Otherworldly Ethics: Trouthe and the Fairy Mistress in the Lays of Lanval, Graelent, Guingamor and Sir Launfal

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OTHERWORLDLY ETHICS: TROUTHE AND THE FAIRY MISTRESS IN THE
LAYS OF LANVAL, GRAELENT, GUINGAMOR AND SIR LAUNFAL

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for a Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors
(English)

The Honors College
University of Maine
May 2023

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ABSTRACT

While the nature of fictional fairies in medieval romance has been widely discussed and it has been acknowledged by many scholars that fairies typically offer some critique of the human courts in which they intervene, they have yet to be examined in relation to their ethical impact and conceptions of justice. In order to address this, this thesis performs a close reading of four Breton lays, *Lanval*, *Graelent*, *Guingamor* and *Sir Launfal* using a framework of medieval folklaw. The four fairies of these lays introduce to their respective poems a unique feminine ethic that critiques the enactment of *trouthe* practiced in the human court by appearing to human knights and testing them, exposing their moral failings and the ways they contribute to the corrupt ethics of the human world. These fairy mistresses further offer an alternative model of justice and *trouthe*, often more forgiving than the model used in the human court. This thesis demonstrates that fairies, far from being arbitrary or illogical, establish a subtly didactic undertone to the narratives in which they intervene.
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INTRODUCTION

Fairies in medieval romance serve a wide variety of purposes and behave in wildly differing manners ranging from the fairy king of *Sir Orfeo* who abducts the protagonist's wife, to shapeshifters like Melusine to the fairy knights who seduce and impregnate human women. For the most part, scholars tend to view otherworldly characters as adoxic, neither prescribing to nor opposed to the accepted ethical standards or beliefs, a view which helps justify many of the ethically dubious actions of these characters and for Wade “allowed for the exemption of fairies…from any social or moral structures established in the human worlds of their texts” and made them a useful device for criticizing those established ethics.¹ For example, scholars of *Sir Orfeo* have heavily speculated the fairy king's motives for abducting Heurodis, some reading him as a collector, others choosing to excuse his behavior on the basis that individuals from the Otherworld do not necessarily subscribe to the same set of morals or understanding of "good" or "bad" that we do. In the four romances examined in this thesis, the fairy maidens’ portrayal range from forgiving, to rewarding knights for reprehensible acts of sexual assault to mutilating members of the human court. Byrne writes that the otherworldly ethic is subtly formulated in each individual text through the narrative and the ways that these otherworldly characters influence it rather than any direct statements declaring their position.² Thus, a deeper consideration of the characters’ actions beyond the act itself and in the context of what it responds to and/or how they interfere in the

status quo is necessary to understand the ethic they represent. While much scholarship is available tracing the most common themes and motifs associated with the Otherworldly, for example, crossing from one physical space to another often via a body of water, less common are examinations of the ethics portrayed through the use of fairies in medieval romance, most writers like Wade and Byrne briefly noting that they serve to critique the human court without delving into how or what they critique. To an even greater extent, some lays have been almost entirely neglected beyond an interest in the literary origins of certain motifs.

The wide range of functions that fairies fulfill in medieval literature, however, should warrant more exploration rather than be written off and collected under one umbrella of arbitrary, illogical behavior. This thesis therefore examines four related Breton lays, the complicated histories of which will be discussed momentarily. The lays will be discussed in the chronological order of composition that is currently accepted moving from the 12th century *Lanval*, written by Marie de France to the two anonymous Old French lays *Graelent* and *Guingamor*, and finally Thomas Chestre’s 14th century Middle English version of *Lanval, Sir Launfal*, which drew on Marie’s work extensively and possibly derived some of its material from the anonymous lays. This thesis will explore these four lays in terms of the depictions of fairies in each with particular attention to the treatment of *trouthe* and its relationship to folk law as a possible gateway to reading the lays and their social commentary. This thesis is primarily concerned with the verbal contracts formed by humans with the supernatural in each story and aims to explore the conceptions of *trouthe*, obligation and justice developed in the narratives through the intervention of fairy patronesses in the human world.
The genre of the Breton lay is somewhat difficult to define definitively and is
generally accepted to be any poem produced from the mid-12th to mid-15th century that
self-identifies as a written version of a lay that would have been sung by Bretons with
harp accompaniment.\textsuperscript{3} These are a type of medieval romance, and thus typically
concerned with themes of chivalry and courtly love. Anglo-Norman writer Marie de
France, one of the earliest known French female poets, is perhaps the most well-known
author of Breton lays and sometimes said to be the originator of the genre.\textsuperscript{4} Despite her
popularity, little is known about her true identity besides the assumption that she must
have been born into nobility to be as well-educated as her works indicate and that she had
connections at court as she dedicated her work to a king. While Marie's and Chestre's lays
and their use of fairy intervention have been explored in terms of these themes and their
possible social impacts or reflections, the oaths that drive the poems have been explored
only superficially and the four lays as a whole have not been connected to their authors'
contemporary contexts of folk law and \textit{trouthe}. Because of concern that the romance
genre and the Breton lay has with chivalry, which was closely linked to one’s \textit{trouthe}, we
might reach a deeper understanding of them when we consider \textit{trouthe} and the
consequences of each knight's enactment of it.

