

Male Trouble: Sir Launfal and the Trials of Masculinity

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THE MAIN TITLE OF THIS ESSAY makes two allusions: one to Judith Butler's famous *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* and the other to "female trouble," a term for gynecological problems—that is, for the kind of trouble only women can get.¹ We could consider the two allusions as pointing to two views of gender. According to the first, any gender identity is really a performance and a copy for which there is no original; according to the second, gender is a real thing located in real bodies. The fact that the second term has no masculine equivalent (although there are certainly many medical conditions to which only male bodies are susceptible) underscores the point that in our society it is the female body that is subject to trouble of various kinds. On the other hand, we could say that if gender is something that one does rather than something that one has, perhaps trouble of this sort can be avoided altogether. Up to this point, I have been stressing the differences between these two views of gender, but my intention is not to bring about a recrudescence of the debate between essence and construction. Rather, I want to read Thomas

¹ For a brief discussion of what it means to use Butler in a medieval context, see Lees, xvii–xix.

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Chestre's *Sir Launfal* as promoting a view of masculinity in which maleness is a condition with what we could call structural flaws.² In contrast to femaleness, which appears to have a solid basis in the world of the poem, Chestre presents maleness as something that is inherently uncertain. While many narratives from the medieval period and later depict a youth working through a variety of problems in order to achieve the form of adult masculinity considered proper in his society, *Sir Launfal* suggests that the achievement of adult masculinity can never be more than a qualified success: male status is always accompanied by male trouble.

The easiest way to begin a discussion of Chestre's focus on masculinity is to examine his relation to his sources.³ While many medieval poems have no surviving source, *Sir Launfal* has several. In his introduction to the poem, A.J. Bliss, following earlier scholars, identifies these as the anonymous Middle English *Sir Landevale*, Marie de France's *Lanval*, and the Old French *Graelent*, all of which are still extant; he also cites a romance mentioned by Andreas Capellanus, which has since been lost (24–31). Much valuable work has been done on the relation of *Sir Launfal* to its sources, but the tendency unfortunately has been to see Chestre's poem as a sort of anthology and to berate him for failing to be Marie de France. The most extreme example of this attitude can be found in A.C. Spearing's study, in which we are informed that "Chestre destroys the meaning of *Lanval* precisely by identifying totally with the very fantasies that it represents" (118).⁴ Not having any information on Chestre's personality or on what he did or did not identify, I shall concentrate on the text itself. In any case, as Myra Seaman points out in her brilliant essay on *Sir Launfal*, "no compelling evidence suggests that Chestre even knew Marie's text" (107).⁵ Chestre's differences from Marie and from the other texts that can be seen as his sources are more striking than his similarities to them: while all the authors who use the story deal with the problems of masculinity, it is only Chestre who takes them as his focus.

2 The name Chestre could be either a surname in our sense or a toponym (Thomas of Chester). I shall use it throughout as a surname.

3 For a good discussion of this question in relation to masculinity, see Laskaya, "Thomas Chestre's Revision of Manhood in *Sir Launfal*." Laskaya's focus is on the tension between heterosexuality and homosociality.

4 For a defence of the literary qualities of the poem, see O'Brien, "The 'Readerly' *Sir Launfal*."

5 Seaman's discussion of Chestre's use of his sources can be found on pages 105 to 108 of her article. Although I agree that it is dubious to discuss *Sir Launfal* as an adaptation of Marie's poem, I shall occasionally refer to *Lanval* for the purposes of comparison.

My concern is thus with the unusual tone and distinctive emphasis of Sir Launfal. Earl R. Anderson has identified “the main concern of the poem [as] Launfal’s manhood, the threats to it by Gwenere, the affirmation of it by Triamour” (119). Sir Launfal is not the only version of the story to consider the fragility of masculine identity, however. Many medieval romances are concerned with the ways in which knights can or cannot establish their knighthood, but I would argue that Chestre has amplified this theme—a theme that can also be found, although to a lesser extent, in both Lanval and Sir Landevale. At the end of each of these texts a woman saves a man’s life and takes him to her country as her spouse, a situation that reverses the more conventional story of a man winning a wife through his prowess. Chestre’s innovation is to explore a greater range of the implications of this narrative than either Marie or the anonymous author of Sir Landevale. Both Chestre’s use of earlier material and his additions to the story draw attention to the problems of forming and, especially, of maintaining a masculine and knightly identity. What is particularly relevant to his poem is that both of these kinds of identity depend on the hero’s relationship with women, and Chestre has further complicated the narrative by making his female characters more powerful than his male characters. As well, Chestre demonstrates throughout the poem that identity cannot be established once and for all, thereby illustrating that “the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated,” to use Butler’s words (140). Or as Clare R. Kinney has remarked in a study of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, “the categories of masculine value, the very signs of manhood, remain subject to change” (56). In that poem, Gawain returns to a world characterized by male homosociality, however; in Sir Launfal, there crucially turns out to be no such world.

