

***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 chivalric ideals. Yet, both works differ in their portrayal of women. Whereas in *Lanval* the main female character, the Queen, is angry, aggressive, conniving and vicious, in *The Franklin's Tale* the female protagonist is shown as being needy, forlorn, vulnerable 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), uses harsh language to describe the knight, calling him a “faithless coward of low degree,” (line 281). She tells 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), reflective of vindictive nature.

The negative and unflattering portrayal of the Queen in *Lanval* is in sharp contrast to that of Dorigen, a married woman who is the hapless target of a young squire's uninvited amorous affections in the *Tale of the Franklin*. The 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. He even conspires with another man to secure the services of a magician to fool the woman into having sex with him. And then after Dorigen apprises her husband of the situation, her husband, who is a knight, 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). Thus, In both works, chivalry is absent; the women fend for themselves.

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 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. 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 traditional gender roles are preserved, Dorigen's demand for independence notwithstanding (re: lines 745-752), *Lanval* presents a new and exciting perspective on the role of women as symbolized by the Queen. Instead of a meek and dependent female, such as Dorigen ("She mourneth, waketh, waileth, 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. The contrast with the three magical ladies in *Lanval*, with their finery, gentleness and pretty countenances, 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 raising doubts as to whether the code of chivalry really existed. The disgruntled Queen, the harried married woman, the high-strung squire, and the misguided husband together suggest a society in flux as social relations are being redefined.