

Sir Launfal:
A Portrait of a Knight in Fourteenth Century England

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I

Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal* is one of the only two Middle English Breton Lays that can be traced directly back to the *lais* by Marie de France.¹⁾ Marie's poems were palpably popular and widely imitated, becoming the prototype of this new genre. Her *Lanval*, the ultimate source of *Sir Launfal* is one of the most appealing of the *lais*. Extant translations or adaptations of *Lanval* are found in Old French, Middle English and Old Norse (Laskaya and

1) *Le Freine* is the other Middle English Breton lay based on Marie de France's *lais* (Laskaya and Salisbury 201). The following introduction of *Sir Launfal* is deeply indebted to the introduction to the recent edition of the Middle English Breton lays by Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury. The citations of the poem, *Sir Landevale* and *Sir Cleges* are from this edition with lines given in parenthesis.

Salisbury 201; Carson 97). In England alone, we have *Sir Landevale*, *Sir Launfal*, and the Percy Folio *Lambewell*.²⁾ *Sir Landevale* and *Sir Launfal* are known to have been written in the fourteenth century; the former in the earlier and the latter in the late fourteenth century, probably three quarters later than the former. *Sir Landevale* has been preserved in a number of manuscripts and early printed books, while Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal* is preserved in only one early fifteenth century manuscript (Laskaya and Salisbury 201).

Considering the lineage of the romances disseminated from *Lanval* and its popularity, it is not surprising to find that the criticism on *Sir Launfal* has centered on the comparative study of both works, usually to the detriment of the latter. A. J. Bliss, for example, finds *Lanval* "civilized, discreet, even intellectual" (23) and says that it has "psychological subtlety" and "sophisticated charm" (46). On the other hand, he criticizes *Sir Launfal* for its crudity and lack of "sensibility and refinement" (46). His criticism is very typical of the critical trend. A. C. Spearing, though acknowledging Chestre's poem's straightforwardness and dramatic quality, calls *Sir Launfal* "a fascinating disaster" (148).

But this criticism, in spite of a number of insightful observations of the features of *Sir Launfal*, does not seem to do justice to what *Sir Launfal* intends to portray. First of all, as many scholars acknowledge, there is no compelling evidence to suggest that Thomas Chestre consulted Marie's *Lanval*, when he composed *Sir Launfal*. Instead, he appears to have three other sources. The immediate and primary source is *Sir Landevale*, a rather close translation of Marie's poem. Another known source is *Graelent*, an Old French lay. This anonymous text, or some version of it, appears to be the source for four

2) The Percy Folio *Lambewell* is probably of early fifteenth-century origin and twice printed during the sixteenth century.

passages in *Sir Launfal* (Laskaya and Salisbury 201). And many scholars assume that at least one other source, now lost, provided Chestre with the episodes of tournament at Carlisle and the tournament with the giant. Thus, considering the lack of immediate exposure to Marie's text, although it is undeniable that *Sir Launfal* is a descendant of *Lanval*, *Sir Launfal* is only distantly related to *Lanval*. *Sir Launfal* may follow the footsteps of its ancestor, but probably with a different intent.

The main problem of the past criticism on *Sir Launfal* springs from the neglect of the multi-leveled ramifications ensuing from the distance between *Lanval* and *Sir Launfal*. As Chester had no direct contact with Marie's poem, it would be unfair to blame Chestre for not having faithfully reproduced the "essence" of Marie's. Rather, it would be a more justifiable and fruitful evaluation of *Sir Launfal* would result from examining what Chestre purports to portray in his poem, deploying the features and characters of *Lanval* which was available to him in the version of *Sir Landevale*. It is of no less, or of more importance that there is another dimension of distance between *Lanval* and *Sir Launfal*. As is well known, the former is born of French soil in the twelfth century, while the latter is born in England approximately in the same period as the Peasants' Revolt, an age brimming with radical socio-economic changes. Both temporal and spatial distances necessarily entail differences in the texture and range of the two poems. My argument in this paper is that the "change" in Chestre's poem is born in different social matrix quite independently from its ultimate origin, not a regrettable degradation of Marie's higher standard and that the poem, through the changes, portrays a knight of fourteenth century England.