Chestre’s emphasis on the difficulties of masculine identity begins with the introduction of the hero; in this regard, a comparison with Sir Landevale is instructive. In that poem, the hero is introduced as “A yong knyght of muche myght” (19). In her analysis of the tail-rime romances, Urs Dürmüller points out that this line is the only line in the whole poem for which Chestre does not find an equivalent in his own version (209). Instead, he says

Wyth Artour ther was a bachelor,
And hade ybe well many a ger:
Launfal, forsoth, he hygt. (25–27)

The term Chestre uses instead of “knight” is “bachelor,” a word which means both an unmarried man and a knight, but the implication is nor-

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mally that a bachelor is a fairly young man. Launfal cannot be very young, however, as he has been the king's steward—a position he would hardly have been given on his first day at court—for ten years (33). Moreover, in the preceding stanza Chestre gives a list of the most famous Arthurian knights and adds that “Of ham ther was a greet los— / Men sawe tho nowher her make” (20–21) before mentioning Sir Galafre, whoever he may be, and Sir Launfal. In other words, not only does Chestre not tell us anything about Launfal's antecedents or his abilities as a knight but he separates him from the famous knights he mentions (Perceval, Gawain, and Lancelot, among others) and puts him with a knight whom not even the most assiduous scholars have been able to link to other Arthurian stories. In this hierarchy of knights, Launfal is clearly on the second tier. And although the fact that Launfal is Arthur's steward demonstrates that he is held in some esteem at court, stewardship is not a particularly knightly occupation, as the depiction of Sir Kay as steward in other Arthurian stories suggests.

Further evidence of Chestre's preoccupation with masculinity can be found in his account of why Launfal has to leave court. In Sir Landevale, the hero leaves because of his financial imprudence; in Sir Launfal the reason for the hero's departure from court is related to the dominance of women in the world of the poem. After ten years as Arthur's steward, Launfal leaves because Arthur marries Guinevere. In Chestre's poem, Guinevere is depicted as promiscuous and as being at odds with Launfal and “other knyghtes that wer hende” (45) from the moment she enters the poem. But Guinevere does not appear to be concerned with those other knights; instead, she chooses to focus her malice on Launfal by insulting him publicly at the gift-giving which is part of her wedding feast: “Euerych knygt sche gaf broche other ryng, / But Syr Launfual sche gaf no thyng” (70–71). The very fact that the queen appears in the story so early is one of the most important differences between Sir Launfal and other versions of the story.⁶ Peter J. Lucas points out that “the introduction of the queen at the beginning, even though her proposal of love to Launfal is kept until later [...] and the naming of her as Guinevere gives this persona greater prominence than in the other versions” (292). The giving of gifts was one of the duties expected of queens, but that Guinevere is so obviously unfair indicates her failure to conform to a traditional feminine role.

Guinevere's appearance in the beginning of Chestre's poem is not the sole change to Sir Landevale's introduction of the queen only toward

6 In the introduction to his edition of the poem, Bliss suggests that Chestre took this from *Graelent* (24).

the end of the narrative, as we also see her in lines 157 to 180, when Sir Hugh and Sir John, the companions Arthur assigned to Launfal, return to court and she once again goes out of her way to make Launfal look bad. Furthermore, as I shall discuss later, she is much more important in the conclusion of the poem than the queen in Sir Landevale. It is not just that Chestre creates and then emphasizes a picture of Guinevere as Launfal's enemy but also that her prominence is achieved at Launfal's expense both in terms of the poem as a whole and, more specifically, in terms of Launfal's departure from the court upon her arrival. We can assume that it would be humiliating for any knight to have to retreat because a woman had got the better of him, but the situation seems to be particularly bad for Launfal as Chestre has not provided him with any reserves of knighthood (or, indeed, of masculinity) on which to fall back. These circumstances may explain why Launfal tells Arthur that he has to leave court because "a lettere was to hym come / that deth hadde hys fadyr ynome" (76–77). The death of the father makes the son an adult, the representative of his family. By establishing himself as an adult and in some sense as the head of his family Launfal can attempt to compensate for the insult that a woman's victory over him has given to his masculine identity. But as Chestre follows the author of Sir Landevale in not telling us anything about Launfal's ancestry, there is no real significance to the idea that Launfal's father has died—in fact, this is the only mention of his family in the poem.