\textit{Trouthe}, or \textit{treuthe} in the Middle English Dictionary encompasses many
definitions. As a noun, it refers to loyalty to country or individuals, to God; a promise or
oath; personal honor/integrity, or honesty; moral goodness.\textsuperscript{5} The term itself originated in

\textsuperscript{3} Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, eds., introduction to \textit{The Middle English Breton Lays}, (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995) p.1
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.
Old English as *treowþ* and developed into the Middle English term *trouthe*. There were analogs in other languages such as Old Norse, medieval Latin, and in Old French the word *trieve*, used in the sense of a truce or calling a truce.\(^6\) The term “prometre,” defined as a promise or an order in *Dictionnaire de l’ancien Français* and in the Anglo-Norman dictionary connected to legally swearing an oath or vow would also have paralleled the concept and practice of oath making.\(^7\) Although three of the four lays discussed in this thesis were written in Old French, for the sake of simplicity the term *trouthe* will be used throughout to reference the concept of oath-making overall. The Middle English language may also provide insight into Romanic depictions of the rituals of oath making as *treow*, an Old English word for *troth* or *trouthe*, is a homonym for the word *treow* which referenced a tree and the two shared an Indo-European root. Green acknowledges a long-standing tradition connecting *troth* and wood that has survived in the Child Ballads and offers some examples of ritual uses of wood in forming contracts.\(^8\) This connection is perhaps evident even in the Medieval Romances and tales concerning fairies; fairies are traditionally encountered either by falling asleep under a tree as Heurodis does under the ympe-tre in *Sir Orfeo*, or in the forest as occurs in the four lays discussed in this thesis.

Throughout medieval literature, the semantic uses of *trouthe* become a bit muddled and overlap such that the various definitions become almost inextricably intertwined. Primarily, the term represented one’s ability to fulfill their promises, to adhere to their word and be faithful, particularly in the case of a lord to a vassal or vice...


\(^8\) Green, *A Crisis of Truth*, p.10
versa. Uses in the context of the theological sense or of factual accuracy/realisticness would not come into popularity until the late 14th century.\(^9\) Verbal agreements, *trouthe*, and the social obligations they invoked were the foundation of feudal society and more generally the relationships between individuals. Carolyn Barry Cole in 1984 conducted an in-depth analysis of the history of troth in Medieval England as it pertained to feudal society originating in the verbal agreements between military leaders and warriors in Anglo-Saxon times and how such pledges developed through the Anglo-Norman period to bind kings and knights in a mutual arrangement that hinged on aid and protection.\(^10\)

Richard Firth Green, in *A Crisis of Truth*, discusses how the legal and ethical senses of *trouthe* were quite entwined when it came to practicing medieval folk law, particularly in oral societies. The legal senses of *trouthe*, which Green refers to as *troth*, reached back to the Anglo-Saxon period and Old English uses of the word and through some semantic destabilization expanded to encompass the ethical senses of *trouthe*.\(^11\) Thus, the reputations of the individuals involved held significant influence in the proceedings of folk law litigation and one’s reputation for keeping their word came to be somewhat equated with them being factually truthful or trustworthy.\(^12\)

In oral societies, contracts would not have been recorded to provide evidence in the case of dispute, but instead contracts were made memorable by the use of tokens, gestures, careful verbal oaths which were witnessed by individuals who could later vouch for the occurrence of a pact or promise.\(^13\) The incorporation of physical objects into the

\(^9\) Ibid, p.25  
\(^10\) Carolyn Barry Cole. “The Purpose and Practice of Troth in Medieval English Society and Literature.” (University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1984)  
\(^11\) Green, *A Crisis of Truth*, p.14  
\(^12\) Ibid.  
\(^13\) Ibid., 42
ritual of oath-making (coupled with certain gestures using those objects) gave it, to use Green’s term, a “thing-like” quality that made it more concrete for participants.\textsuperscript{14} The language of the verbal oaths sworn would have laid out the conditions of the agreement and the consent performatively for the benefit of the witnesses.\textsuperscript{15}

For societies becoming more reliant on written documents through the end of the 13th and into the 14th century, Richard Firth Green describes how “increasing reliance on written records forced people to confront not only the fallibility of human memory but, far more traumatically, the unreliability of human trouthe.”\textsuperscript{16} Though the feudal relationship, primarily based on exchange of service and material rewards did not abandon this system entirely for the written one and instead the two systems coexisted.\textsuperscript{17} Often, the oath would be made with all the performative trappings, but supplemented by an official written record.

In each of the four poems discussed in this thesis, the protagonist knight who has fallen from good social standing enters into an agreement with an Otherworldly woman through which he receives her love and a variety of other gifts associated with wealth and ultimately restores his social status. The order of composition has been highly debated over the past century or so though the generally accepted order of composition is currently: \textit{Lanval, Graelent, Guingamor, Sir Launfal}.\textsuperscript{18} Although Chestre’s \textit{Sir Launfal} draws heavily on Marie’s \textit{Lanval}, it is uncertain whether and/or to what degree the two anonymous lays drew on \textit{Lanval}, or whether they merely share source materials in older

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 50
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p.59
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p.39
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p.157
folklore. Prior to the 20th century, some scholars directly attributed *Graelent* and *Guingamor* to the work of Marie. Stokoe in 1948 suggested that Graelent actually preceded Marie’s story, but C. Segre and Illingworth have contested this, positing the *Lanval, Graelent, Guingamor, Sir Launfal* order of composition accepted as correct today, claiming that Graelent and Guingamor both drew extensively on Marie’s lays, and that Guingamor also used material from Graelent.\(^\text{19}\) Considering the similarity in plot and even at times several consecutive lines between the four lays, it is clear there is some relationship or ongoing process of narrative adaptation occurring.

Marie de France’s *Lanval* begins with Lanval, a knight foreign to the court he serves. Though she tells us that he serves the king well, he is forgotten by the king; though impoverished, he receives no gifts from the king who gives generously to everyone else. Still, Lanval fulfills the general qualities of a knight, including being generous himself, a virtue referred to as *largesse*. Consequently, Lanval rides into the forest and meets a fairy who tells him she has appeared in the forest for him and wishes to grant him her love on the condition that he never speaks of her to others, which Lanval accepts, essentially entering into a “contract” agreement with the fairy. The fairy’s luxurious gifts restore Lanval’s status in the king’s court. One day, Lanval catches the eye of the queen who goes to him and attempts to seduce him. Lanval rejects her, but the queen goads him, suggesting that he prefers men to which he rashly responds that he is in love with a woman far more beautiful than the queen, thus breaking his agreement with his fairy lover. Lanval must then appear at court and is put on trial for insulting the queen. He is asked to present his lover as proof of the truthfulness of his claim, but

because he has broken his oath she has abandoned him. However, she appears at the last
moment, absolving him and Lanval leaps on the back of her horse going with her to the
Otherworld.\textsuperscript{20}