It is intriguing to note that no attempt, as far as I know, has been made to relate Chestre's work with socio-economic changes in his contemporary

England. Needless to say, there are countless works of criticism to relate English romances with the history of England. In the case of *Sir Launfal*, however, curiously enough, scholars have focused on “literary” issues alone. As mentioned above, comparative study has been preponderous. Folktale elements, such as the spendthrift knight, the fairy lover, a journey to the other world, combat with a giant, a magical servant, magical gifts, a broken oath, and the cyclic pattern of exile and return, are partly responsible for the lack or absence of the scholarly concern about the social dimension of the poem. That *Sir Launfal* presents the world of wish-fulfillment has goaded some scholars to view the work under the aegis of Freud, Jung or Lacan, blinding their eyes to the “real” world concealed beneath it (Spearing, Veldhoen, Boitani, etc.). But, as Strohm aptly sums up, “invented texts cannot fail to disclose the marks of their own historicity” (Strohm 3). *Sir Launfal* is no exception, I believe. The later fourteenth century England is neither a mere backdrop of the work, nor a mechanical aggregate of historical events, but a matrix within which the work is produced and received. Intended or not, *Sir Launfal* bears its own marks of its historicity.

II

Sir Launfal's distinctive features emerge clearly from the first scene in which our hero left the court. In *Lanval* the hero is described as “a rich and mighty baron” from the beginning. He is a son to a king of high descent, though his heritage is in a distant land, and he becomes a member of Arthur's household. Marie goes on to talk about Arthur's campaigns against the Picts and Scots. Arthur distributed honors and lands to “all the servants—save only

one.” So Launfal is presented to be neglected by the king, unjustly, in spite of his prowess. “Misprised” and mispraised, his honor is at stake. On top of that, he becomes destitute since Arthur did not give him land, but he still keeps spending as before saying nothing about his trouble, partly because of his pride or a sense of honor and partly because he has no one to turn to nearby. This is the reason why he rides out on his horse alone. In this poem, Lanval’s trouble is threefold; social, psychological and financial.

Contrastingly, Landevale’s trouble springs solely from his spending habit.

Sir Landevale, spent blythely,
And gaf gefyys largely;
So wildely his goode he sette
That he felle yn grete dette.
[Then gan he to make his mone:]
“Who hath no good, goode can he none!—
And I am here in uncuth londe,
And no gode have under honde;
Men will me hold for a wreche.” (21-29)

His poverty results from “his own uninhibited *largesse*” (Stokes 57). Landevale reminds us of Sir Cleges in that liberality is rewarded in the narrative as a noble virtue. Although there is a passing reference to his being “in uncuth londe,” which is a vague textual trace of Lanval’s social isolation in Marie’s poem, the poem does not take interest in his background any more. With no more information about his socio-economic status given to us, the main problem with him or the narrator’s concern about him seems to be a mercenary one. And this concern, in turn, is conjoined with his reputation. Unlike Lanval whose status as “a stranger in a foreign court” (Spearing 139) is emphasized,

Landevale is concerned about “Men will me hold for a wreche.” What his neighbors would think about him worries him. With his financial state intricately interwoven with his social standing, abstract virtues like honor or “goode” are considered to be incorporated in financial stability rather than his inner virtue or knightly valor. The above passage shows some typical features in *Sir Landevale*. Firstly, the shift from reported to direct speech is remarkable, making the poem more dramatic (Spearing 141). Secondly, “dilution of courtliness” (Spearing 142) is manifest. Abstract virtues are replaced with action or violent burst of emotion. Thirdly, psychological dimension is reduced. Inner interiority recedes. Instead, social relationship is foregrounded.

It is these features, not the elegant, suggestive, and symbolic narrative of Marie’s that Chestre inherited from his source. If Chestre had stopped here, it would be justifiable to say *Sir Launfal* is a “crude and less refined” bastard son of *Lanval*. But by compounding other episodes from *Graelent*, he transforms the poem into one that opens readers’ eyes to see Launfal’s place in the society he belongs to. The beginning of the poem with the description of Arthur’s court as the one “that helde Engelond yn good lawes” (2) makes it manifest that its concern is not confined to a knight alone. In the second stanza, the knights of the Round Table are introduced one by one. The enumeration of knights’ names, instead of a perfunctory mention of the Round Table as in his sources, conveys a more concrete picture of the social group to which Sir Launfal belongs. In this context, when he is presented to give “gyftys largelyche” “to squyer and to knyght” (28), his liberality seems to be a part of socializing activity and a performance of one of the many functions expected of aristocratic members.