Launfal's manhood is compromised not just by Guinevere's actions early in the poem but also by her very presence. Guinevere insults Launfal at the wedding feast, and he leaves the court immediately afterwards: "And, whan the bredale was at ende, / Launfal tok hys leue to wende" (73–74). We can get some sense of the importance of the setting of this scene to Chestre if we remember that the decision to begin the action of the poem with Arthur's wedding is his alone. There is no equivalent in Sir Landevale or even in *Graelent*, although in the latter text the queen is also the knight's enemy from the beginning of the poem. By opening his poem with the wedding festivities, Chestre juxtaposes the arrival of Guinevere and the departure of Launfal and thus makes the two characters parallel. If Carol J. Nappholz is accurate when she suggests that "Chestre uses the word 'large' with sexual overtones" (4, n6), the parallel between them has been set up even earlier since Launfal's largesse—the quality that, in Sir Landevale, forces him to leave court—can be seen as a sexual liberality related to the promiscuity he dislikes so much in Guinevere. It is as if once Arthur has a wife he no longer needs his steward; we could surmise that Launfal is to some extent acting on this assumption when he leaves the court. At any

rate, it is clear that Guinevere and Launfal cannot share the same space without coming into conflict and that when they do come into conflict it is the woman who is victorious. Guinevere's presence at court would arguably be enough to drive Launfal away even without her display of malice, as it seems that his identity both as a man and as a courtier is too weak to withstand her.

Launfal's identity continues to come under attack even after he has left the court. As soon as he reaches his own country he is snubbed by the mayor, and even Sir Hugh and Sir John are forced to leave Launfal when his money runs out. The mayor's daughter asks him to dinner, however; when he refuses, she gives him a saddle and a bridle for his horse. Her kindness partially compensates for Guinevere's unkindness, a point that Chestre stresses by making the two gift-giving scenes structurally parallel. Both at court and in his own country Launfal has received an insult and a compliment from members of the same family. At court, the insult comes from the woman and the compliment from the man, as Arthur gives Launfal money and tells him to take Sir Hugh and Sir John with him (80–84); in the later passage, the insult comes from the man and the compliment from the woman. Launfal's relationship to women has changed, and this change is crucial to the development of the story. Chestre appears to be suggesting that the world in which Launfal lives is controlled by women and that if the story is going to end happily he will have to begin to appeal to them. The actions of Arthur, Hugh, and John are sufficient proof that he can inspire affection in men; nevertheless, the fact that Arthur's goodwill is not enough to counteract Guinevere's dislike indicates the women have more power than men even at court, the place in which knightly identity is maintained and celebrated.

In a sense, then, it is not only Launfal's masculinity that is compromised but masculinity in general, as Chestre can be taken to hint that the male assumption of superiority over women is mistaken. Both at court and in the town women control the distribution of gifts. While this is certainly not an unusual function for medieval women, the feminine distribution of gifts is usually matched by masculine control of more large-scale assets, such as land. At various points throughout *Sir Launfal*, Chestre demonstrates that no such masculine control exists. This is a world in which everything depends on women. The threat to a masculine identity is considerable. Vern L. Bullough says that although "what constitutes manhood has varying definitions according to a society or culture or time period, the most simplistic way of defining it is as a triad: impregnating women, protecting dependents, and serving as provider to one's family" (34). The

first of these does not occur in the poem, but Launfal is certainly deficient both at protecting dependents and as serving as a provider. What the stress on gift-giving in this first part of the poem suggests is that he is himself a dependent, not in the approved sense of being dependent on his king but in the sense of depending on female bounty in order to maintain his knightly position. As the rest of the poem will show, Launfal is also someone who will require protection more than he will be able to grant it.

