not benefit from the gifts of the white boar and the brachet, because everyone he knows in his own world has died. In his desire for honour, he accepts gifts that result in the abandonment of his own world.[143] He has to return to the Otherworld and he could not have stayed in his own land even if he had wanted to. Therefore, the positive sexual wish fulfilment by the fairy in *Guingamor* transforms into a forced life in the fairy world for the hero.

In *Guingamor*, the wish fulfilment belongs to the narrative elements rather than that it enacts social critique of the medieval court. This difference from other versions of the *Lanval* story could reflect the influence of Celtic traditions on *Guingamor*. As Chapter 2 argues, *Guingamor* appears to be marked by more Celtic influence than *Lanval*, *Graelent* and *Sir Launfal*. These Celtic traditions could have been less concerned with enacting a social critique and more concerned with depicting the supernatural. This greater Celtic influence might explain why the wealth of the hero is not emphasised in *Guingamor*. Therefore, the social critique on the limitations of the medieval court that is prominent in the other three lays is not portrayed in *Guingamor*.

As this chapter has explained, the gifts in *Lanval*, *Graelent* and *Sir Launfal* aid the knights on a socio-economic level. The socio-economic value of these gifts is highlighted more in *Graelent* than it is highlighted in *Lanval*; this value is highlighted even more in *Sir Launfal* than it is highlighted in *Lanval* and *Graelent*. The fairies' gifts represent the ultimate wish fulfilment of the medieval upper class, including landless young bachelors. These gifts underline the limitations of courtly culture; the knights would not have been able to attain their excessive wealth in the real world. This chapter has also shown that the generous behaviour of the knights in *Lanval*, *Graelent* and *Sir Launfal* demonstrate problems with the unjustly behaviour of medieval kings and queens. Presumably owing to its Celtic influences, *Guingamor* is not concerned with socio-economic wish fulfilment provided by the fairy as the other three lays are.

[143] Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, p. 144.

## CHAPTER 5 – THE FAIRY TABOO

In the lays under discussion, the heroes do not obtain the wish fulfilment examined in the previous chapter in any straightforward manner. The fairies' gifts and sexual favours are accompanied by the imposition of taboos. Wade explains that heroes in medieval romances can never sufficiently reciprocate the gifts the fairies bestow upon them, because a human can never attain a fairy's wealth in the human world.[144] He argues that the gift that the heroes return is the correct fulfilment of the conditions of a taboo.[145] This taboo revolves around the heroes' ability to not speak of the love with the fairy. The taboo appears out of balance with the gifts; the fairy lady's favours are exceedingly more valuable than the uncomplicated and undemanding taboo.[146] Therefore, taboos frequently seem illogical and arbitrary. Nevertheless, as Byrne explains, that the taboos question straightforward wish fulfilment by highlighting the limits of this wish fulfilment.[147] With the imposition of a taboo, the fairy proves that the fulfilled wishes are unattainable in the actual world. Thus, the taboo underlines the limitations of the medieval court. This chapter will show that the breaking of the fairy's promise and the consequences thereof depict other forms of social critique.

### *The taboo*

In *Lanval*, *Graelent* and *Sir Launfal* the fairy lady prohibits the hero from speaking or boasting of their love. Neil Cartlidge argues that this prohibition could be seen as a reflection of a principle that was key to the court at the time: that a noble lover should not betray his lady's name.[148] The taboo thus reflects a rule of romantic etiquette. After the fairy lady grants Lanval the gifts of wealth, she clarifies the conditions of her generosity:

> Ami fet ele ore vus chasti
> Si uus comant e si vus pri
> Ne uus descouerez a nul humme
> De ceo vus dirai ia la summe
> A tuz iurs mauriez perdue
> Si ceste amur esteit seue
> James ne me purriez ueeir

[144] Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, p. 115.
[145] *Ibid*.
[146] *Ibid*.
[147] Byrne, "Fairy Lovers," p. 105.
[148] Cartlidge, Neil. "The Fairies in the Fountain: Promiscuous Liaisons," in *The Exploitations of Medieval Romance*, ed. by Laura Ashe, Ivana Djordjevic and Judith Weiss (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2010), p. 21.