He gaf gyftys largelyche,

Gold and sylver and clothes ryche,
To squyer and to knyght.
For hys largesse and hys bounté
The kynges stuard made was he
Ten yer, I you plyght;
Of alle the knyghtes of the Table Rounde,
So large ther nas noon yfounde
Be dayes ne be nyght. (28-36)

Intriguingly enough, neither prowess nor noble birth is mentioned in Launfal's introduction. It is the reputation of largesse that qualifies him for an appointment as a royal steward, "the official responsible for the provisioning of whole household and guests" (Stokes 58). Thanks to his official status in addition to his personal spending habit, Launfal becomes the "paragon of generosity" (Veldhoen 124). Differing both from *Lanval* where Arthur's distribution of lands is nothing more than a scaffold to explain Lanval's socio-economic status, and from *Sir Landevale* where the hero's socio-economic background is totally omitted, in Chestre's poem the detailed information about the society accumulates. Before Sir Launfal meets his lady, there are "various confrontations" (Veldhoen 124) between the knight and other people in his social circle. Instead of concentrating on the love of the knight and his beloved, Chestre inserts many other episodes that will help us to have a glimpse of fourteenth century England.

The appearance of Queen Guinevere in the poem is a telling example. She does not appear in any other sources or analogues. Her marriage to Arthur, rumor about her promiscuity, barons' dislike of her, and her gift-giving scenes are all Chestre's additions to the inherited sources. The episodes involving Guinevere add moral, economic, social and political dimensions to the poem.

First of all, the Queen's slighting of Sir Launfal in her gift-giving is presented to be an immediate cause of Launfal's leaving the court. Slighted, he does not bear the brunt of insult and leaves Arthur's court. And it results in his poverty. The implication is that, unlike Lanval and Sir Landevale, he never would have run out of money if he had stayed with Arthur (Furnish 138). This episode reveals that Launfal's accustomed largesse is made possible by his "symbiotic participation" (Furnish 138) with Arthur's court. The centrality of the court as a source of economic as well as of political power emerges clearly. And the privileges conferred upon the post of steward are strongly suggested. As the study of new parliamentary peerage in the reign of Edward III shows, the post of royal steward was not only a prestigious one but it also carries "substantial remuneration" (Bothwell 2004: 98). Launfal's poverty after leaving the court evinces, ironically, the economic resourcefulness put to the office of a royal steward. Unlike in *Lanval* and *Landevale*, *Sir Launfal* employs so many strands of the social web in which the eponymous hero is entwined that it outgrows a widely accepted definition of the genre as a narrative of a "solitary knight setting forth."

The gift-giving scene which is unique to this poem is another example. This scene is built on the contemporaries' knowledge of the multiple implications of gift-giving. "Giving gifts—usually in the form of food, sometimes of cloth or jewels—was an important social function, sometime with political implications" (Mertes 93). Although the poet never acknowledges it explicitly, Queen's slighting seems to result from his antipathy toward her. Thus, this scene exposes that gift-giving is a kind of a trade between the interested parties, which has been concealed beneath the veneer of the chivalrous virtue of largesse which, in turn, has always been gloriously praised and celebrated in romances. This scene is just a preamble to the subsequent

episodes that reveal the realities of fourteenth century England society in which courtliness and economy are indistinguishably compounded.

The ensuing encounter of Launfal with the mayor vividly illustrates that human relationship in Launfal's world is no longer based on chivalric value such as friendship, hospitality and mercy, but on monetary value and self interest. The mayor, who was formerly Launfal's servant, refuses to accommodate him after he finds that Launfal does not belong to the court any more. Although Anderson says that his lies reveal "bourgeois self-interest" (117), I suggest that his lies and excuses are indicative of the *Zeitgeist* of Launfal's society, because the intervening episodes concerning Arthur's nephews are not substantially different from the mayor episode. Arthur lets Launfal "[t]ak wyth the greet spendyng," (81) and has his two nephews accompany him to his home, as a courtesy of his ten-year service to him. But they are not as faithful as to stand by him to the end. When they find Launfal too impoverished to sustain, they unhesitatingly leave him.