The lowest point of the poem comes just after the episode of the mayor's daughter. After having had to leave the court, Launfal now has to leave the town. Chestre takes Launfal farther and farther from the scene of knightly power and, indeed, of civilization. He goes into the forest to be alone, but only after falling in the mud and humiliating himself once again: "hym scornede many men / Abowte hym fer & wyde" (215–16). Launfal begins the poem as the steward of a royal court, which is to say close to the pinnacle of human society; Chestre quickly strips away not merely Launfal's occupation and social standing but also, it would appear, human society itself. It is at this point that the fairy princess appears and offers him the presents and the love that enable him to change his life. The changes Chestre makes to the character of the fairy princess are similar to those he makes to the character of Guinevere, to whom she is paralleled in several ways.⁷ Perhaps the most notable similarity is that both take the lead in courting the hero. Judith Weiss has analyzed the role of women who take the romantic initiative in Anglo-Norman narratives. She comments that "Demonstrating a misogynistic outlook is only one of [the functions of these narratives] and it appears to co-exist easily with sympathetic, occasionally approving attitudes to women who make their own choice" (157). I would suggest that in *Sir Launfal*, Guinevere and Triamour represent these opposed uses of the wooing woman character. Although ostensibly the hero of the story, Launfal can also be seen as merely the conduit for a power struggle between women, as not only is he relatively powerless but even Arthur is unable to help Launfal here or toward the end of the poem. In other words, we could see *Sir Launfal* as illustrating the traffic in men: the important characters in the poem are women.

Perhaps the most immediately noticeable difference between the fairy in Chestre's version and the fairy in the other versions of the story is that the fairy in *Sir Launfal* has a name. Lucas connects the fact that both the fairy and Arthur's queen are named: "Against [Guinevere] is set Launfal's mistress, who is also given greater prominence than in the other versions

7 See Veldhoen, "Psychology and the Middle English Romances."

by being named” (292). Chestre connects the two in order to suggest that it is they who control the world of the poem. The fairy’s name may also be significant in itself. In his study of the various lays which can be considered sources for Sir Launfal, William Henry Schofield noted that “Triamour is, except in Chestre’s poem, where I suspect a misunderstanding, a man’s name” (148, n1). It is possible that Chestre misunderstood his sources, but it is also possible that he chose to use a man’s name in order to underline that in the relationship between Launfal and Triamour it is she who assumes the responsibility of providing for and protecting her lover, a responsibility that is normally seen as part of the masculine role. Furthermore, the extent to which women assume masculine roles and functions within the narrative is emphasized by what we could see as the feminization of Launfal himself. And in the meeting between the two, as in the opening of the poem, it is not only that the woman is prominent but also that the man appears at a disadvantage. Launfal is despondent, muddy, and penniless; Triamour is radiant, beautiful, and has magic powers. It is only through these powers that Launfal is able to regain his position at court and actually to improve upon it.

Chestre’s version of the scene in which the fairy mistress promises to fix Launfal’s life for him differs interestingly from the other versions in which the offer is not particularly specific. In Sir Landevale, the offer is general: “J will yeue the grette honoure, / Gold jnough, and grete tresour” (129–30). This is based closely on Lanval, in which Marie says “Un dun li ad duné” (She gave him a gift; 135) and the fairy goes on to explain that “Cum plus despendra richement, / E plus avra or e argent” (The more lavishly you spend the more gold and silver you’ll have; 141–42). In contrast, Triamour enumerates exactly what she will give Launfal, beginning with a magic purse: “As oft thou putttest the hond therjnne, / A mark of gold thou schalt wynne” (322–23). Chestre specifies what the gift is and replaces the generic gold of the earlier versions with a contemporary unit of currency. Furthermore, he goes on to mention three gifts for which there is no equivalent in either of the earlier versions:

J geue the Blanchard, my stede lel,
And Gyfre, my owen knaue;
And of my armes oo pensel. (326–28)

Triamour goes on to say that her gifts and her care will ensure him victory both in battle and in tournament. Her only condition is that he not reveal their love:

Bot of o thyng, Syr Knygt, J warne the,
That thou make no bost of me
For no kennes mede! (361–63)

The condition is in all versions of the story, but only Chestre includes the comment that Launfal should not reveal Triamour's existence even if some reward could be gained by doing so. Chestre's tacit suggestion that even a knight might be interested in financial gain is one of the most original aspects of his poem. As Seaman points out, his "visual emphasis on the material products of [Triamour's] love overpowers and eliminates its more abstract and spiritual qualities" (114).