Ne de mun cors seisine aueir

["Love," she said, "I admonish you now,
I command and beg you,
do not let any man know about this
I shall tell you why:
you would lose me for good
if this love were known;
you would never see me again
or possess my body."] (ll. 143-150)[149]

The fairy emphasises the sexual fulfilment of their relationship: if Lanval breaks his promise, he will not receive sexual gratification by her anymore. This lay is the only one that highlights the sexual element of the relationship in the imposition of the taboo.

The fairy in *Graelent*, on the other hand, refers to the fact that the hero forced himself upon her when she imposes the taboo. She says: "Graalant, vos m'avez surprise, / Je vos aim enterinement, / Mes une chose vos desfent: / Que ne dites parole aperte / Dont nostre amor soit descoverte" ["Graelent, you took me by surprise, / I love you most sincerely. But I forbid you one thing: / That you should say anything openly / Through which our love could be discovered"] (ll. 314-318).[150] This remark can be traced back to Cartlidge's argument on the rules of romantic etiquette. Graelent has taken the fairy's love by force, and he should now act as a noble lover and not speak of their love, otherwise the fairy's reputation would be ruined.

The lays of *Lanval* and *Graelent* seem to enact an exaggerated version of the more traditional courtly love conventions. These conventions called for socially respectable people to keep their love affairs hidden. These conventions developed under the influence of the queen consort of France and England, Eleanor of Aquitaine, whose influence was decisive in the transmission of the concept of courtly love across Europe.[151] It could be suggested that *Lanval* and *Graelent* enact critique toward Eleanor of Aquitaine in particular, because she was the queen consort in the time these lays were written. Chapter 2 explains that *Lanval* was presumably composed between 1160 and 1199 and *Graelent* between the end of the twelfth century and the first decades of the thirteenth century. Eleanor of Aquitaine was queen consort of France from 1137 to 1152 and queen consort of England between 1154 and 1189. Therefore, the exaggeration of the courtly love conventions in *Lanval* and *Graelent* could depict critique

[149] De France, *Le Lai De Lanval*, pp. 32-34; De France, *The Lais of Marie de France*, p. 108.
[150] Burgess and Brook, eds. and trans., *French Arthurian Literature*, "Graelent," pp. 388-391.
[151] "Courtly love," *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, Britannica Academic, 8 Jan. 2020. academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/courtly-love/26618. Accessed 29 May. 2021.

on the contemporary queen consort and the highly conventionalised code that she brought with her.

The taboo in *Sir Launfal* is more focused on the economic value of the revelation of the love between the fairy lady and Launfal than the taboos in *Lanval* and *Graelent*. Lady Tryamour tells her lover:

> "But of o thyng, Syr Knyght, I warne the,
> That thou make no bost of me
> For no kennes mede!
> And yf thou doost, I warny the before,
> All my love thou hast forlore!"
>
> [But of one thing I warn you, Sir Knight,
> That you make no boast of me
> For no kind of reward!
> And if you do, I warn you as before
> You have utterly lost all my love!] (ll. 361-365)

Lady Tryamour realises that Launfal is prone to falling for rewards because he is so eager to be accepted like the other knights at Arthur's court. She insists that the knight should not boast of their love, even if he gains a reward for it.

Cross explains that taboos to remain silent about love are common in the Offended Fée stories. These types of taboos are used in *Lanval*, *Graelent* and *Sir Launfal*. He argues that these taboos reflect the medieval system of prohibitions in which the societies of the lays were entangled.[152] In medieval society–and its courtly culture in particular–, people were limited in what they could or could not do. The fairy's taboo expresses these limitations. The taboos in *Lanval* and *Graelent* are focused on courtly love, which was a code of conduct with particular rules, and thus limitations. The sexual gratification stressed in *Lanval* and the focus on being a noble lover in *Graelent* are both elements of courtly love. Both poems are concerned with the limitations that courtly love brought upon the aristocracy.