The anonymous \textit{Graelent} author reverses the two phases of the story; Graelent, a
respected knight, is first propositioned by the queen before encountering the fairy.
Graelent reminds the queen of her promises made to the king and attempts to deter her by
reminding her that he too is loyal to the king. The queen continues to pursue him,
however, sending him lavish gifts until finally she slanders him to the king who stops
paying him, casting Graelent into poverty. Graelent’s narrative, however, strangely
diverges from its predecessor when, upon encountering the fairy maiden in the woods,
attempting to steal her clothes and being reprimanded and having his advances rebuffed,
he cajoles then rapes her despite having just fended off the queen’s harassment. Even
oddier, the fairy now gives him her love with the same stipulation as Lanval’s fairy that he
must not speak of her. From there, the story continues accordingly, with Graelent’s
restored status and a period of bliss until at the Pentecost feast, the king has the queen
stand on a bench, placing her on display and demanding that all his guests praise her.
Graelent criticizes this demonstration, rashly revealing the existence of his fairy mistress
resulting in him being placed on trial. Once again, the fairy comes to exonerate him.

Graelent then attempts to follow her back to the Otherworld but the fairy is angry with
him and almost allows him to drown in a river before she rescues him.\textsuperscript{21}


Guingamor, another anonymous lai, diverges most dramatically from both of these stories. Guingamor, is the nephew of the king and stands to inherit his throne. Like Graelent, he is propositioned by the queen early in the story; however, unlike both Graelent and Lanval, he is never cast into poverty. Instead, he willingly embarks on a hunt for a white boar that has been seen in the forest. The king is hesitant to allow him to pursue the boar because he has lost ten other knights who attempted the same, but Guingamor takes advantage of the rash oath his uncle makes and convinces him to lend him the tools he needs. After a long hunting scene during which he encounters an empty palace/tower, Guingamor like Graelent stumbles upon a maiden bathing in the woods and attempts to steal her clothes. Unlike Graelent, however, he is adequately discouraged from this by the fairy’s warning that his reputation would be damaged. The fairy tells him that he will never kill the boar without her help, and offers her assistance on the condition that he lodge with her for three days. He agrees, and returns to her palace with her where he finds the other ten knights said to have been lost. On the third day, he tries to leave with the boar’s head and his uncle’s dog but the fairy tells him it has been three hundred years, not three days. He still wants to leave, and says he will return if nobody remembers him or his uncle, and the fairy allows it, extracting a promise that he will not eat or drink anything from the human world. He finds a woodcutter who tells him some older folk still remember his uncle’s kingdom. Guingamor gives him the boar’s head and tries to return to the fairy realm, but becomes hungry and, forgetting his promise, eats some fruit he finds. His body becomes decrepit and he is mercifully rescued by the fairy’s maidens who carry him back to the fairy world.22

Thomas Chestre’s *Sir Launfal*, composed in Middle English, follows much the same plot as Marie’s original *Lanval* with a few creative revisions. The story begins with Launfal’s relative passing away, so Launfal leaves the human court with Arthur’s blessing to put his affairs in order. However, he overspends leaving himself impoverished. He rides into the forest and encounters the fairy maiden who offers him the same boon of her love and endless financial support as long as Launfal does not speak of her. He agrees and enjoys the benefits of her love. Chester provides hundreds of lines worth of detail regarding jousts at which Launfal triumphs which restores him to the king’s court, earning him an invite to a feast. It is here that Gwenore propositions him, and he refuses her advances by rashly claiming that his fairy lady is more beautiful than the queen. The queen lies to Arthur and tells him that Launfal propositioned *her*. Launfal is put to trial and though the other knights vouch for him and clear him of the charge that he approached the queen, he must still answer for his boast that his lady is more beautiful. He must bring his lady forward, but since he broke his vow of silence she has abandoned him. Like Lanval’s fairy however, Tryamour appears at court to free him and the story culminates in him exiting the human realm with her.23

Although built on the same skeletal structure, the differences in these narratives contribute to unique conceptions of *trouthe* and criticisms of the human courts. While fairies are a popular subject in the study of medieval romance, scholars largely hesitate to apply any ethical description to them, instead choosing to read them as outside of any identifiable ethical rules. Fairies in medieval literature have been widely studied in terms of the traditions to which certain tropes belong and their common supernatural effects.

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Richard Firth Green in *Elf Queens and Holy Friars* offers an examination of the intersection between the cultural beliefs surrounding fairies and the various depictions of them that we get from historical accounts and medieval literature.\(^{24}\) Narrower readings of fairies in medieval romance have been done by Aisling Byrne and Corinne Saunders regarding the effect of the supernatural on readers and concerning the narrative use of fairy lovers and the “arbitrary” stipulations they impose to incite conflict and drive the narrative forward.\(^{25}\)

James Wade in *Fairies in Medieval Romance* offers a similar examination of the interactions between the supernatural and the human worlds, exploring the similarities and differences in representations of fairies as they shift in accordance with an author’s intended aesthetic or readership. Wade suggests that each story contains its own “internal folklore” because each story reimagines the supernatural in unique ways to suit its own narrative needs.\(^{26}\) Further, fairies, even those who demonstrate the most abhorrent behavior, escape judgment from audiences because they occupy a special conceptual space in which they are free from the mores imposed on humans, especially by Christianity; they acted neither within nor against any established orthodoxy.\(^{27}\) While I find the concept of “internal folklore” useful to keep in mind, I hesitate to agree with Wade’s persistent description of fairies as “arbitrary” and “illogical” as we will see that many fairy actions we could take to be illogical might contribute to a larger theme. While Wade describes fairies as arbitrary and illogical and adoxic, he also acknowledges that


\(^{26}\) Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, p.3

\(^{27}\) Ibid., p.15
they function as a criticism of the human court and even adhere to ethical codes in some cases, but does not go into much depth on this matter.  