Seaman sees Chestre's emphasis on material considerations as one of the strengths of his poem and as one of the signs that the romance genre was becoming English, but critics have been more likely to disapprove of it and to see it as a sign of Chestre's inferiority to his poetic contemporaries. For instance, Spearing, while not entirely disagreeing with seeing this focus on the material as a sign of Englishness, compares this aspect of the poem to Sir Thopas and says that Chestre's "conception of reality [...] is intensely materialistic. Sir Launfal possesses not just the concreteness characteristic of Middle English romances but exactly the materialism that Chaucer diagnosed in Sir Thopas as belonging to the vision of aristocratic life seen from below stairs" (153). The characterization of a plebeian vision as a sickness to be diagnosed is most curious. I do not feel that Chestre is to be faulted because he produces a version of aristocratic life which is less flattering to the upper classes than the one that a court poet might produce. One of the strengths of Chestre's poem is his insistence on the material basis of privilege (both class privilege and masculine privilege), a factor that is typically ignored in romances. In the passage describing Triamour's gifts, for instance, the effect of Chestre's changes—the listing of the gifts and the mention of a reward as something that might be tempting to Launfal—is a certain compromising of Launfal's heroic status and perhaps even of knighthood in general. With Triamour's help Launfal re-establishes himself at Arthur's court, but Chestre's focus on materiality undercuts this achievement. It is clear that anyone with these gifts could become a great knight, whereas in the other versions of the story the fairy's intervention restores the knight to his proper place. In Sir Launfal, the hero uses magic to achieve a status which cannot be said to be his by merit, as Chestre has not previously depicted Launfal as especially knightly. We can see the emphasis on materiality as indicating that the knightly system, which purports to be based on merit, is really decided chiefly on material conditions. Perhaps the view is better from below stairs.

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Launfal's return to court as a rich man is not enough in itself to establish him as a knight—he also has to be able to triumph at a tournament. When he does so, it turns out that this too is insufficient to establish his knighthood. As soon as he vanquishes the other knights at Arthur's court, Launfal receives a challenge from outside the court, indeed from outside England altogether. His new fame has apparently attracted the attention of Sir Valentine, a terrifying knight from Lombardy: "Syr Valentine was wonther strong, / Fyftene feet he was longe" (511–12). This is one of the episodes that Bliss has declared to be entirely original to Chestre's version; it is both literally and metaphorically central to Chestre's conception of the story as Sir Launfal has 1,044 lines and the challenge, as Sir Valentine gives it to the messenger, begins on line 523, at the exact beginning of the poem's second half. In one sense, the narrative could have ended with the tournament at Arthur's court, since after having had to leave the court under a cloud, Launfal has returned rich, happy in love, and, perhaps most surprisingly, a valiant knight. I think that Chestre places the episode exactly at the centre of the poem to make a point crucial to the ending of the poem: knighthood, which is the particular manifestation of masculinity with which Chestre is most concerned, is really an ongoing trial rather than a state. As is the case with gender, knighthood has always to be proved again. In fact, this section of Sir Launfal can be taken to suggest not only that the fighting at tournaments through which knights establish their reputation must be endlessly repeated but also that maintaining that reputation becomes increasingly difficult.

Sir Valentine's challenge has tremendous importance for the themes of the poem because it connects the different aspects of knighthood. As Anderson remarks, the "challenge is worded in a way that relates it to both the sexual and the martial aspects of Launfal's manhood" (122). The sexual implications may be implicit in the character of Valentine. The juxtaposition of his size and name, associated at least since Chaucer's Parliament of Fowls with love, may be intended to suggest that we should see him as a symbol of potency, as the phallus which is the source and sign of masculine power—the phallus, of course, that nobody ever really possesses. For Launfal, at any rate, the wording of Valentine's challenge begins the process of proving himself to be a knight all over again:

sey hym, for loue of hys lemman
(Yf sche be any gantyle woman,
Courteys, fre other hender)
That he come wyth me to juste,

To kepe hys harneys from the ruste—
And elles hys manhood schende. (523–28)