They seyde, "Syr, our robes beth torent,
And your tresour ys all yspent,
And we goth ewyll ydyght."
Thanne seyde Syr Launfal to the knightes fre,
"Tellyth no man of my poverté,
For the love of God Almyght!" (139-144)

Economic conditions seem to weigh heavier than loyalty. The nephews care about the sartorial propriety, which will be repeated later when Launfal abstains from attending the mass because of his poor clothing. This concern about the outside appearance does not seem to be fit for chivalric ideal at first glance, and scarcely found in other preceding romances as well (compare him

with Chaucer's Knight!). But Launfal accepts their excuse as understandable. Furthermore, Launfal, in turn, asks them to keep his poverty to themselves when they come back to the court. They willingly agree to him and cover up for him in the court. They share a value system in common, which is definitely different from the ideal knighthood glorified in traditional romances. To both Launfal and Arthur's nephews, what neighbors would think is of supreme importance. honor and shame, which were two poles to support the chivalry system, are now transubstantiated into monetary term and poverty is recognized as a shameful thing. It is remarkably different from *Sir Cleges* which deals with a knight with a similar fortune.³⁾

Some scholars call this materialistic feature "bourgeoistic" (not infrequently, in a pejorative sense), or attribute it to "popular" (Pearsall 92) character of English romances. It is undeniable that *Sir Launfal* reflects the expectations of English audience who was composed of "mixed sorts," unlike the audience of Marie's *lais* two centuries earlier, ranging widely from the aristocratic group in the court through the middle and lower classes, including the small provincial nobility and the urban petty bourgeoisie. As Spearing, though reluctantly, acknowledges, "[I]t is in his evocation of the social dimension of a materialistic way of life that he shows his greatest strength" (154). I suggest that this "dimension of a materialistic way of life" is not only found in bourgeoisie as is uncritically presumed, but in the "chivalrous" society

3) *Sir Cleges* also becomes destitute due to his extreme largesse, and is later rewarded for this virtue and restored to wealth through supernatural intervention. Deprived of his property, he goes to country and lives a plain life. Though he is in sorrows "[s]ygheng full pyte wysly" (*Sir Cleges* 108), he does not think of his poverty as shameful. Rather his wife comforts him and "thanke God of Hys lone of all that He hath sent" (131-32) and the porter of the court who despised him for his poor appearance is punished in the end.

in the age of Edward III. The “vulgar” features which seem to stem from the mixed composition of the English audience are interlocked with reconceptualization of a knight the English audience share in Chrestre’s age, which results in a rather unheroic portrait of a knight, stripped of mystifying aura surrounding a knight in the majority of romances.

The concern of sartorial propriety, for example, looks undeniably coarse in the light of romance conventions, but, in the later medieval England, “presenting a splendid exterior to the world” (Mertes 102) was considered to be a political and social necessity. The first and second sumptuary laws, respectively in 1337 and 1363, substantiated the idea that a dress should correspond to his/her social status. “[T]he idea of a strict hierarchical view of society expressed by the means of dress was a fourteenth-century phenomenon” (Lachaud 119). As Mertes argues, the sumptuary legislation in the reign of Edward III “clearly indicates that people evaluated others by their clothing” (Mertes 103). If it is the case, Arthur’s nephews and Launfal may go absolved of the accusations of vulgarity, or rather, one can say that their excessive concern about their appearance is an incontrovertible mark of an aristocratic member strutting in the streets of fourteenth century London. One step further, one can argue that *Sir Launfal* is not to blame for its materialistic and bourgeois feature, for it portrays a knight not infrequently found in Chrestre’s England.

III

The relationship of Launfal with his beloved has different character compared with that of Marie’s poem. As many scholars have pointed out,

Lanval's encounter with the *faerie* in Marie's text has a nature of wish-fulfillment. The dual grants given by the *faerie* to Lanval corresponds at once to "an obvious male erotic fantasy" (Spearing 135) and the fantasy of disinherited males. Lanval's own remark when he returns from her pavilion to his place emphasizes "the closeness of the whole episode to a dream or fantasy" (Stokes 63).

Mult est Lanval en grant esfrei;
 de s'adventure vait pensant
 e en sun curge dotant.
 Esbaiz est, ne set que creire;
 Il ne la quide mie a veire. (196-200)⁴⁾

He was greatly disturbed, thinking of his adventure and uneasy in his heart. He was at a loss to know what to think, for he could not believe it was true. (75)

The anonymity of the fairy lady and the secrecy of their love reinforce the mysteriousness and otherworldliness of the fairy world. In opposition to "the flawed, earthly world of the court" (Seaman 110), the fairy lover represents the idealized, spiritual world of love. Marie strictly separates the private from the public and concentrates on the private as the poem proceeds. Lanval's choice at the end of the poem to ride a palfrey behind the lady and go over to Avalon is a conclusion fitted for a knight who mourns after a rash oath to Guinevere that he cannot see his lady anymore and seeks only for her forgiveness. The court where people look for economic prosperity and personal advancement

4) The citations are from *Lais de Marie de France*. Ed. Laurence Harf Lancner. The translation is from *The Lais of Marie de France* by Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby.

lost “its sanctions and incentives” (Stokes 67).