Simone Kingma has done a thorough examination of the same four lays looking at how the social critique of the human world changed through each iteration of the story. While being one of the few pieces of scholarship that includes discussion of the anonymous lays alongside those for whom we have identified the authors, it is focused on the limitations of the human court to provide for knights materially and sexually rather than ethical criticisms of the court. While a reasonable claim that fairies point out the inadequacy of the human court and its inability to provide for its knights through extreme demonstrations of luxury, I contest the implication that it is because the human court cannot provide. Certainly the fairies provide for these knights the wealth and love and status that the human kings do not. However, it is not because the kings are unable; indeed, Lanval’s Arthur is noted for sharing out land and wives and money and merely forgetting Lanval; Graelent’s king is convinced by his wife to withhold pay, and Launfal’s poverty is somewhat disconnected from Arthur’s influence, caused instead by the malicious Queen Gwenore. It is not that these kings are incapable of providing for the knights, but simply that they refuse for a variety of reasons despite these being loyal and deserving knights.

It is notable that although much discussion of the supernatural in Lanval and Sir Launfal exists, Lanval serving as the foremost example of the fairy lover tradition, little analysis has been done regarding the anonymous variations (Graelent and Guingamor), and the Lanval variants as a whole have been relatively unexplored in regards to

\[28 \text{Ibid., p.102}\]
conceptions of justice or ethics, most scholars being more interested in the supernatural or the source materials. Sara Sturm is the only author I have found who attempts to compose a close reading of either of the anonymous lays. She examines Guingamor through its two most prominent traditions, as a fairy mistress lay and as an otherworld aventure, before finally concluding that perhaps the lay is best read as a commentary on Christian temptation. This thesis will attempt to add to the interpretations of these four lays by offering close readings of the varying models for justice that they offer.

This thesis is particularly interested in the intersection between the feminine supernatural and trouthe in these four lays. Romances featuring a male fairy who lays with a human woman, such as Tyorel, demonstrate a tendency to be more concerned with the offspring of such a union and the fairy's narrative impact is reduced to the progenitive. In Tydorel, the fairy takes on a human lover but their relationship is soon discovered and he never returns. The rest of the story focuses on the product of this supernatural-human relationship, a child who cannot sleep and must be entertained through the night by stories. Yonec, similarly, begins with a fairy knight, Mul Dumarec, who offers his love to a woman imprisoned by her husband and impregnates her. Though Mul Dumarec is killed by the husband's machinations, the fulfillment of his prophecy that his child, Yonec, will avenge him comprises the rest of the narrative. Though scholars broadly accept that fairies in general tend to criticize the court in some way, I suggest that female fairies in particular and narratives containing them tend to take on a more didactic tone or are concerned with the moral instruction of knights suggesting the benefits of feminine ethics. In terms of all four lays, there has been little analysis pertaining to the

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29 Sara Sturm The Lay of Guingamor: A Study (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968)
verbal agreements and their impacts beyond comparing the linguistic structures in order to determine an author or source materials. Discussing the fairy mistresses of Lanval and its subsequent variants with a closer attention to their contracts may provide a new lens through which to view the ethical impact of these Otherworldly characters and further open a new avenue for understanding how this ethical impact intersects with their gender and the sexualization or sexual violence inflicted upon them in the human world.
CHAPTER ONE: LANVAL

Lanval’s agreement with the fairy most strongly resembles a contract given the carefully phrased and mutual oaths. It could be considered that the gifts the fairy provides Lanval, the endless wealth and more significantly, her body, might represent the objects that make the agreement memorable and “thinglike,” one of the performative mechanics of a verbal oath. Lanval’s oath occurs early in the narrative when he meets the fairy and agrees:

“Bele,” fet il, “si vus pleiseit
E cele joie me aveneit
Que vus me vousissez amer,
Ja n[e] s[av]rïez rien comander
Que jeo ne face a miel poer,
Turt a folie u a saveir
Je frai vos comandemenz
Pur vus guerpirai tutes genz
Jamés ne queor de vus partir:
Ceo est la rien que plus desir”30

The extreme language throughout this passage, “you could command nothing that I would not do to the best of my power,” “I will give up everyone” and “I never wish to part from you”, echoes the unspecificity of a rash oath. The rash oath motif occurs throughout medieval literature as an impulsive promise made often with few to no limits.

In the 14th century Breton lai Sir Orfeo, for example, the fairy king, entertained by Orfeo’s harping rashly offers Orfeo anything he asks for, which Orfeo then uses to rescue his wife Heurodis who had been abducted by the fairy king. The plot of Chaucer’s The Franklin’s Tale likewise revolves around Dorigen’s rash promise to commit adultery with Aurelius if he vanishes the rocks from the coast. In this case, the condition imposed

30 Marie de France, “Lanval” lines 121-130
is absurd, supposedly impossible and modern readers would read this as a mockery intended to reject Aurelius. However, through magic he fulfills the condition and Dorigen is under pressure to fulfill her oath. Lanval, therefore, carelessly leaving his phrasing so open also leaves himself vulnerable to the fairy’s wishes.

Rash oaths such as these, even if difficult to enforce in a medieval court, still carried a social obligation to fulfill them; a rash oath was still an oath that impacted one’s display of trouthe.\(^{31}\) Many scholars will point to Orfeo’s reprimand of the fairy king who hesitates to return Heurodis to Orfeo. Orfeo reminds the fairy king of his promise and equates the breach of such an oath to outright lying. This reminder would have held a lot of sway socially because reputation was so entwined with the performance and perception of honest character.\(^{32}\) Thus, breaking one’s oath also had the potential to negatively impact their standing in court; someone who regularly went back on their word would be treated with much more suspicion in a court case, especially when folk-law was more often practiced orally and the only evidence available would be claims made by individuals and/or witnesses. Lanval’s inevitable failure then, to keep this rash oath to obey the commands would have represented an ethical issue that would have injured his reputation.