By fighting Valentine, then, Launfal will establish both the noble status of the woman he loves and his ability to fight. The appearance of the challenge shows that Launfal cannot rest on his laurels and that by establishing himself as a knight he has not left but rather entered further into the arena of competition, an arena characterized by endless performance. Butler says that the “acts, gestures, enactments” we take to indicate identity “are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (136). In the case of a chivalric romance such as *Sir Launfal*, the most important “corporeal signs” are the actions performed in tournaments (and, as Valentine makes clear, the possession of rust-free armour). These actions are simultaneously produced by bodies and give us information about those bodies. Typically, they tell us that these bodies are not only masculine but specifically knightly. As becomes clear at the end of *Sir Launfal*, however, the women in the poem have their own and ultimately more decisive form of dueling.

Although Launfal succeeds at killing Valentine, Chestre does not imbue the contest with any glory—at least, not as far as the readers are concerned. For them, the fight will probably appear grotesque rather than chivalric.⁸ Nappholz has suggested that “a closer examination of *Sir Launfal* will reveal a great deal of humour” (9), and I think the humour is most apparent in the fight between the knights. After all, the fight is not just between the knights since Launfal has the help of Gyfre, the dwarf given to him by Triamour. Chestre sets up a comic contrast between the huge Sir Valentine and the tiny Gyfre. The contrast is not apparent to Valentine, of course, as the dwarf is invisible, but for the reader the comedy is increased by Gyfre’s intervention in the fight. It is he who picks up Launfal’s helmet once Valentine knocks it off, and it is he who retrieves Launfal’s shield. Chestre makes it clear that Launfal would have been killed without Gyfre’s help. While the dwarf squire is a familiar figure in medieval romance, Gyfre’s actions go beyond merely assisting his knight. Not even Launfal’s subsequent (and apparently unmotivated) slaying of “Alle the lordes of Atalye” (601) can disguise the fact that he is dependent for his success in tournaments and duels on the help of a woman and a dwarf, that is, on the help of precisely those people who would typically be presumed to be completely reliant

8 Seaman argues that the poem as a whole emphasizes Launfal’s masculinity; in support of this view she cites the fight with Valentine.

on knights for protection. In this sense, the comic juxtaposition of the giant and dwarf is also serious. I would relate it to Chestre's critiques of knighthood and masculinity; this relation is underlined if we take these extremes in size as a manifestation of anxieties about the male body—and specifically about the body that is both male and knightly. In other words, the Valentine episode draws our attention to male trouble. Furthermore, the fact that Valentine's challenge focuses on Launfal's "loue of hys lemman" suggests that one of the things at stake in the poem is, precisely, the picture of the knight as the defender of women. This picture is central to the ideology of the knight, but by this halfway point in the narrative it should already be clear that it does not reflect the events of the narrative; the rest of the poem shows us a knight at the mercy of female characters who are far more powerful than he is.

The wording of the challenge also demonstrates Valentine's entirely reasonable assumption that Launfal has a mistress. To those who know Launfal, however, he appears to be unattached, since he only meets Triamour in private and he has been forbidden even to speak of her. The enforced secrecy of their relationship puts Launfal at risk, as he would appear to those around him to be available for seduction. This, at least, seems to be the belief behind Guinevere's words when she sees him dancing:

Of alle the knyghtes that y se there
He ys the fayreste bachelere—
He ne hadde neuer no wyf. (649–51)

As Oscar Wilde's Miss Prism notes, "by persistently remaining single, a man converts himself into a permanent public temptation" (348); Guinevere is unable to resist the temptation. When Launfal refuses the queen, her vanity leads her to assume that his refusal is motivated by a lack of interest in women in general: "Thou louyst no woman, ne no woman the" (689). In Marie de France's poem, the queen's accusation is that Lanval is sexually interested in his valets rather than in woman. Following Sir Landevale, Chestre's version of this accusation is more reticent but it seems to express the same thing. At any rate, when Launfal rather petulantly relates the queen's speech to Arthur it is clear that this is now how he understands her comment: "sche sayde y nas no man" (775). It is obviously significant for the treatment of masculine identity in this poem that what some people might understand as a comment on Launfal's single status he sees as an attack on his masculinity in general. His panic makes him forget his promise to Triamour: "The knygt was sore aschamed tho; / To speke ne mygte he forgo" (691–92). In his panic he not only reveals the existence

of Triamour but also tactlessly declares that even the ugliest maiden who serves his mistress is more beautiful than Guinevere.

