Sir Lanval and Sir Launfal

The relationship between King Arthur and Queen Guinevere is essential to the plot of both *Lanval* and *Launfal*. Though Guinevere is regarded for her adulterous ways, with this being public knowledge to the knights in *Launfal,* King Arthur does not appear as benevolent as he normally does. His decision-making is seen as somewhat brash and reactionary, wanting to execute one of his loyal knights at the first word of his betrayal. Though Lanval certainly has a less-than-ideal relationship with Arthur - “Wives and land the king supplied / to everyone who was on his side / Except Lanval, and he had fought / Valiantly. Arthur gave no thought / To him” (17-21) - his reaction still seems a bit intense. This is especially true in *Launfal* because, “He was the king’s steward for ten years”, revealing that he and Arthur possess a great mutual respect for one another. However, Arthur can not be chastised too hastily, as his anger with Lanval/Launfal stems directly from the words his wife tells him. Having married Guinevere, Arthur has made both explicit and implicit oaths to her, vowing to protect both her physical form and her reputation. The oath between a man and wife, especially when they are king and queen, would likely take higher priority than the oath between a lord and his vassal, especially when Arthur entertains a multiplicity of said king-knight oaths. While he may not entirely believe Lanval/Launfal to be at fault, to blatantly disregard the words of his wife would be incredibly foolish: some action must be taken. Arthur’s compliance with Guinevere is also essential to the plot, driving the action of the story. Due to his faithfulness and respect to his wife, Arthur is (eventually) able to acquiesce to her demands and simultaneously offer Lanval and Launfal a safe, honorable way to prove his innocence.

The most important oath of the story is made by Lanval/Launfal to his faerie lover. She tells him to “make no boast of me for any reward; if you do, you will lose all my love.” His oath not to boast of his fairy lover is made in a quick, rash fashion; Lanval likely agrees to her request with the goal of immediately pleasing her, distracted by her beauty and the gifts he has received, and not anticipating the potential difficulty of keeping such an oath. Indeed, as soon as Guinevere flares up his emotions, his desire to spite or repel her overrides his oath of avantance with his lover. The breaking of the oath suggests a larger problem - that Lanval’s word is not a trustworthy one. The ability to trust your lover’s word and keep her identity a secret were two of the most important components of a relationship in this time. Despite breaking his explicit oath to her, he is still rewarded in the end. This may be because he has learnt his lesson about the importance of keeping an oath, acknowledging the unfortunate situation he finds himself in as a result of his own oath-breaking. It could also be because he broke his explicit oath to her in order to respect the implicit oath that their lover-status suggests. When the oath is broken in *Launfal,* Blaunchard and Gyfre leave him, his radiant armor turns to blackness, and all of his winnings vanish into thin air. These serve as more apparent, immediate, and tangible consequences of his actions. In Lanval, he doubts that the events have even occurred, “overcome / with great fear...his doubts were very strong, and then Lanval began to feel / What had happened to him was not real” (196-200), perhaps causing him to doubt whether or not his oath has any meaning at all. Though Lanval/Launfal fail to keep their oaths to the faerie, they are both rewarded. Her acceptance of Lanval is not nearly as overt as it is in Launfal; Lanval has to leap onto the back of her horse as she rides away, while Launfal is reunited with Blaunchard, by Gyfre, to ride alongside her.

We are shown, in *Beowulf*, that a good king is capable of many things. He must respect his citizens, do his best to protect them and the kingdom from danger, and listen to their wants and needs. He himself must be honorable, both in battle and in the political arena, having demonstrated his might and ability to his people. Finally, a good king shares his wealth with those in service to him, both to honor them for their support, and out of friendship. King Arthur fulfills *some* of these duties. Though he is initially kind to Launfal, offering him the company of his two nephews on his journey home, his oath with Guinivere binds him in his duty to protect her (and her honor), and he angrily turns on Launfal when he is accused of traitorous adultery. Ironically, Launfal had actually refused her advances, exclaiming, “I will never be a traitor, by God!” showing his deep respect for Arthur and his own lover. Lanval similarly says, “Lady...leave me alone! I don’t intend to break my vow / to the king I’ve served a long time now.” (270-272), remaining loyal to the king despite his wife’s temptations. Though Lanval is generally a good servant to the king, operating in a chivalrous manner and presenting a good image of his Lord, he makes a huge mistake when he insults his wife directly. In court this is noted as his most grievous offense, as most of the knights realize by this point that Lanval is a pretty swell guy, even offering their lands as collateral in his stead. However, they must acknowledge that, “Lanval may have indeed lacked / Respect for the honor that he owes / His Lord” (448-450). These stories present the relationship between king and servant as somewhat strenuous, upset by the meddling of Guinevere and emotions running amok.