The fairy further stipulates that Lanval should not speak of her to anyone, invoking a restriction referred to as a geis, or a magical taboo. Not only does this represent the medieval concern with secrecy in love, it also ostensibly allows the fairy mistress to maintain her power and agency; in some older civilizations, having someone’s name gave you power over them as the name was linked to that person’s being and could

\(^{31}\) Green, *A Crisis of Truth* pp.305-308
\(^{32}\) Ibid., p.308
be used to enchant them just as one would use a physical magical tag like hair. This belief was so strong that people often had two names, one used commonly to refer to or address them, and their ‘true’ name which was kept private for protection. Scholars generally agree that the geis is the critical element of their agreement that Lanval fails to honor. However, the placement of the introduction of the geis does not present it as the central issue upon which their “contract” hinges; it is not introduced until after they have agreed to love each other and she has granted him gifts. The geis as it is presented by the poet seems less important than the broad oath; even Lanval’s acceptance of this stipulation is glossed over in a sentence of narration in contrast to the ten lines of direct dialogue in which he makes the rash oath. The fairy’s instruction of the geis also echoes the oath Lanval has just made “jeo frai voz comandemenz”, repeating the word “command” throughout and his agreement is summed up as “il li respunt que bien tendra / ceo que ele li comaundera” [He replies that he will certainly hold to what she commands].

Therefore, it could be that the transgression he is punished for is not only revealing the fairy’s existence to the queen, but on another level it is rather his failure to uphold his broad oath he has just made that he would do whatever she commanded, demonstrating a lack of trouthe. This commanding tone further adds to the depiction of the fairy as a sort of instructor for Lanval who will eventually usurp the king as Lanval’s lord.

I would like to turn to critiques of the lai that have questioned the impact of the geis given that the fairy usually returns to rescue the night at the end of the narrative.

Byrne claims the stipulation and consequences of disobedience are merely a tactic to

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34 Marie de France, “Lanval” 151-152
propel the plot forward, while others read it as retribution for breaking the fairy’s trust or as a test of love.\(^{35}\) However, thinking of their oath in two parts might allow us to justify the fairy’s return and read it as an entry to examining the intersection of *trouthe* and gender. It is crucial to note that Lanval’s fairy specifies in her instructions (and the poet specifies in the narration) that the fairy’s body or *cors* is at stake, when she adds that if their love were discovered, “jamés ne me purriez veeir / ne de mun cors seisine aveir” [you could never see me again / or have possession of my body].\(^{36}\) Only his access to her body, not her financial support or affection for Lanval hinges on the geis. After Lanval breaks his oath, only the fairy’s abandonment of him is noted in the narrative and Marie depicts Lanval’s lament over losing her; there is no mention of Lanval’s material gifts vanishing and when the fairy returns to acquit him, she claims that she still loves him. Lanval’s trespass then results in the fairy reclaiming the rights and access to her body and nothing else as was stipulated in the verbal contract they formed. It is common knowledge that women’s bodies were part of the gift economy upon which medieval society was structured as we see in Lanval when the king distributes “femmes e tere” [women and land] amongst his knights.\(^{37}\) Wade has discussed how fairies destabilize the traditional structure of this by both giving and *being* gifts, but because their gifts are supernatural they cannot be equally reciprocated by humans and so the geis is a way of balancing this out.\(^{38}\) Because properly participating in this gift-economy is a crucial mode for both the king and his vassals to demonstrate their integrity within the court, particularly for the king who trades in women, their *trouthe* is essentially reliant upon the

\(^{35}\) Byrne “Fairy Lovers”

\(^{36}\) De France “Lanval” 149-150

\(^{37}\) Ibid.,17

\(^{38}\) Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, p.114-115
appropriation of women’s bodies. This is evident in Lanval as Marie’s fairy mistress makes her body a marker of the agreement. She disrupts this system based on the male possession of the female body and assumes the agency to offer or reclaim her body as she chooses by offering it on a conditional basis. Through her subversion of the traditional system, the fairy mistress of Lanval contests a system for fulfillment of *trouthe* that is based on the male appropriation of women’s bodies.

It is therefore a particularly significant trespass that Lanval reveals his fairy lover and his *trouthe* becomes reliant on presenting her body to the court for judgment. In order to keep his *trouthe* in a patriarchal society and avoid sleeping with the wife of the king, Lanval chooses to reveal his lover, and his *trouthe* comes to rely on her body being fairer than the queen’s, on being able to prove this, thus choosing to participate in a culture in which a man’s *trouthe* (or lack thereof) is demonstrated across a woman’s body. This further demonstrates a significant betrayal since he had earlier made the rash oath “pur vus, gueripirai tutes genz,” but now chooses to justify his actions by saying “Ne li voil pas mentir ma fei” [I don’t want to betray my faith to him] thus prioritizing his bonds to a king who has not shown him the same respect by failing to reward his service.  

The fairy further offers a chance for redemption when she interrupts the human court’s proceedings to rescue Lanval. After she has acquitted Lanval, he leaps onto the back of her horse and rides away with her, abandoning the human court and fulfilling his earlier oath that he would forsake everyone for her. The fairy mistress comes to represent an alternative system of justice where one can be redeemed. *Sir Orfeo* contains a similar structure in which the king, Orfeo, fails to keep his oath to follow his wife, Heurodis,  

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39 Marie de France, “Lanval” 272
anywhere thereby losing his authority as a king, but is rewarded and restored at the end by venturing into the Otherworld to rescue her, finally fulfilling his oath. The fairy’s system of justice contrasts the masculine one in which the king threatens that, “il le ferat arder u pendre” [He will have him burnt or hanged]. The lais consistently depict this reversal of gender roles, placing the female fairies in positions of power—over their own kingdoms, over the male hero, and in some senses even over the human court. Lanval, by placing himself at the command of the fairy mistress, reverses the typical gendered social order.