The offended queen's first action is to go to her husband. She repeats the knight's insult but claims that he propositioned her. Arthur has Launfal brought to him and calls a jury of twelve noblemen, who decide to have Launfal executed unless he can produce his mistress and her maidens. The reader is of course aware that Launfal will be unable to do this since as soon as he spoke about Triamour she took back her presents and refused to see him. The summary contained in the last four sentences is substantially applicable to the other versions of the story, but one of the things that distinguishes Sir Launfal is that in this text the queen does not drop out of the story once she has made her false accusation. The endings of *Launfal* and *Sir Landevale* can thus be read as conflicts between human male authority and otherworldly female power, while it would be more accurate to say of Sir Launfal that it ends with a conflict between two women, one natural and one supernatural. Chestre stresses the role of Guinevere in the process intended to result in Launfal's execution. Although Arthur is nominally the highest authority and although it is he who orders the trial, it is obvious that Guinevere controls both him and the court. The nobles who have been assembled to serve as a jury are men who "knewe the maners of the quene" (788), and they decide that the whole matter "was longe on the quene, & not on Launfal" (794), but despite their belief in his innocence the barons feel powerless to dismiss the charge. Instead, they charge him to produce his mistress. They think that by doing so they are making it possible for him to clear himself, but their decision actually ensures that Launfal will now be completely dependent on Triamour. As the narrative nears its end, Launfal is trapped between two powerful women, one of whom is absent and presumably displeased and the other of whom is very much present and very obviously displeased.

By keeping Guinevere in the poem and by increasing her role in the narrative Chestre indicates that it is she who is the real power at court. As well, by making Guinevere more powerful and more prominent, Chestre has effectively undermined the role of Arthur. Instead of the powerful leader of men, we get a man who does what his wife tells him, even though she is patently false and unjust. Nor is it only the case that Guinevere is powerful at court, as she also controls the motion of the narrative. As Lucas points out, "without her initial hostility Launfal would not have left court and met Tryamour, and without her proposal of love Launfal would not have required to be rescued by Tryamour" (292). So while Guinevere's actions demonstrate Launfal's masculine weakness, they also

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create a space in which other kinds of feminine power can operate and Triamour moves into this space. We see her doing this when she comes to court to rescue her hapless lover. In both of the earlier versions, the fairy comes to court preceded by two pairs of maidens. In Chestre's version, two groups of ten maidens each go to the court to warn of her arrival. The result is that Triamour arrives in an ambassadorial state. The greater pomp of this version can be taken as a sign of the greater power of the women in the economy of Chestre's recension; we could say that Chestre's changes here dramatize Butler's claim that "The masculine subject only appears to originate meanings and thereby to signify [...] that process of meaning-constitution requires that women reflect that masculine power and everywhere reassure that power of the reality of its illusory autonomy" (45). Whether or not this is generally the case, it has certainly been the case in the poem until this point; with the appearance of Triamour and the readers' awareness that the outcome of the plot now depends on a struggle between the female characters, Chestre demonstrates just how illusory masculine power is in the world of his poem.

Triamour has absolutely no difficulty in defeating Guinevere. The most curious detail of Chestre's refiguring of this scene as a duel between women rather than as a trial undergone by a knight is what Triamour does just before leaving with Launfal:

Wyth that, Dame Tryamour to the quene geth,
And blew on her swych a breth
That neuer eft mygt sche se. (1006–08)

The blinding is one of Chestre's most noticeable additions to the narrative,⁹ and his Guinevere has, quite literally, asked for it: "Gyf he brynge a fayrer thyng / Put out my een gray" (809–10). The main effect of the blinding is to bring the two female characters into direct confrontation in a particularly memorable way. Weiss comments that the wooing women in literature "can mark the progress of a hero's career, the stages he passes on his way to acquiring an acceptable social identity" (160). This is certainly the traditional model for romance narratives, and it has appeared to be the model for Sir Launfal up to this point. Now, however, Chestre brings the two wooing women, who have been kept separate, together and makes the opposition between them the focus of the poem. By focusing our attention on the combat between Triamour and Guinevere at this crucial

9 For a discussion of the importance of the scene, see Hazell, "The Blinding of Gwennere."

point, Chestre presents them as the protagonists of the poem and Launfal as a sort of proxy or prop. Chestre has denied Launfal yet another of the conventional attributes of manhood: the right to be the most important person in the story. The important “corporeal signs and discursive means” in the narrative turn out to concern women rather than men.

