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Lady in Shining Armor: Character Analysis on Lanval’s mistress in Marie de France’s “Lanval”

Marie de France’s “Lanval” tells the story of Lanval, his mistress, and their love affair in King Arthur’s Camelot. Lanval’s mistress embodies a traditional woman; she is at Lanval’s beck and call, she is beautiful, and she is a gentlewoman. Considering that Lanval’s mistress does not even have a name, one may think that she is a typical submissive lover whose sole purpose in life is pleasuring Lanval. Her actions, however, show her acting for her own needs and being the ultimate control in the relationship. Lanval’s mistress is written as the ideal woman, a woman who seems to exist for filling man’s needs, yet she is written as the dominant force in the relationship. De France’s interpretation of the mistress tells the audience that while the ideal woman is strong, the ideal woman and the man who allows her to be strong do not belong in the real world, that their strange relationship is as fantastical as the mistress.

Lanval’s mistress’s characterization in the poem is partially devoted to painting her as not only the ideal lady, but everyman’s fantasy. She is available to Lanval whenever he wishes to have her, and will only arrive on his command. Lanval’s mistress will, in essence, appear only when he wants to have sex and will never bother him when he does not want her (de France 160-170). His lover is also unearthly beautiful, the description of her written as though she were the epitome of feminine beauty. “There was none more beautiful in the world… Her body was elegant, her hips slim, her neck whiter than snow on a branch, her eyes bright, her face white, a beautiful mouth, a well-set nose, dark eyebrows and an elegant forehead, her hair curly and rather blond; golden wire does not shine like her hair in the light” (de France 550, 563-570). By painting the girl as the ideal woman for the knight, de France manipulates the reader into believing that the girl is not overstepping her bounds as an Arthurian woman.

Despite the surface characterization of the woman as simply an obedient, pretty woman, the girl is the one in control in her and Lanval’s relationship, acting as the driving force from beginning to end. Their relationship is fairly formulaic: one is summoned by the other, and having arrived, is courted and given riches to the extent that they could want for nothing. The courter makes their lover submit to their rule without question. The lover returns and a person of power attempts to seduce them, which the lover vehemently refuses. In doing so, the lover breaks their courter’s rule and is doomed to die until their courter rescues them, taking them away to live in harmony. What Marie de France does is break the formula by making the beautiful lady the symbolic knight in shining armor and making the actual knight the lover.

The girl takes control of the relationship, setting the rules for Lanval to follow on the pain of never seeing her again. She uses Lanval’s poverty to control him by providing him with insane wealth to the extent that “he would never again want for anything, he would receive as he desired… she would provide what he needed. Now Lanval is well cared for” (de France 136-140). The woman being wealthier than the man and the woman providing the man with financial security turns tradition on its head. After Lanval has received her body and her wealth, the girl commands him to never speak of her to anyone to which Lanval submits fully (de France 143-152). When Lanval goes against his mistress’s command, he is emotionally distraught at her absence, crying and calling out to her (de France 333-346). Lanval is doomed to die until his lover arrives on horseback to rescue and take him away, ironically making the girl the archetypal heroic knight on horseback. The girl is the savior of this story and the power behind their love despite her being a woman.

The mistress is the ideal woman, beautiful and obedient, but she is also empowered. Lanval may unbothered by this duality, but the poem suggests that such a woman cannot realistically exist in Lanval’s world or the real world. The girl’s insane wealth and unsurpassable beauty suggest that she is not human at all, but a magical creature. This would make de France’s suggestion that women can be in power acceptable as the woman in question could not exist in the real world. Even so, they are still not acceptable to reside in Camelot, so in the poems closing lines, the girl takes Lanval and herself to Avalon. She and Lanval are free to live out their lives in harmony, but so long as they are away from people. De France makes her point clear: a relationship wherein the woman is in power can only exist in secret.

In Marie de France’s “Lanval”, de France presents a fantasy woman, a beautiful maid who will appear to have sex, anytime and anywhere. Not only that, the woman showers her lover with wealth beyond necessity. The ideal woman but on the flipside, she is in control of the man, she is the provider, she makes the rules, and she saves the man from death. De France asks the question that if a woman is perfect but empowered, what is to become of her and her lover? The answer is that they can be together, but they cannot exist with others. Their kind of love is beautiful, but it is forbidden. If one is willing to leave all else behind, then this love can exist. In essence, a love like this, a lady like this can never practically exist in reality. A story like this is best left as a fairytale.

Works Cited:

De France, Marie. “Lanval.” *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*. Ed. Martin Puchner. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013. 1032-1045. Print.