The lai serves as a testament to the strengths of feminine authority. Not only is the fairy depicted with far greater material wealth, such that “suz ciel n’ad rei ki[s] esligast / pur nul aver k’il i donast” [no king under heaven could buy them / for any wealth he might offer] but she fulfills her oath to support Lanval financially where the king fails to, elevating her above the human court in terms of ethics and criticizing the lack of trouthe within the kingdom. The fairy’s active role in the narrative is a further criticism of the king’s passive nature. The fairy’s “commanding” of Lanval actively improves his life and is intended to assimilate him to the proper ways of the court. The king, in contrast, presides over Lanval’s trial, appearing to act as an administrator of justice, but actually fails to actively make a single impactful decision in the entire lai. In fact, he leaves the decision regarding Lanval’s innocence to his advisors “[Que hum] ne li puis[se] a mal retraire” [So that no one can blame him for it]. The king is so concerned with his own reputation and appeasing the public that he relinquishes any authority over his kingdom.

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40 Ibid., 328
41 Ibid, 90-91
42 Ibid, 384
The supernatural, then, must intervene to correct this and finally, Lanval chooses to abandon the king’s corrupted system.
Although the knight in *Graelent* establishes a similar agreement with the fairy he encounters, it is paramount that we first examine the sexual violence inflicted upon the fairy leading up to the verbal oaths because our reading of chivalry and *trouthe* in *Graelent* is complicated by the rape that occurs when he encounters the fairy. Not only does this scene seem incongruent with Graelent’s chivalric identity and the narrative’s persistent reiteration of his stock chivalric qualities such as being “cortois et sages / Bons chevaliers et de grant pris” [courtly and wise / a good knight and of great reputation], the fairy’s acceptance of the knight would at first seem to reward ethically abhorrent behavior.\(^{43}\) While Amy Vines has proposed that for the knights of medieval romance within the chivalric structure who commit rape, this act is crucial for their development because it catalyzes a reparational arc for the offending knight, Graelent’s rape is immediately followed by the fairy’s bestowal of rewards and therefore he seems to not face any direct consequence for the trespass.\(^{44}\) At the very moment that Graelent rapes the fairy, the author chooses to emphasize that this scene is set “en l’espoisse de la forest” [in the thick of the forest] seemingly reminding us that we are beyond the bounds of the court and societal order. Though this seems to reflect the arbitrary/adoxic nature of fairies given that rape in secular law would have been taken seriously (if sometimes blurred with abduction) and it seems to contradict any sense of justice for the fairy to reward Graelent for raping her, it creates a unique ambivalence that contributes to the

\(^{43}\) Burgess “Graelent.” lines 10-11
story’s conception of *trouthe*. The scene has been woefully neglected by scholars who for the most part accept the fairy’s prescience as justification, or chalk it up to the amateurish incorporation of the swan maiden tradition.

In the Swan Maiden tradition, a type of animal bride story, the maiden is able to transform between human form and animal form, in this case, a swan. Her clothes represent a feather skin that allows this transition. When a man stumbles upon her bathing and steals her clothes, she is unable to transform back into a swan. The man uses this to pressure her into marrying him and holds her captive by hiding her featherskin. The swan maiden might bear him children but is doomed to unhappiness unless she can reclaim her featherskin. In some variations, she finds where her captor has hidden her feather skin and escapes; in others she has her children bring it to her. This tradition and its presence in *Graelent* and *Guingamor* has been discussed by several scholars such as Schofield, Cross, Stokoe and Illingworth. Though Schofield argues the discrepancy in the knight’s behavior and his reward results from the anonymous poet’s mishandling of traditions, I would like to consider how the inclusion of the swan maiden motif might actually contribute to and/or complicate the narrative of rape that the author develops.

The author gives an odd amount of specificity to Graelent’s interaction with the fairy’s cloak. Because *Graelent* is adapted from older myths and tales, it is quite possible that there are older versions of this story where the significance of the mantle is made much more explicit. Scholars who have in the past written on the Germanic or Celtic swan maiden source material have pointed to the maiden’s cloak as her “feather-skin” which a human might steal to entrap her.\(^45\) We are told that “Il li mist son mantel devant,

Initially, he lays it in front of her, then places it on her himself. Where Burgess & Brook translate this as him giving her cloak back to her, however, some key words seem to have been overlooked. First, in line 273, it is “son mantel” which would indicate a masculine possessive, making it Graelent’s cloak rather than the fairy’s. Second, the verb rent has been translated as some approximation of returning or giving back the cloak, perhaps because of its similarity to the verb retourner; however, if we take the verb to be instead a conjugation of renter, it takes on a meaning closer associated to paying rent or the act of renting something out (“payer le rentage”). Choosing to specify that Graelent places the cloak on the maiden, the author seems to emphasize a possessive act.

A thesis from 2009 has posited that the scene and its reversal later in the poem represent the two being “cloaked in each others’ love” and that the two states of the bodies of water signify the different stages of their love. However, such a reading overlooks the sexual violence inflicted upon the fairy and the questionable ethics of the romance hero. This is a crucial piece of the story that many scholars have chosen to gloss over. It is also notable that the placing of the cloak is immediately followed by the line “Par la main senestre la prent, / Et puis l’a de soi aprouchiee” [He took her by the left hand / and then drew her towards him]. The term “senestre” not only referenced the left side, but also unsurprisingly carried the meanings of being “unfavorable” or “dishonest,

46 Burgess, “Graelent” 273-274
49 Burgess, “Graelent” 276-277
suspicious, corrupt.”⁵⁰ CM Woolgar discusses the late medieval connotations of the left side with the devil, noting the use of it in 14th century morality plays such as “Mankind” to denote devilish associations.⁵¹ Such a detail acknowledges (and signifies to the audience) that Graelent is acting outside of the accepted ethics.