The completely private character of Lanval’s relationship with the fairy lady is in sharp contrast with that of Launfal’s relationship with Tryamour. Skipping the description of the intensity of their love which is the main focus in *Lanval*, Chestre shows more interest in the public display of the “benefits” accompanied with the love: economic prosperity and personal advancement. At first glance, Tryamour seems to want “privacy” of their love, directing Launfal not to reveal her name or presence to anybody. However, the gift package and the gift-giving process arranged by Tryamour herself inevitably entails his exposure to the public view. Unlike in *Lanval* where wealth is provided for him unnoticed by anyone else, Sir Launfal’s lady provides her gifts ostentatiously. “Ten well yharneysyth men” (376-77) ride into the city “to presente hym, wyth pryde” (381) with silver, gold, “ryche clothes and armure bright” (382). They ask where Launfal abides (these faeries are not informed of the direction!) and deliver the gifts in magnificent display. Public relations supersede a private paradise of love as a core of his relation with Tryamour, or of Chestre’s concern with their love.

“Love” of Launfal and Tryamour has a problematic nature, too. Idealistic love in *Lanval* is lost in *Sir Launfal*. When the fairy lady gives a purse to Lanval, it is a grant added to the bounty of her heart and loving care, symbolic of her infinite love. But, as Spearing criticizes, Tryamour’s gift to Launfal is imagined far more materialistically and visually (152). A silk purse, a tangible and visual object, is given to Launfal by Tryamour and she is “metonymically equated with the gold,” for when he loses her favor by betraying her name to Guinevere, he finds the purse empty for the first time (Seaman 114). The emptiness of the purse and the disappearance of the servant and the horse, which are Chestre’s unique additions to the sources, are given more emphasis

than the loss of the lover itself (Spearing 153). Though Lanval, Graellent, and Landevale, the heroes in the sources, have all financially benefited from their love, they lament their loss of love on the moment that they find their love gone. Only in Chestre's poem, it takes twelve lines to burst forth his pain at the realization of the loss of wealth before he bemoans the loss of his lover.

Likewise, the response of Launfal, when the fairy lady visits Arthur's court to acquit him of the charges against him, is considerably different from those of Lanval and Landevale. Lanval and Landevale are relieved to see the lady once more. Lanval says he does not care whether people slay him or not, for his cure is in seeing her. Landevale briefly mentions that his misfortune will be relieved now, but goes on to say he does not care about death since he sees her with his eyes. Launfal's response is contrasting.

“Her,” he seyde, “comyth my lemman swete!
Sche myghte me of my balys bete,
Yef that lady wolde.” (970-972)

He is solely interested in the prospect that her appearance at the court will relieve him of his trouble. He is not concerned about her love, nor regretful of his rashness. Even her sexuality which attracts so much attention from the citizens in the street and from the barons at the court does not appeal to him at this moment. He is too self-interested and self-absorbed. He has no scruples about the violation of an oath. Thus, it is no wonder that Chestre omits the scene found in *Lanval* and *Landevale* in which the hero pleads for forgiveness from her and the lady accepts his apology, though at first she refuses it. Idealized courtly love gives place to more practical and materialistic relationship. Tryamour is an “ideal” lady to Launfal in the sense that she

finances his “knightly” activities limitlessly, fulfilling his economic wish.

The following passage shows clearly that Tryamour provides everything he may hope for to regain his former status.

“Also,” sche seyde, “Syr Launfal,
I yeve the Blanchard, my stede lel,
 And Gyfre, my own knave.
And of my armes oo pensel
Wyth thre ermyns ypeynted well,
 Also thou schalt have.
In werre ne yn turnemen
tNe schall the greve no knyghtes dent,
 So welly schall the save.” (325-33)

Launfal is given by Tryamour what identifies him as a knight: a steed, a banner of arms, and a servant. Launfal’s knighthood is entirely dependent on Tryamour. Tryamour’s three repetitions of “my” in accoutering Launfal reminds us that Launfal, unlike his predecessors, “has no identity without Dame Tryamour” (Weldon 116). Revenue, armor, horse, and knightly companion have all come from her. Even a banner imprinted with heraldic image is conferred on him. This is a detail unique to Chestre’s poem. In addition to this, another unique insertion is found in Tryamour’s introduction. In Chestre’s poem, Tryamour is introduced to be as the “kynges doughter of Olyroun” (278) while Launfal’s origin is not known. This original insertion strongly suggests that Chestre intends to convey an impression that Launfal’s knightly identity comes from his conjunction with the female line rather than along the male line.