In Lanval and Sir Landevale, once the hero has been rescued he and his fairy mistress go to her country to live happily ever after. In her discussion of the extent to which Marie de France might be considered a feminist, Sharon Kinoshita argues that the happy ending of a romance (and, indeed, of most narratives) is signaled by the hero’s assumption or re-assumption of a position of masculine privilege. Kinoshita says that the ending of Marie’s Lanval, in which the hero is dependent on the woman and goes to her country, constitutes “a dissent from the fundamental premises of the patriarchy” and suggests that it is here “that the ‘feminism’ of the Lais of Marie de France might ultimately reside” (272). In keeping with his treatment of gender issues throughout the poem, Chestre adapts the story in such a way as to increase our sense of the vulnerability of masculine identity and, in effect, to register an even stronger dissent.¹⁰ After all, while both Lanval and Landevale do get to live happily ever after, this is not the case with Launfal. In both earlier versions, once the couple leaves they are never heard from again, as both writers are at pains to stress: “Nuls hum n’en oi parler, / Ne jeo n’en sai avant cunter” (No man has heard of him since, nor can I relate anything else about him; 645–46); “Of hym syns herd neuer man— / No further of Landevall tell J can” (535–36). Despite the fact that these narratives demonstrate that the knight is dependent upon the woman, he is still permitted to enjoy a happy ending, and, I would argue, the feminist possibilities of the narratives are at best incipient. By contrast, although Launfal leaves his country forever—“Seththe saw hym yn thys land noman” (1036)—he does not pass out of human knowledge altogether.

To create his conclusion, Chestre borrows from the ending of Graellent, in which the hero falls from his horse and is forced to ride pillion behind his mistress—in other words, the male character has to assume a typically feminine position. Graellent’s horse can be heard for years, neighing for its lost master: “Mout lonc tens après l’oç on / Par maint an en cele saison” (For a long time afterwards it could be heard at that time of year; 745–46). Chestre follows this narrative fairly closely, but he reverses the situation.

10 For the argument that Launfal’s removal from court is a punishment equivalent to Guinevere’s blinding, see Edwards, “Unknightly Conduct in *Sir Launfal*.”

In his poem, the horse's neighing is the sign of the hero's presence, rather than, as in *Graelent*, of his absence:

Ho that wyll axsy justus,
To kepe hys armes fro the rustus,
Jn turnement other fygt,
Dar he neuer forther gon;
Ther he may fynde justes anoon
Wyth Syr Launfal the knygt. (1027–32)

Thus, although Launfal does get the fairy princess it appears that he is compelled to demonstrate his prowess eternally. *Chestre* stresses the element of repetition by repeating almost exactly in lines 1027 and 1028 the lines of *Valentine's* challenge (526–27). We could extrapolate from the poem's ending to suggest that Launfal is not only defending his own masculinity but masculinity in general.

Launfal's manhood and knighthood—and, indeed, his masculine identity as a whole—can never be established beyond doubt. Ultimately, he seems like a chivalric Sisyphus or what Jill Mann, in her discussion of Chaucer, calls a “feminized hero” (129–44). Mann sees the feminization of the hero as Chaucer's way out of “the sterile antitheses between active and passive” (144) and out of the medieval misogynist tradition to a more nuanced and androgynous view of both men and women; in *Sir Launfal*, however, no such optimism is possible. While *Guinevere* is clearly malevolent, the poem's ending suggests that there is no escape even in the supernatural realm of the benevolent fairy *Triamour*. In conjunction with his revelation that knightly power must always be demonstrated (and then demonstrated again, and again), *Chestre's* depiction of feminine power should lead us to conclude that displays of masculine power, such as jousting, lack real importance. Not all the victories in all the tournaments in all the world can hide the fact that it is the women who control the events *Chestre* narrates, and they do not seem especially interested in jousting. In *Sir Launfal*, *Chestre* juxtaposes an anxious and constantly tested masculinity with a more fixed and powerful femininity—not, I think, because he wants to make a point about women so much as because he wants to undermine ideas about knightly masculinity. Perhaps male trouble comes from the pressures of maintaining the illusion of male dominance.

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