The mantle in medieval courtly culture was often a mark of status, royal or judicial. Cloaks and the act of placing one around someone more often represent a protective gesture, as in ‘taking someone under a wing.’ In courtly poetry, this tended to occur in the context of a woman of status taking a disadvantaged man into her care.⁵² Jane Burns in Courtly Love Undressed discusses the cloak as a unisex garment. Burns notes that the mantle in the place of armor offers no protection and leaves a knight literally vulnerable to attack as the mantle does nothing to protect him from weaponry.⁵³ The mantle functions as a similar symbol of vulnerability within the Graelent narrative; without it, the fairy maiden is obviously vulnerable in the fountain scene, and by the end of the narrative she adopts the role of protector.

Given the cloak’s symbolism as a feather-skin, the possession of which can trap the fairy/swan maiden, I do not find it a stretch to suggest that Graelent placing his own cloak around her might in turn be construed as a gesture that places her under his care such that she is objectified as women were technically legally recognized as “property” of whichever man was responsible for them whether that be a husband or a father. Still,

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⁵¹ CM Woolgar The Senses in Late Medieval England (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013) p.30
reading it as a symbol of protection would align with Graelent’s promise that he would not harm her and indicate that he still holds power in this moment. Thus, his rape constitutes an ethical failing not only in the sense that physical assault is reprehensible but also because he goes back on a promise to not harm her, indicated both verbally and through a physical gesture.

Several writers have taken up the idea that the fairy’s sudden shift to acceptance of Graelent is because of his sexual prowess due to the line “she would never find so good a lover” or otherwise suggest that the fact that she knowingly came to the river justifies the rape. However, the poem seems more concerned with the chivalric qualities than sexual prowess of the knight. The rape is given in barely more than a line; we have no details that tell us what kind of lover Graelent is. Instead, leading up to her admittance that Graelent is her best option, the narrator offers us the fairy’s thoughts which list his courtly qualities: He is “cortois et sages, / Biaus chevaliers et preuz et larges” [courtly and wise, / A handsome knight, brave and generous], all the standard characteristics of a Romance hero, and yet it seems a stretch that as grievous a trespass as sexual assault would be so glossed over that Graelent could still be considered an upstanding knight. While raping a maiden was a serious transgression, the folklaw regarding rape certainly would have considered a ravished maiden devalued or tainted, thus victims were sometimes pressured into marriage or reconciliation with their rapist. If we accept Illingworth’s suggestion that earlier Celtic versions of this story that contained the fountain scene and in which the protagonist also bore a child or children from this rape

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54 Burgess, “Graelent” 307-308
which were then omitted from the *Graelent* manuscript are source materials, it might explain the lack of concern with the rape since a child often negated claims of rape.\(^{56}\) In another anonymous lai, *Desiré*, which closely resembles *Graelent* in the implications of sexual violence imposed on a fairy encountered in the woods who then grants the hero gifts and her love, the second half of the lai is concerned with the children born from the union between the mortal and the fairy. However, the *Graelent* author still fails to reconcile or justify this choice within the narrative itself.

Further, the fairy’s suggestion that she had foreknowledge that she would suffer by appearing to Graelent generates more discrepancies rather than resolves them. Why would she knowingly allow herself to be assaulted and then reward the perpetrator? The fairy’s stated foreknowledge of what would happen and intentions in meeting Graelent might be better explained as her appearing to Graelent in order to expose his ethical failings. Such a reading would suit the fairy’s apparent function as symbol for *trouthe*. She makes known to the audience Graelent’s lack of *trouthe*. In response to the assumption that the rape incites no consequences, I instead suggest that the agreement formed between them is itself the beginning of Graelent’s reparational arc. Graelent’s agreement with the fairy is written less as a mutual verbal agreement, but as a commandment. While Graelent sets the conditions of their agreement through indirect dialogue given to us through the narrator, telling the fairy that “si li otroit sa druerie, / Et il fera de li s’amie / Et bien loiaument l’amera / ne de li mes ne partira.”\(^{57}\) [She should now grant him her love / and he would make her his beloved / He would love her very

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\(^{56}\) Illingworth “Composition” 4

\(^{57}\) Burgess, “Graelent” 301-304
loyally / and never leave her.], the fairy dominates the directly spoken conversation, instructing Graelent in what she wishes him to do.

Although Graelent pressures the fairy into an agreement, he does not hold much agency at this moment. Rather, the fairy’s stipulation takes center stage as the fairy evaluates him, decides to accept him and is given twenty-eight lines of direct dialogue instructing Graelent in how he should behave moving forward, during which she reiterates his courtly qualities, “loiaus / preuz et cortois, et assez biaus,” [loyal, brave, courtly and very handsome] and introduces the condition that Graelent must not boast of her among other instructions he should follow involving chivalric duties before telling him “Ma volenté vos manderai.”58 Throughout, she maintains an imperative tone, either directly commanding or using the word ‘should’, echoing his earlier demand following the rape that she “should” love him now. She reverses the dynamic now, placing Graelent in a role of obedience and this constitutes the consequences of his rape and the beginning of a reparational arc.

We receive a list of the duties that Graelent fulfills to such a degree that he is regarded as a lord in his own right. Graelent now contrasts the king, fulfilling duties he was previously prevented from fulfilling by the king’s refusal to pay him or let him fight in the war. He hosts anyone in need of food or lodging and attends many tournaments, fulfilling expectations of largesse and demonstrating his chivalric prowess. Though this initially appears to be a stock description of knightly duties, it serves a larger purpose when juxtaposed with the way that the king expects trouthe to be displayed in his court of elevating the fairy maiden’s patronage and model of chivalry above that of the king.

