**When You Can’t Win, It's How You Play The Game:**

**Power and the Guinevere Motif in *The Knight of the Cart* and *Lanval***

For a medieval knight, victory was straightforward: if he performed well in battle and obeyed the rules of chivalry, he was victorious. But victory is always fragmentary for the Guineveres portrayed in the narrative romance *The Knight of the Cart (Lancelot)* by Chrétien de Troyes and the “lai” *Lanval* by Marie de France. These female characters are entitled either to a share of private erotic power, or public secular power, but not to both. Neither the Lancelot Guineverenor the Lanval Guinevere[[1]](#footnote-0) emerge unequivocally victorious in their respective narratives, and the quality of the outcome for each is determined by how ably she exercises power within the system of medieval courtly love[[2]](#footnote-1). In Chrétien’s romance, Guinevere wins her knight’s love and submission in the intimate space of the sacred-erotic[[3]](#footnote-2), but she fails to overcome the secular limitations placed upon her by the men around her in the feudal system at large. Marie de France’s Guinevere, despite her mastery of courtly love and ability to act effectively in the world of men, ultimately comes up short and fails either to win love or save her reputation as the most beautiful and, therefore, virtuous woman at court.

The Lancelot Guinevere exerts tremendous power, but only in the intimate context of her romantic relationship. Chrétien’s richly characterizes her by means of his narrative style that illustrates believable internal psychological worlds for both Guinevere and Lancelot, especially in their moments of suffering. The Lancelot Guinevere is defined by two important episodes, one public and one private: her abasement before Sir Kay at the beginning of the tale, and her sacred-erotic domination of Lancelot at the climax of the narrative. It is this latter section of text, examined in dialogue with the earlier passage, that delivers Chrétien’s biggest message about female authority in the sacred-erotic aspect of the system of courtly love.

The Lancelot Guinevere’s refusal to greet Lancelot when he arrives to rescue her creates ambivalence in her characterization that can be resolved by examining the narrative context of those scenes. Fearful that he may have killed himself because of her cold reception, the queen laments (to us) that her refusal to thank Lancelot was just a “joke”; and only later does she admit (to him) that her true reason is the flaw her lover demonstrated by hesitating for two steps before getting into the ignominious cart. The internal contradictions that Chrétien draws into the queen’s characterization could suggest the male cliché of the enigmatic woman: what does she want anyway? But it is perhaps more useful read it another way: Guinevere’s withdrawal from Lancelot occurs in a public setting, in front of King Bademagu, but she offers her more sincere and believable explanation to Lancelot when they are alone. Because Chrétien emphasizes Guinevere’s internal world as her most genuine throughout the narrative, it is reason offered in the intimate moment that we must see as sincere.

From the beginning of the narrative, the Lancelot Guinevere lacks secular, real-world power. The most remarkable example of this is when King Arthur tells his queen to “Go to [Sir Kay]...though he deign not to stay for my sake, pray him to stay for yours and fall at his feet if necessary, for I would never be happy again if I were to lose his company.”[[4]](#footnote-3) Sir Kay, though dear to him, is the least of Arthur’s knights. The king’s command to Guinevere to “fall at his feet if necessary” shows how the queen, while trusted to be effective on the king’s behalf, does not enjoy a status with him that is above the least of his retinue. Neither is she able to use her position as queen in the court to her own benefit, since the only result of her skillful self-abasement to Sir Kay is that she is taken prisoner by Meleagant.

The Lancelot Guinevere shows real power exclusively in the private realm of the sacred-erotic: it is this privately exercised power that wins her Lancelot’s unquestioning obedience. In private, she has total control over Lancelot, the greatest of all knights. The Lancelot Guinevere’s power is characterized by absence (she retreats), inwardness (she is imprisoned in towers and recessed windows), and her own self-projected superiority in the realm of idealized love. Within the system of affective piety, the extreme suffering that Lancelot experiences on his quest for Guinevere serves to heighten his passion for her, improve him as a knight -- and to increase her power over him.

The climax of this aspect of the narrative occurs when the queen finally explains to Lancelot why she withdrew from him when he arrived to rescue her (italics mine):

“My lady, if you would tell me what *sin* has caused me such distress, I am prepared to *atone* for it at once.”

The queen replied, “What? Were you not shamed by and frightened of the cart? By delaying for two steps you showed your great unwillingness to mount. That, to tell the truth, is why I didn’t wish to see you or speak with you.”

“In the future may *God preserve me from such a sin*,” said Lancelot, “and may he have no *mercy* upon me if you are not completely right. My lady, for God’s sake, accept my *penance* at once; and if you could *pardon* me, for God’s sake tell me so!”