In contrast with *Lanval* and *Graelent*, *Sir Launfal* is more concerned with middle class prohibitions. The taboo in *Sir Launfal* emphasises socio-economic value; this value highlights Launfal's need for wealth. This significance of the hero's wealth could be explained by the events of the time period in which the lay was written. As was explained in Chapter 4, *Sir Launfal* was written during the Peasant's Revolt in England. One of the conflicts surrounding the middle class and aristocracy that became increasingly pronounced during the Peasants'

[152] Cross, "The Celtic Elements in the Lays of *Lanval* and *Graelent*," p. 622.

Revolt was the disproportionate distribution of wealth. It is therefore not surprising that Chestre depicts the need for wealth by the middle class in his lay. Although the details of the fairies' impositions differ between the lays, the aim of the taboo is the same in the three narratives. Even with the help of a fairy, the knights' wishes cannot be fulfilled unproblematically. The taboos, then, portray the limitations of the medieval court; they show that the wishes of the medieval aristocracy were inaccessible.

The result of the breaking of the promise to the fairy is clear in the three aforementioned lays: the love of the fairy will be lost. However, the breaking of the taboo has other results in *Guingamor* than in the other three lays. In *Guingamor*, the fairy's taboo does not revolve around not speaking of their love; it is fixed on not eating or drinking in the real world. When Guingamor wants to return to his own world to present the white boar's head to his king, the fairy mistress says to him:

> 'Je vos chasti,
> Quant la riviere avrez passee
> Por rale ren vostre contree,
> Que ne bevez ne ne mengiez
> Por nule fain que voz aiez,
> Desi que serez reperiez;
> Toste en series engingniez.'
>
> ['I warn you,
> When you have crossed over the river
> To return to your own country
> Do not eat or drink
> However hungry you may feel
> Until you have returned here;
> You would soon come to grief.'] (ll. 564-570)[153]

Guingamor knows something bad will happen to him if he eats or drinks in the real world, but he does not know what exactly will happen. The fairy's taboo does not have anything to do with their love; it is only a warning to make sure Guingamor does not age rapidly. Therefore, the taboo in *Guingamor* does not imply courtly love or socio-economic limitations as in *Lanval*, *Graelent* and *Sir Launfal*. In *Guingamor*, the taboo does not enact a form of social critique.

[153] Burgess and Brook, eds. and trans., *French Arthurian Literature*, "Guingamor," pp. 186-187.

*The queen's advances*

As Chapter 2 has shown, a scene resembling the Biblical episode of Potiphar's wife is used in all four lays. In these episodes, the queen proclaims her love for the hero and gets rejected. In *Lanval*, *Graelent* and *Sir Launfal*, the queen is the one who provokes the hero to break his promise to the fairy mistress. In *Lanval*, the queen seduces the hero after he has met the fairy lady. Lanval tries to reject the queen's advances by claiming that he wants to remain loyal to his king, but when the queen accuses him of being homosexual, Lanval breaks his promise to the fairy queen. He proclaims: "Mes io aim si sui amis / Cele ke deit auer le pris / Sur tutes celes que ieo sai" ["I love and I am loved / by the one who should have the prize / over all the women I know."] (ll. 293-295).[154] As if this remark does not insult the queen enough, Lanval also says:

> Vne de celes ke la sert
> Tute la plus poure meschine
> Vaut meuz de vus dame reine
> De corse de uis e de beaute
> Denseignement e de bunte
>
> [any one of those who serve her,
> the poorest girl of all
> is better than you, my lady queen,
> in body, face, and beauty,
> in breeding and in goodness.] (ll. 298-302)[155]

By stating that even the poorest handmaid of the fairy lady is better than the queen, Lanval offends his queen severely. The queen's supremacy is called into question by this statement. Moreover, the statement shows the limitations of Arthur's court. If the queen, who is thought to be the most beautiful of all women, cannot compete with a handmaid from the Otherworld, the women from the real world are worth nothing in terms of beauty, courtesy and kindness.

