

***Lanval* and *The Franklin's Tale* – Comments**

by Phillip W. Weiss

***Lanval* by Marie de France and *The Franklin's Tale* by Geoffrey Chaucer**

both offer portrayals of social interactions that are in variance with the chivalric ideals. One area in which both works differ, however, is in their treatment of women. Whereas in *Lanval*, an angry and aggressive Queen torments a lonely knight, in *The Franklin's* the main character, a vulnerable woman, is placed in a highly compromising situation. The former female is portrayed as conniving and vicious, while the latter is presented as being needy, forlorn and abandoned. Supernatural forces also figure prominently in both stories, yet here too there are major differences in the way each story deals with the subject.

In *Lanval*, the Queen is a shrill, mean spirited slanderer and liar, a far cry from the kind of lady associated with courtly love. After her advances are rejected, the Queen, “made angry ... insultingly expressed her spleen,” (lines 273-274) and calls the knight a “faithless coward of low degree,” (line 281), harsh, nasty language indeed. She makes it clear to the knight that she is going to make trouble for him, saying: “My lord was badly served when he suffered your person to come near” (lines 282-283) and “vowing never again to rise, Unless the king grants her redress” (lines 307-307), revealing a vindictive nature. This negative and unflattering portrayal of a woman is in sharp contrast to that found in the *Tale of the Franklin*. In this story the protagonist, Dorigen, a married woman, is a hapless target of a young squire's uninvited amorous affections. This pushy, distraught young man (“And in his raving said his orisoun, for very woe out of his wit he braid.” – lines 1026-1027), is willing to lie and even employ subterfuge to satisfy

his carnal desires. Thus he even conspires with another man to secure the services of a magician to fool the woman into having sex with him. And what is more surprising is that after the woman apprises her husband, who is a knight, of the situation, her husband will not come to her defense (“Peradventure a heap of you, ywis, will holden him a lewd man in this, that he will put his wife in jeopardy.” (lines 1493-1495). In both scenarios chivalry is abandoned.

Supernatural or magical activity figure prominently in both stories, but whereas in *Lanval* the supernatural intervention is benign, charming and esthetically pleasing, in *The Franklin’s Tale*, the magic is coarse and vulgar, conjured up not to bring comfort but to deceive and cause harm. These differences are further accentuated by the very nature of the magicians themselves. In *Lanval* the magic takes the form of three beautiful women, the faery Queen herself (“was fairly pitched, a beauteous sight” – line 80), and her two maidens (“... the fairest he had ever seen” (line 56), wearing “... close-fitting tunics, tightly laced, made of deep-dyed purple wool, their faces were most beautiful....” (lines 58-60), who appear from nowhere to enthrall the young knight and then later save him from serious punishment after he is wrongly accused of slandering the Queen and is harshly treated, while in *The Franklin’s Tale*, the magician charges money for his services, specializes in making “illusion,” (line 1264) and relies on “japes and wretchedness” (line 1271) and astrological tables to concoct spells, giving the impression of something that is seedy and dishonest, and motivated by deception.

Both stories are similar in their treatment of men. The men in them are morally weak, passive, and even boorish, perhaps somewhat more so in *The Franklin's Tale*. In *Lanval* the knight is poor, unattached, unaffiliated, a man “who got nothing from the king” (line 31) and came to “a foreign land and finds no help from any hand” (lines 37-38). And he is also a daydreamer, makes promises (re: lines 140-149) that he later does not keep, gets into trouble with the Queen, provokes the ire of the King and is put on trial, all of which creates an impression of a rather irresponsible and socially inept fellow. But at least he is not conniving, unlike the squire in *The Franklin's Tale* whose behavior represents a complete repudiation of chivalric virtue as he fails to control his passion and plots to seduce a married woman who wants nothing to do with him. Even more atrocious is the behavior of the woman's husband who assigns a higher priority to keeping faith with the “Truth” than to protecting his wife (re: lines 1474-1475), especially in this case where obedience to “truth” has to do with a promise that was made in jest.

Unlike *The Franklin's Tale*, in which, in spite of the Dorigen's demand for independence (re: lines 745-752) traditional gender roles remain in force, *Lanval* offers a new and exciting perspective on the role of women as symbolized by the Queen. Instead of a needy and dependent female, such as that found in Dorigen (“She mourneth, waketh, wailleth, fasteth, ‘plaineth” – line 819), the Queen is angry, strident, vicious, and troublesome. Far from being subservient, this woman wields authority, and is threatening, temperamental, irritable and vengeful (“The Queen has

charged the knight with treason.” – line 354). She is a force to be reckoned with and demands to have her way (“There had been far too much delay; the queen had found it most frustrating that they so long had kept her waiting” – lines 546-548). The imagery is clear. The Queen wants satisfaction now. Compared to the three magical ladies in *Lanval*, with their finery, gentleness and pretty countenances, the contrast cannot be any sharper. Yet on second thought, perhaps there is in fact some similarity between the ladies in *Lanval* and *The Franklin’s Queen*, if not in style, then in substance, since the three apparitions do come forth to rescue a man from harm, which would constitute an example of role reversal. But unlike the Queen, who is real, the three fine ladies are of a spiritual, otherworldly nature, so perhaps the comparison is not absolute.

In conclusion, both *Lanval* and *The Franklin’s Tale* succeed in calling into question whether the code of chivalry really exists. The disgruntled Queen, the harried married woman, the high-strung squire, the misguided husband together represent a microcosm of a society in flux as social relations are being redefined.