Although many cases are found both in romances and in history that males ascend on the status ladder with marriage, an accumulation of “small” changes

of the inherited material through omissions and insertions of details in the poem concerning the lineage of the hero and the heroine and acquisition of knightly status through marriage are specifically reminiscent of the remarkable increase of inheritance through daughters in England in the wake of Black Death. As is well known, the new demographic conditions after the plague affected the rearrangement of lands. Absence of male heirs in many households redirected the line of descent. Merging of estates through marriage was frequently found. And “the proportions of inheritances passing to or through daughters rose from less than 20 per cent in the first half of the fourteenth century to over 30 per cent in the second half” (Palying 414). Though the proportion declined thereafter, “a powerful regard for the rights of daughters as the heiresses” (Palying 414) still prevailed in the late medieval England. For the careerists, the heiresses would provide the best opportunity to fulfill their dreams. Materialistic interests on the male side are traded with the desire to keep the family name on the female side. In this sense, Lanval, Landevale, and Launfal are all very lucky. But it is *Sir Launfal* that debunks the idealism of love which has been indulgently celebrated in the greater part of the romances. Self-indulging in love and all-consuming intensity of love, neglect of secular concerns, self-sacrifice or selfless service to the lady, and other ennobling features of love, are all forgotten in *Sir Launfal*, but the calculating practical concerns are openly suggested, at least, as concomitant to their love. And this is one of the main reasons for the criticism against the poem as bourgeois. But it should be noted that negotiations, calculation, speculation are the terms with which marriage is considered in the nobility and *Sir Launfal* merely bares it open. If readers feel still uncomfortable with this poem, it is because the unveiling of the mechanism that works behind courtly love and marriage is contrary to the expectations of the generic conventions. The imbalance between

the generic conventions and the poem's unique deployment of romance motifs, inescapably, embarrasses modern critics who have a preconception of what a romance should be like. As for Chestre, however, a romance seems to be an amorphous heap of materials which he can deploy as he pleases, to depict what he observes in the lives of the contemporary nobility.

IV

Many charges have been laid upon the mayor's immediate change of attitude toward Launfal on seeing his riches. The main target is his demonstrable bourgeois materialism.

And whan the Meyrseygh that *rychesse*
And Syr Launfales *noblenesse*,
He held himself foule yschent. (400-402) (Italics mine.)

In the view of the mayor, "rychesse" and "noblenesse" are inseparably interlocked. At first glance, Mayor's response seems to be intolerably materialistic. And this is one of the many points of which critics such as Spearing complain. In terms of otherworldly idealism of Marie's poem, the insertion of this detail is a deplorable degradation, but in terms of societal concerns consistently palpable in Chestre's own insertions, the mayor's reaction is an interesting reminder of visual culture and exuberant display found in the contemporary England. As Mertes describes in detail, English nobility is expected to spend money on every possible item. "By keeping a luxurious house and a generous table, by dressing servants in fine livery, by displaying a large following, a lord was able to assert his nobility, proclaim his wealth,

and advertise his power” (Mertes 103). Then, Mayor’s response is not to blame, for it is nothing more than a reflection of an idea embedded in the contemporaries’ mind that nobleness and wealth are almost exchangeable terms.

Chestre exposes the falsehood of the ideology that supports the feudalistic social structure in the sense that Chestre does not intend to idealize the knightly class. Or rather, we can say that Chestre’s poem, consciously or unconsciously, reveals the social mechanism that runs the society in his age. What distinguishes his poem from other romances is that his poem makes it manifest that the nobility have secular, practical, materialistic concerns, while the majority of the romances that preceded his were composed to “entertain a courtly audience and reinforce a belief in its own superiority” (Sweeney 15). If one calls Chestre’s poem “down to earth,” it is true in the sense that his knight is no more an idealized, ahistorical being but a person standing on the firm ground of fourteenth century England. Bourgeoistic features in the poem have been one of the main targets in the poem’s criticism. They look bizarre, especially when the poem is juxtaposed with *Lanval* which is presented in all elegance and subtlety. It would be more appropriate to call his poem “demythifying” the knightly class rather than bourgeoistic.

The tournament scenes are of great significance in terms of both the structure of the poem and the conceptualization of a knight. As is well known, the tournament scenes are found only in Chestre’s poem. In spite of the criticism on the insertion of the tournament scenes for their ineptness or “bloodthirstiness” (Bliss 43), *Sir Launfal* differs from its sources and analogues partly because of the tournaments (Weldon 112; Laskaya 200). The tournaments function as a vehicle to widen the vistas of *Sir Launfal* from personal to public domain. The episodes in Karlyoun, Glastonbury and

Lombardy provide Chester with more sites to explore what it means to be a knight in his age.