In contrast with the queen's seduction in *Lanval*, the queen's seduction in *Graelent* takes place before the hero encounters the fairy mistress. She proclaims her love for the knight, but he refuses by giving a speech on what love is supposed to be like. After Graelent meets the fairy lady, he returns of the king's court, where the king exhibits his wife in front of everyone so that they can praise her beauty. Since the queen is in love with Graelent, it strikes her that Graelent is the only one who does not praise her. When Graelent is confronted with his behaviour, he

[154] De France, *Le Lai De Lanval*, p. 46; De France, *The Lais of Marie de France*, p. 113.
[155] *Ibid*.

gives direct critique on the king and his court. He declares that the king is acting outrageously and he says to the king: "De ta fame fez mostroison" ["You are making a spectacle of your wife"] (l. 479).[156] Graelent does not agree with the custom of medieval society that forces everyone to pay tribute to the queen's beauty.[157] This declaration is the only explicitly stated social critique that is given in all four lays discussed here. Because it is explicitly stated, the critique given in this seduction scene of *Graelent* is more powerful than the critique given in the seduction scene of *Lanval*. Graelent also insults the queen herself, by asserting that "Qu'en puet assez trover plus bele" ["One can easily find someone more beautiful"] (l. 484) than the queen.[158] The queen is not even the most beautiful woman there is, since the fairy mistress clearly surpasses her beauty. Accordingly, the queen's supremacy is called into question.

*Guingamor* deviates from *Lanval* and *Graelent*; the promise to the fairy lady is not broken because of the queen. This lay does involve the Potiphar's wife episode, but it takes place at the beginning of the narrative. Because Guingamor rejects the queen's advances, she proposes the quest for the white boar so that Guingamor will leave court. The queen's promiscuity is implicitly criticised in this scene. After the queen's proposal for the white boar, the queen does not return in the narrative. Guingamor forgets his promise to the fairy lady just because he is extremely hungry when he is back in his own land.

The scene of the queen's seduction in *Sir Launfal* mostly mirrors the one in *Lanval*. Much like Lanval, Launfal rejects the queen because he does not want to be disloyal to his king. Guinevere and Lanval's queen react similarly: Guinevere accuses Launfal of being homosexual. This accusation causes Launfal to reveal his relationship with Lady Tryamour. The knight says to the queen: "I have loved a fayryr woman / Than thou ever leydest thyn ey upon" [I have loved a fairer woman / Than you have ever laid your eye upon] (ll. 694-695). Like in *Lanval* and *Graelent*, the supremacy of the queen is called into question and the queen is insulted because the fairy queen is way more beautiful than her.

In all four lays, social critique can be found in the scenes where the queen seduces the hero. Adultery–and, in particular, adultery performed by women–was condemned in the Middle Ages.[159] In general, promiscuous behaviour leads to adultery; the queens in the four lays would have committed adultery if the heroes did not refuse their advances. Since the queens' promiscuity is described critically in all the lays, it can be suggested that a negative view on

[156] Burgess and Brook, eds. and trans., *French Arthurian Literature*, "Graelent," pp. 396-397.
[157] *Ibid*., p. 368.
[158] Burgess and Brook, eds. and trans., *French Arthurian Literature*, "Graelent," pp. 396-397.
[159] Vern L. Bullough, "Medieval Concepts of Adultery," *Arthuriana* 7, no. 4, 1997, p. 5.

women, queens especially, who behave promiscuously existed throughout the Middle Ages in both England and France.