“Dear friend, *may you be completely forgiven*,” said the queen. “*I absolve you* most willingly.”[[5]](#footnote-4)

The queen’s syntax here is significant: “May you be completely forgiven” is a prayer offered to God on behalf of a supplicant; “I absolve you”, however, demonstrates Guinevere’s assertion of her own power as arbiter of forgiveness in the court of love. She alone offers or withholds absolution from “sin”. Her refusal to show herself to Lancelot or speak to him, she explains, emerges from his two-step failure to hold love supreme above even his own honor. He acknowledges this “sin”, receives her “pardon” and only then is granted the “holy communion” of their tryst. Lancelot arrives at Guinevere’s window on a moonless night: “...[H]e reaches the window, where he stood absolutely silent, careful not to cough or sneeze, until the queen approache[s] in a spotless white chemise.”[[6]](#footnote-5) The image is irresistible: a silent supplicant stands before the confessional window waiting for the Priestess, who appears in virginal white vestments. Soon thereafter, Lancelot manages to force his way through the barred window and stand next to her bed: “Lancelot bowed low and adored her, for he did not place such faith in any holy relic.”[[7]](#footnote-6) Lancelot’s loss of flesh and blood on the altar of Guinevere’s bed alludes to Holy Communion, and, indeed, “on parting, Lancelot bow[s] low before the bedchamber, as if he were before an altar.”[[8]](#footnote-7) It is impossible to overstate the intense erotic and spiritual feeling embodied in this scene. The communion with the beloved is a holy ritual, taking place in the mysterious darkness, inside a space that is hard to enter. Idealized courtly love requires resistance and sacrifice: the Lancelot Guinevere’s victory is complete in this context.

The Lanval Guinevere is the antagonist of Marie de France’s famous “lai”, but unlike the Lancelot Guinevere, there is nothing spiritual or interior about her. This Guinevere speaks for herself, and Marie de France does not permit us into her mind. The Lanval “lai” focuses on the brass tacks of courtly life: wealth, position, and recognition by powerful people, and so this queen is all about courtly love as a system of law and as a means of exercising real-world power. Marie de France does not name her (she simply “the queen”), nor does she offer the reader any description of her; but we know that the Lanval Guinevere must be beautiful (because she is the queen), and we may even experience some sense of injustice on her behalf that she should have to endure a public beauty contest with a fairy![[9]](#footnote-8) Ultimately the Lanval Guinevere is a flat character such as we might expect in the antagonist of a “lai”, based as she is on the simply-drawn characters of Breton folk tales.[[10]](#footnote-9) She is arrogant and entitled, and she is most at home in the public world of men.

Root explains how the “lai” form’s multi-layered conception of courtly love is different from the romance’s single-focus on “fin amor”, or idealized love. He writes, “...the discourse of courtly love comprises both sincere expressions of love, those Frappier helpfully labels "fin amor" after the troubadours and Chrétien, to the far more ironic and manipulative strategies of love...The *lais*...seem to be aware of and to invoke these two widely divergent approaches to the discourse of courtly love.”[[11]](#footnote-10) The Lanval Guinevere’s brash candor in her approach to Lanval suggests that she is operating on the ironic and manipulative level of courtly love, and her success or failure in her exercise of power must be understood in that context.

In her exercise of secular power,[[12]](#footnote-11) the Lanval Guinevere displays agency in a way that the Lancelot Guinevere does not. She waits for a moment when the young knight is alone and then sallies forth from her tower in the company of thirty of “her most attractive and beautiful young women”[[13]](#footnote-12) in a female display that parallels the recently arrived King Arthur and his retinue of knights. For the Lanval Guinevere, then, courtly love is a form of battle between men and women, a tournament that features verbal parrying and has serious consequences. She demonstrates male directness and a certain lack of c*ourtoisie* in her approach to Lanval:

When the queen saw [Lanval] alone,

she went straight to him.

She sat down beside him and told him

what was in her heart:

“Lanval, I have greatly honored

and cherished and loved (*amé*) you;

you can have all my love (*druërie*),

and you should be very happy to have me.[[14]](#footnote-13)

The Lanval Guinevere does not beat around the bush, and it is clear that she expects a positive response! But given that Lanval was ignored by the court when he was poor and only became of interest to both King Arthur and his queen when he had “fairy money” from his new lover to spend, how can we take the queen’s profession of love seriously? A careful look at the words Marie de France uses for “love” may offer some insight. According to Kinoshita and McCracken, in the feudal historical context, “...something of the semantic breadth of medieval expressions of love...appears in the word *druërie* (love-friendship)...Though loosely the equivalent of “love”, in context it often suggests the contractual overtones of a favor bestowed or the public acknowledgement of a token given.”[[15]](#footnote-14) Even the verb *amer* (to love), according to Kinoshita and McCracken, is not used exclusively romantically in the feudal context, and may signal political alliance or rupture.[[16]](#footnote-15) What are we to make of this? Has the queen noticed Lanval’s lavish spending and decided for that reason to ally herself with him? Or have Lanval’s looks, transformed by his new love, made him more attractive? Or a bit of both? Let’s suppose for a moment that Guinevere is offering Lanval an opening to suggest the kind of relationship that *he* is willing to have with her. Lanval’s unchivalrous response now takes on new significance:

“Lady,” he said, “leave me alone!