Firstly, the fact that the first tournament comes to be held in honor of Launfal as a result of his deeds of largesse makes plain the linkage of riches, fame, and honor. The poem divulges that a true key to his (re)-entry into the nobility lies in wealth, for the tournament is, in the last analysis, made possible by his wealth and the subsequent events leading up to his reintegration into the court are built on the fame he won at the first tournament. It may be needless to say the importance of wealth in Chestre's England. When Henry of Lancaster says that birth and behavior are most important to judge the gentility of a person, wealth is "too obvious to be mentioned" (Waugh 117) as a factor of what constitutes nobility. Thus, the linkage of wealth and status itself may not be new at all. What is distinctive is that Chestre brings up this linkage, which has been assumed to be too natural to be noticed, to the surface of a romance.

Tournaments are one of the stock motifs in romances employed to test one's martial skills, to probe into his moral virtues, and so to prove his "gentility." In *Sir Launfal* too, a tournament provides Launfal a chance to prove his qualification as a knight. However, the narrative barely conceals the dubious nature of his victory for his victory seems to result from Tryamour's promise of magical protection rather than his own martial skills or prowess. With no precedent in the sources, Chestre has it that Tryamour gives Launfal magical power that will prevent him from being injured "in werre ne yn turnement" (331). Then, his victories at the tournament do not prove his own might. Generally speaking, the use of magic in romances is "one of the authorial tool to create morally ambiguous situations which encouraged analysis by the audience" (Sweeney 13). Sometimes magical protection of a

knight will be a sign of his innate nobility or providential deliverance, while, in other times, it will be interpreted to be ominous or even diabolic. So Tryamour's promise of magical protection itself is not to blame, but solicits a detailed analysis.

In the joust with the giant Valentyne, as is expected, Launfal wins over Valentyne. But the poem does not hide the fact that his victory is a hollow one, or a kind of a magic show. Valentyne is such an invincible adversary that Launfal cannot defend himself. When Launfal is endangered, Gyfre becomes invisible suddenly and helps Launfal three times. Without Gyfre's help, this fight must have been mortal to Launfal. As Gyfre becomes invisible at the moment, no spectators of the tournament notices that Launfal's victory is heavily indebted to the supernatural help. But the poem's audience is invited to witness that Launfal passes the final test of his knighthood that will make him regain his former social identity in the court with the help of external power, whether it is magic or Tryamour's resourcefulness.

I suggest this scene represents the ambivalence in the conceptualization of a knight of the age. When Furnish says that "[a] careful reading shows that Chestre deploys elements such as class consciousness, chivalric spectacle deliberately and ironically, more like Chaucer handling his Franklin" (Furnish 137), it has a point. Chestre's poem gets close to a parody of knighthood (cf. O'Brien 35). Employing the stock motifs of a romance inversely, Chestre discloses the vacuity of a cultural belief that supports and perpetuates the social structure: a knight is a fighting man. The tournaments disclose that wealth rather than prowess is a necessary physical base for one's recognition of knighthood. But it does not mean that Chestre discards the traditional idea of a knight as *bellatore* entirely, for he represents Launfal as a winner of a tournament, however suspect the nature of his victory may be. By adding the

tournaments, the poem shows that both largess “as an economic posture proper to *gentils*” (Stokes 69) and “publicly acclaimed chivalrous renown” (Laskaya 200) are required for a person to be recognized as a knight. Chestre does not endorse the traditional idea of a knight as a fighting man wholeheartedly, nor wholly abandons it. Negotiating with common expectations of a knight, Chestre addresses the problems inherent in the conceptualization of a knight in his age through the tournament scenes.

It is difficult to see what makes Chestre’s poem so different from earlier romances. A clue to solve the questions may be found in Chestre’s age which ceaselessly draws people’s attention to one’s social standing which is entwined with the size of estate as a result of unprecedented political, social and economic changes. An illustrating event is the palace coup of Edward III in 1330. The king formally announced the assumption of independent power in late October 1330. It meant many political changes which included the execution of Roger Mortimer, the complete withdrawal of Queen Isabelle from the stage and the promotion of his supporters and “friends.” It also meant enormous economic changes. In particular, substantial amounts of land which had returned to the king’s possession with the execution of the old “time-servers” were redistributed. Edward’s redistribution of lands which started with the success of the coup lasted at least for seven years until the establishment of earldoms in 1337 (Bothwell 2001: 35-52). High social mobility was interlocked with the redistribution of land, thus, “who got what” was inescapably a big topical issue. What mattered in the distribution was fairness and balance. Chester’s insertion of the slighting of Launfal in Guinevere’s gift-giving is symptomatic of the general concern of English people in his age. Knighthood, gentility, nobility are not any more conceived to be born with, but to be subject to many factors, the most important one of

which is the amount of wealth.