The critical view of promiscuity in *Lanval*, *Graelent* and *Guingamor* might reflect critique toward Eleanor of Aquitaine. As was examined earlier in this chapter, Eleanor of Aquitaine ruled around the time the poems *Lanval*, *Graelent* and *Guingamor* were written. Peggy McCracken points out that it was rumoured that Eleanor of Aquitaine was entangled in an adulterous relationship with her uncle Raymond of Antioch when she was married to King Louis VII of France.[160] The critique in these lays that is directed at the queens' promiscuity could be connected to the rumours of Eleanor of Aquitaine's adultery.

The fairy lady contributes to the negative image of the queen, because, as Hazell explains, she is the antithesis of the queen.[161] The fairy lady is loyal and generous and the queen lacks these virtues. Byrne points out that the fairy mistresses also offer sexual intercourse to the heroes without the commitment of marriage or negative consequences; the queen would never be able to offer this type of gratification.[162] The queen and the fairy lady are implicitly contrasted in *Guingamor* and explicitly contrasted in *Lanval*, *Graelent* and *Sir Launfal*. These contrasts depict the limitations of the medieval court: idealised relationships–relationships that resemble the relationships between the knights and fairies–cannot be obtained in the real world. The fairy ladies surpass the queens in every way. As a result, the supremacy of medieval queens is called into question.

### *The disappearance of the fairy's gifts*

The performance of the fairy's taboo results in the lays in the disappearance of her favours. The important elements of the taboos, either courtly love or socio-economic value, reoccur in the disappearance of the fairies' gifts. When Lanval realises he has lost the fairy's love, he is devastated. He "crie cent feiz merci / Que ele parlot a sun ami / Sun quor e sa buche maudit / Ceo est merueille kil ne socit" ["cried a hundred times for her to have mercy / and speak to her love. / He cursed his heart and his mouth; / it's a wonder he didn't kill himself"] (ll. 343-346).[163] The emphasis here is on Lanval's misery due the love he has lost. The courtly love conventions are exaggerated in this scene. This exaggeration may reflect a critical view of the limitations of the highly conventionalised code that the aristocracy had to follow.

[160] Peggy McCracken, "Introduction: Defining Queenship in Medieval Europe," in *The Romance of Adultery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 1.
[161] Hazell, "The Blinding of Gwennere," p. 125.
[162] Byrne, "Fairy Lovers," p. 99.
[163] De France, *Le Lai De Lanval*, p. 50; De France, *The Lais of Marie de France*, p. 114.

Graelent's agony is also highlighted: "D'ire et de mautalent tressue; / Il est bien droiz qu'a mal li tort" [He was perspiring from distress and anger; / He deserved to be in this sorry plight"] (ll. 508-509).[164] When Graelent returns to his lodging, he discovers that his chamberlain is gone. Afterwards he is devastated and "Miex vosist estre morz que vis" ["He would rather be dead than alive"] (l. 533).[165] Just like Lanval, Graelent thinks about taking his own life. This time, the hero is also mournful due to the loss of his servant, but this loss is not given much attention. *Graelent* draws heavily on the depiction of the loss of a courtly lover in *Lanval* in this scene; Graelent is just as grief-stricken as Lanval. Because of the same exaggeration of courtly love conventions as in *Lanval*, the code of courtly love is criticised in *Graelent*. This scene shows that the aristocracy was limited due to this code.

Guingamor does not lose the fairy's favours, but ages rapidly as soon as he forgets the fairy's taboo and eats apples in his own world. He became "de son cors si afoibliz / Que du cheval l'estut cheoir; Ne pot ne pié ne main avoir" ["so enfeebled in body / That he could not help falling from his horse; / He could not use his hands or his feet"] (ll. 646-648).[166] This rapid ageing can be seen as a depiction of the restraints of the courtly world. Due to the simple restriction of not eating, Guingamor would not be able to live in his own world. Since Guingamor ages rapidly, he is simply not able to remain in his own world. Therefore, the courtly world is portrayed as a place that is unsuitable to live in; the Otherworld is the only place in which Guingamor will be able to live.