I have no desire to love (*amer*) you.

I have long served the king,

and I do not wish to betray my faith.

Never will I wrong my lord

for you or your love (*amur*).”[[17]](#footnote-16)

If Guinevere is offering him an option between the more sincere expression of affection or simply a “love-friendship” (*druërie*), then Lanval has missed her point entirely, revealing himself as dangerously clumsy in the battle-game of courtly love! The queen’s response is swift and obliterating:

The queen became angry;

in her fury she spoke outrageously.

“Lanval,” she said, “I think

you don’t care for that kind of pleasure.

I’ve very often been told

that you have no desire for women.

You have taught young men,

And you have taken your pleasure with them.

Lowborn, evil coward!

It is tragic that my husband

has tolerated you near him.

I fear that he is damned for doing so.[[18]](#footnote-17)

The queen rebukes Lanval by attacking three of his chivalric virtues -- friendship (he is a terrible choice of friend for the king), his chastity (he fornicates with men), and his piety (his behavior will damn the king). To complete her tirade, she calls into question his nobility of birth and courage. The Lanval Guinevere’s secular authority, based in part on her command of the subtle semantics of courtly love and command of chivalric virtue, brooks no affront: she quickly manipulates the king into getting involved by threatening “... that she [will] never get [out of bed] / if the king [does] not see that justice [is] done / in regard to her complaint.”[[19]](#footnote-18)

The king was extremely angry,

and he swore that if Lanval

could not prove his innocence in court,

he would have him burned or hanged.[[20]](#footnote-19)

The Lanval Guinevere does not languish psychologically as the Lancelot Guinevere does: instead she uses her power to bring the whole court down on Lanval’s head. When she loses her case, it is because her rival in the beauty contest comes from the fairy land of Avalon, which operates outside all the laws, customs and norms of human society where the queen dominates. One suspects that if the Guinevere could prosecute her case against Lanval without the intervention of magic, she would emerge victorious! For this queen, however, the *fin amor* aspect of courtly love appears nearly irrelevant: she exercises her power in the public sphere, and does not occupy the intimate, sacred-erotic space of the Lancelot Guinevere.

The dialogue between the Lancelot Guinevere and the Lanval Guinevere offers a complex and informative look at the world of courtly love, the ways it was exercised, and what it meant to the power and personal agency of medieval women of elevated social position. The Lancelot Guinevere emerges as a powerful force of erotic gravity, but apart from her private influence on her lover, she is powerless. During her circular journey from Camelot to Gorre and back again, The Lancelot Guinevere never breaks free of her real-world role as chattel. The Lanval Guinevere, in contrast, offers a more complex view of courtly love and the woman’s role in it. This Guinevere is a powerful actor who insists on the “laws” of courtly love as they are played out in public. Neither Guinevere, however, emerges victorious as the male protagonists in their narratives do. Ultimately, in both narratives, the Guinevere motif functions principally as a crucible in which the destiny and character of the male protagonist is forged, while her own personal development and potential remain unexplored.

**Works Cited**

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Lacy, Norris J. and James J. Wilhelm. *The Romance of Arthur.* 3rd edition. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Root, Jerry. *Courtly Love and the Representation of Women in the “Lais” of Marie de France and the “Coutumes de Beauvaisis” of Philippe de Beaumanoir*. Vol. 57, No. 2, pp. 7-24. The Rocky Mountain Review of Literature. 2003.

1. For the sake of brevity, here the Guinevere character in Chrétien de Troyes' *The Knight of the Cart (Lancelot)* is referred to as "the Lancelot Guinevere", and the Guinevere in Marie de France’s “lai” *Lanval*, is called "the Lanval Guinevere". [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. The term "courtly love" in this essay echoes Jerry Root's broad definition: "[T]he discourse of courtly love comprises both sincere expressions of love…and to the far more ironic and manipulative strategies of love”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. The term “sacred-erotic” in this discussion refers to affective piety, the expression of sexual feeling as a metaphor of religious experience and vice versa. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Lacy and Wilhelm, p. 115 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Lacy and Wilhelm, pp. 155-156 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Lacy and Wilhelm, p. 157 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Lacy and Wilhelm p. 157 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Lacy and Wilhelm, p. 158 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. NEED CITATION HERE. WHO SAYS FAIRIES ARE ALWAYS MORE BEAUTIFUL? [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Kinoshita-McCracken, p. 13 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Root, p. 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Secular power is defined here as the active manipulation of the systems of the feudal court. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. Lacy and Wilhelm, p304 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. Kinoshita and McCracken, *Marie de France: A Critical Companion*, p. 58 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. Root, p. 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. Kinoshita and McCracken, *Marie de France: A Critical Companion*, p. 55 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
17. Wilhelm, p. 305 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
18. Wilhelm, p. 305 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
19. Lacy and Wilhelm, p. 306 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
20. Lacy and Wilhelm, p. 306 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)