An analysis of the new promotions of people into peerage with the start of the new reign of Edward III reveals some interesting points. Compared with Henry I's promotions which were made up of "men raised from the dust," Edward III's sixty-nine new promotions are divided into three main groups (Bothwell 2004: 15). "Roughly half were for men who already had the wealth to sustain their new ranks" (Bothwell 2004: 16). Others were promoted in recognition of the previous loyal service to the king, but in this case too, the size of his estate was still significant. In the last group were the people "holding larger estates who were summoned to encourage better service in the future" (Bothwell 2004: 17). The analysis of the new promotions shows that a large estate of land was a key to a new entry into the peerage. In varying degrees, the size of the estate had been important in the promotions into the titled nobility in medieval England. But one of the distinctive features in the age of Edward III was that the size of the estate was relatively variable as a result of the run of events since the downfall of Edward II in 1327 through the coup of Edward III in 1330 to the establishment of earldoms in 1337. With this high mobility, one who had never dreamed of it before could cherish the hope of a new entry into the peerage. The distinctive features of Chestre's poem—Launfal's first entry into the Arthur's court made possible by his fame of largess which means nothing else than his economic power, and Launfal's re-entry into the court based upon his newly-gained wealth—can be properly understood when viewed in the context of the state of affairs in Chestre's England which he tries to portray as his keen observing eyes lead to, making most of the material inherited from his sources.

As we have seen so far, many complaints about *Sir Launfal* spring from the materialistic aspects of the poem. Spearing, for example, criticizes Chestre,

saying that “[h]is conception of reality in *Sir Launfal* is intensely materialistic” (153). This kind of criticism is blind to, at least, two points. Firstly it presupposes particular features as prerequisites of a romance: a romance should portray an idealistic and spiritual inner world in a suggestive and symbolic manner. And that presupposition is based upon another premise that twelfth-century French romances are a highly recommended model of a romance and that the “popular” English romances in the later middle ages are mongrels lacking elegance and the refined sentiment. Secondly, related with the first, it neglects the fact that a genre goes through transmutations in accordance with the climatic changes in the society which is the matrix producing a literary work. Difference in time and space entails differences in literature, too. A poem born of a core member of the twelfth century aristocratic French court cannot or, one is tempted to say, should not subsume a poem born two centuries later in the soil brimming with social, political and social changes within and without the court.

If that is the case, the difference found in the romances at either side of the channel is not a matter of superiority/inferiority. Sir Launfal wants to establish his own lineage, not to remain a bastard son of Lanval.

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Sir Launfal: A Portrait of a Knight in Fourteenth Century England

Abstract

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The purpose of this study is to relate *Sir Launfal* to fourteenth century England and to explore the contemporary re-conceptualization of a knight presented in the poem. My argument is that *Sir Launfal* is a portrait of a knight, not ensconced in the idealized setting as in Marie de France's poem, but frequently found among fourteenth century English nobility. Appropriating inherited literary materials and stock motifs of the genre, Chestre demystifies the ideal of knighthood, de-idealizes romantic love and discloses the cohesiveness of wealth and knighthood, mainly through his own insertions of episodes that serve to widen the prospect of the poem from an individual knight to the society in which he is entwined in the social networks and the value system shared by its members. "Materialistic" or "bourgeois" features found in the poem and criticized so far are symptomatic or reflective of the state of affairs in Chestre's age, such as the sumptuary laws, visual display culture of the nobility, inheritance of lands through heiresses, and a series of redistribution of estates from 1327 to 1337. In conclusion, *Sir Launfal* is not a deplorable degradation of *Lanval*, nor should it be evaluated by the standard which sets the twelfth century French romances as a model. Rather, it should be viewed as a poem born in fourteenth-century England—brimming with social, political and social changes within and without the court—intended to depict a knight of this age.

Key Words

Chestre, Marie de France, *Sir Launfal*, *Lanval*, knight, fourteenth century, romance, nobility

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