In *Sir Launfal*, misery about the loss of a courtly lover is replaced by devastation about the loss of wealth. The return to his chamber after he has broken his promise to Lady Tryamour is described as follows:

> He lokede yn hys alner,
> That fond hym spendyng all plener,
> Whan that he hadde nede,
> And ther nas noon, for soth to say;
> And Gyfre was yryde away
> Up Blaunchard, hys stede.
> All that he hadde before ywonne,
> Hyt malt as snow ayens the sunne,
>
> [He looked in his purse,
> Where he usually found spending money plentiful,
> Whenever he had none,

[164] Burgess and Brook, eds. and trans., *French Arthurian Literature*, "Graelent," pp. 398-399.
[165] *Ibid*.
[166] Burgess and Brook, eds. and trans., *French Arthurian Literature*, "Guingamor," pp. 190-191.

And there was none, to say truthfully;
And Gyfre had ridden away
  Upon Blaunchard, his steed.
All that he had won before,
It melted away as snow under the sun,] (ll. 733-740)

As A. C. Spearing explains, the emptiness of Launfal's purse and the departure of Gyfre and Blaunchard is highlighted more profoundly than the absence of Launfal's lover.[167] The fairy is the only one who can provide wealth for the knight and Launfal is distraught after he loses the fairy's gifts. Again, the hero's need for wealth is emphasised which shows the ongoing wealth conflict between the middle class and the aristocracy in fourteenth century England.

The scenes where the fairies gifts disappear depict a difference in the societal concerns of the times in which the lays were composed. Even though the knights in *Lanval* and *Graelent* also lose wealth due to the violation of the taboo, they are mostly focused on the loss of their love. The aristocracy of England and France in the twelfth century was primarily concerned with courtly love, its conventions and the limitations that came with it. *Lanval* and *Graelent* were written in social milieus where French culture flourished. These two lays are focused on courtly love, which is an important element of French culture. *Lanval* and *Graelent* exaggerate the conventions of courtly love and, thus, criticise the limitations that were caused for the aristocracy by the code. *Sir Launfal* shows that people in fourteenth-century England were more concerned with wealth rather than with courtly love. This time period witnessed the Peasants' Revolt and the Black Death; both these events magnified the tensions and unequal distribution of wealth between the middle class and the aristocracy. It could therefore be expected that *Sir Launfal* is more concerned with the loss of the hero's wealth than *Lanval* and *Graelent*.

[167] A. C. Spearing, "Marie de France and Her Middle English Adapters," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, The New Chaucer Society, Volume 12, 1990, p. 153.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored the ways in which fairies and their worlds enact social critique in four interconnected Breton lays: *Lanval*, *Graelent*, *Guingamor* and *Sir Launfal*. As this thesis has shown, fairies occupied an ambiguous position in medieval culture. Pre-Conquest elves, which can on some levels be seen as an early type of fairy, had a negative reputation; for example, they were believed to cause mysterious diseases. However, in other contexts such as Old English glosses they were associated with femininity, beauty and the supernatural. In the later Middle Ages, fairies were demonised by the Church, but also came to be depicted in a positive way in romances. In these texts, fairies were used as vehicles for wish fulfilment by providing sexual gratification and great wealth. However, taboos are also imposed by fairies, and these taboos demonstrate the limitations of courtly culture.

The lays of *Lanval*, *Graelent*, *Guingamor* and *Sir Launfal* all revolve around a fairy who becomes the mistress of a mortal knight and imposes a taboo on him, which he breaks, following the loss of the mistress' love. As this thesis has shown, the four lays draw on the same story and are therefore interconnected. Marie de France's *Lanval* is considered the first recorded version of the story. However, it does not seem to have been original; it presumably draws on a source that includes a scene with a fairy in a fountain. *Graelent* and *Guingamor* make use of this fountain scene, but also draw extensively on *Lanval*. Both Old French poems are influenced by Celtic traditions; Celtic sources are used more heavily in *Guingamor* than in *Graelent*. Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal* uses another Middle English version of *Lanval* and *Graelent* as its sources.