Women behave very powerfully in these works, with Guinevere and Tryamour being the primary two examples. Guinevere abuses her power as queen in both stories, using her position to further her own interests and guard her (untrustworthy) claim, when it comes down to her word versus Launfal’s. Nevermind the fact that she violates her marriage oath when she advances upon Lanval. Interestingly enough, the queen seems to dislike Launfal in the beginning, giving gifts to everyone except him at her wedding. It is later stated that, “The good report of Launfal...pained the queen, who wished him ill.” Despite this, she vies for his attention after he becomes an object of desire, suggesting the fickleness of her affection. Though Arthur’s knights distrust Guinevere, for her unfaithful reputation precedes her, they are unable to voice these opinions due to the oaths they hold with Arthur; Launfal is made an example of when he speaks out against her, and they realize that they, similarly, are in no position to match words with the queen. Tryamour also holds great power over Launfal, making him to promise not to reveal her identity. In exchange, she offers Launfal everything he could want - she takes him as her lover, offers him a steed and squire, and gives him a bottomless bag of money. In this sense she has extreme influence or even direct control over Launfal, able to address many of the things he has been denied, despite his chivalrous ways. Arthur and Launfal, despite their social positions, must answer to their female lovers, reversing the traditional power dynamic within these stories. Like a heroic knight showing up just in the nick of time to save her “damsel” in distress, Tryamour swoops in and saves the day just before Launfal is executed. In this way the women’s power can be compared to that of Lady Philosophy, who is able to deliver Boethius from utter despair to calm acceptance. Wealhtheow, too, possess a great deal of power in Beowulf, but uses her queenly position to show her good faith in Beowulf, and protect the interests of her own people and kin. Guinevere, by contrast, abuses her power due to greed and selfishness, despite bringing shame and potential physical harm to her subjects.

These works present two very important lessons about human interaction, both pertaining to the folly of language. The first points out how language is incapable of accurately conveying our exact wants and intentions. Explicit oaths, despite being made and accepted by both parties, rarely encompass the underlying expectations that both parties hold. This desynchronization of explicit and implicit oaths can then cause miscommunication, allowing the technical aspects of the oath to overpower the unsaid, or vice versa. For example, when Launfal loses his temper and shouts down Guinevere, boasting of his immaculate lover, he breaks the explicit oath not to reveal her identity. However, as her lover, he is being dutiful to the implicit oath the two share, rejecting Guinevere’s advances out of respect for the exclusiveness of their relationship. These stories suggest the reader be mindful of the binding words they speak, the various ways in which they can be mis/interpreted, and the consequences that this understanding, however accurate, has upon the relationship. The second lesson underscores the devastating effects that emotions can have upon our words, and urges us to be mindful of them before we speak. Lanval *reacts* emotionally when the queen suggests he loves little boys; Lanval “spoke before the thought” (288) while Launfal “could not hold his tongue in response to the queen’s accusation.” The shock, anger, and self-righteousness that Lanval feels causes him to forget his oaths, wanting to belittle the queen for her attack on his person. The queen herself insults him as an emotional reaction, attempting to cover up the indignation of her sexuality and power being rejected. Lanval’s respect for his ruler is shattered by her hurtful words, furthering the disparity between the two while undermining their feudal relationship. In these instances, temporary feelings direct the exchange of language, transforming a personal confrontation into a stately affair. The maxim, “Mean what you say” conveys this concept in its rawest form, especially in a world where technology allows our voices to be heard by hundreds of internet “friends”, and many more, near-instantaneously. Facebook, specifically, does not allow the user to recall messages after they have been sent. The explanation for this is that in the “real world”, our words can not be taken back once expelled from our mouths. This implicitly suggests the same core ideas offered by Lanval/Launfal; words can have very real impact upon the “real world”, language does not always accurately portray what one intends, and emotions should be checked before saying something that can’t be taken back.