Written in the twelfth century, a period that witnessed the emergence of a mercantile middle class, *Lanval*, *Graelent* and *Guingamor* reflect growing tensions between the middle class and the aristocracy. *Sir Launfal* was written in the fourteenth century, when the conflicts between these classes were even more pronounced and, as this thesis has shown, such conflicts are also more pronounced in the poem. In the four lays, extensive descriptions of fairies and fairyland are used as a device to create a suspension of disbelief. Accordingly, the fairy world functions as an adoxic space that can reflect upon establishments such as courtly culture. The fairy world is described as wealthy in *Lanval*, more wealthy in *Guingamor*, and even more wealthy in *Sir Launfal*. The richness of the Otherworld is used as a form of social critique to depict the limitations of courtly culture and the conflicts between the middle class and aristocracy. *Sir Launfal* enhances this richness by making references to the "wonders of the East".

The fairy ladies are portrayed following the *descriptio* tradition in all four lays. They surpass the queens in terms of beauty. In *Lanval*, *Graelent* and *Sir Launfal*, the richness of the fairy ladies' appearances is described extensively. These excessive depictions stand in powerful contrast to the depictions of the courts, and thus show that the wealth of the aristocracy is limited. Therefore, descriptions of fairies and fairyland in the lays operate as critiques against the limitations of courtly culture, and they reflect increasingly pronounced conflicts between the middle class and the aristocracy.

The fairies are used as vehicles for wish fulfilment in the four lays. In *Lanval*, *Graelent* and *Sir Launfal* the heroes' poverty as a consequence of the restrictions of the court is emphasised at the beginning of the narratives. The hero's poverty is highlighted most strongly in *Sir Launfal*, due to the unequal distribution of wealth between the aristocracy and middle class caused by the Peasants' Revolt. The fairies provide sexual wish fulfilment as well as gifts for the heroes. These gifts of the fairy in *Lanval, Graelent* and *Sir Launfal* conform to the social milieus in which the stories appear. At the time *Sir Launfal* was written, conflicts between the middle class and aristocracy were more pronounced than in the periods *Lanval* and *Graelent* were composed. Perhaps owing to its Celtic influences, the wish fulfilment in *Guingamor* is adapted to the narrative elements instead of enacting social critique on the medieval court.

The fairy's taboos portray the limitations of medieval courtly culture. The taboos in *Lanval* and *Graelent* are concerned with the limitations of the aristocracy. These limitations are pronounced through the conventions of courtly love, which was an important code in the twelfth century. The conventions of this code are exaggerated in the lays; this exaggeration draws attention to these conventions and, in doing so, highlights their excess. One aspect of courtly love, promiscuity, is also criticised in the lays. This critique happens in all four lays when the queen tries to seduce the hero. This critique in *Lanval*, *Graelent* and *Guingamor* could be linked to queen consort Eleanor of Aquitaine, who was rumoured to be involved in an adulterous relationship. *Sir Launfal* is, on the other hand, concerned with the limitations of the middle class. Chestre portrays the unequal distribution of wealth between the middle class and aristocracy by emphasising the socio-economic value of the taboo and the loss of the hero's wealth.

In short, the fairies in *Lanval, Graelent, Guingamor* and *Sir Launfal* enact social critique concerning the increasingly pronounced conflicts between the middle class and aristocracy. The lays criticise the limitations of the medieval court and its culture. In *Sir Launfal*, these conflicts are more pronounced than in the other lays; its more pronounced interest in these conflicts may reflect the more fraught social circumstances at the time that the lay was written. These findings

illustrate that fairies were not simply stock figures within late medieval romance, but enacted a powerful social critique. Moreover, the findings show that studying fairies has much to offer for shedding light on the kinds of political, social and cultural conflict that appears in medieval literary works.

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