58 Ibid., 327-328
59 Ibid., 342
Inevitably, though, Graelent breaks his oath to keep their love discreet when, during a feast, the king puts the queen’s body on display. Graelent criticizes this display and boasts of his own lady. Much as in Lanval, the narrative here criticizes trouthe that is mediated through women’s bodies. The king asks all the guests to praise the queen, and “A touz la covenoit loer”[Everyone was obliged to praise her].60 We are shown the same scene again when Graelent attends the Pentecost feast:

“A ses barons prie et commande
Et sor s’amisté lor demande
Que verité li queneüssent,
Se si bele dame seüssent.”61

He begged and commanded his barons
And in accordance with their friendship asked them
To let him know the truth
If they knew of such a beautiful woman

Not only do we return to the obligation of the vassal that the king invokes, asking them to maintain their faithfulness to him likely established through oaths taken to him, he is further commanding. In the first description of this event, Brook and Burgess have made more explicit that everyone present is “obliged” to praise the queen. Further, the word “loer” adopts two meanings. One meaning and the one used in the translation is “praise” such that the sentence indicates everybody praised the queen. The word has a second meaning, however, associated with renting, payment or generally employment.62 The use of this term, then, acknowledges the link created in the narrative between praising the queen and the obligation to the king. Thus, in the system created by the king, demonstrations of the knights’ trouthe or faithfulness to the king is contingent upon the display and admiration of the queen’s body rather than any truly chivalric acts.

Furthermore, the fact that the narrator describes this event to us twice, and this seems to

60 Ibid., 439
61 Ibid., 449-450
occur at every Pentecost feast, turns it into a sort of ritual renewal of the knights’ oaths in which they reaffirm their *trouthe*. The queen’s body might even be considered the “token” that makes this contract between king and knights memorable, objectifying the queen to an even greater degree.

The fairy mistress, through her agreement with Graelent, has instructed him in the proper ways of enacting *trouthe* to one’s lord: not through the appropriation and inappropriate display of women’s bodies, but through martial pursuits. It is perhaps because he refuses to take part in this ritual that Graelent’s fairy returns to acquit him at the last moment. Though he ultimately fails the test of *geis* by revealing the fairy, it is significant that he refuses to participate, and perhaps implied that the lesson is not quite complete, and Graelent is still learning. Following the fairy mistress’s appearance and Graelent’s acquittal, there is an odd and ambiguous line: “Graalent pas ne s’oublia / Son bon cheval fet amener / O s’amie s’en veult aler”63 [Graelent had not forgotten what he should do / He had his good horse brought out / Intending to leave with his beloved]. It is unclear why Graelent believes he must do this but a possible interpretation might be that this line references his oath to “never leave” the fairy maiden. In a broader sense, choosing to follow her represents a rejection of the king’s court as a whole; he accepts the fairy over the king as his patron, reinforcing the emphasis on feminine sovereignty.

The fairy, however, is still angry with Graelent for breaking his oath. Though he tries to follow her across the river, she tells him to turn back. Finally, the fairy, chastised by her maidens for leaving Graelent to drown, saves the knight and then wraps him in a cloak, mirroring the beginning of their relationship where Graelent placed the mantle on

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63 Burgess, “Graelent” 664-666
her. This moment might on one level finalize her acceptance of him as a vassal. As the maidens watch Graelent drown, they cry out to their lady, “S’en li aidier ne metez cure / vos avez de lui grant pechié” [If you do not make an effort to help him / You will be committing a great sin against him] signaling a relationship very much like the reciprocal love expected between a king and his vassal. Placing her cloak on him could then represent her marking him visually as one of her own knights.

The fairy’s eventual rescue of Graelent might also be explained by Graelent undergoing a sort of ordeal. According to Green, ordeals were a sort of final opportunity for an accused individual who lacked oath worthiness to prove their innocence through something like trial by hot iron. This aspect of folk law was once again, more performative than anything and “was predicated on the assumption that a willingness to suffer pain would demonstrate the ethical truth of the accused.” It is possible, therefore, that Graelent’s willingness to risk drowning himself to follow the fairy exonerates him to some degree.

The scene where the knight clothes the maiden and this reversal of it both involve a body of water as well, creating a parallel between the two scenes that offers insight into the shifting power dynamic between the fairy and Graelent. Where Graelent is hesitant in the first scenario to touch the maiden while she is in the water, in the second he rushes into the river to follow his beloved and almost drowns. The connection between these two scenes is further accentuated by the addition of an exchange between the two characters involving a mantle. Where Graelent places his cloak around the maiden in the first scene, the story concludes with the fairy wrapping the knight in her cloak and taking

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64 Ibid., 720-721
65 Green, A Crisis of Truth 111
him with her to the otherworld. Considering the cleansing function of water, the water motif might represent a moment of purification or even rebirth; one could perhaps even go as far as to read Graelent’s near-drowning as a baptismal moment. This is certainly a turning point for Graelent, who previously demonstrated a massive ethical misstep in choosing to rape the fairy-swan-maiden. The removal of his clothing might also call to mind a symbolic rejection of the mortal world in favor of the supernatural one. The fairy thus teaches Graelent about the possibility of an alternative system of *trouthe* and status centered not on the possession of women’s bodies but on the valuation of largesse and honoring one’s social responsibilities, and Graelent ultimately chooses this system over the human court.
CHAPTER THREE: GUINGAMOR

Though the *Le Lay de Guingamor* departs dramatically from the other three iterations of the Lanval story, the significance of *trouthe* is perhaps even more prevalent. Unlike his three counterparts, Guingamor is never impoverished or dishonored in court. However, his loyalty to his uncle, the king, does not seem to be fully reciprocated despite Guingamor possessing the typical qualities of a successful knight. The poet tells us that he is “sages et cortois…preuz et senez” [wise and courtly…brave and sensible] and more intriguingly specifies that “biau sot promestre et bien doner” [He made fair promises and gave generously].

This *promestre* in Old French was one of several lexical items in the language to reference a concept parallel to the Middle English *trouthe*. Like Graelent, Guingamor is propositioned by the queen and rejects her advances. From there, however, the story diverges tremendously from the rest of the Lanval variants in ways scholars are still struggling to make sense of. Scholars once again have been more concerned with the sources of the lay and comparisons to various stories from Celtic folklore have dominated the discourse. Sara Sturm in “The Lay of Guingamor: A Study” has examined the lay in terms of these traditions and contests the denigration of the *Guingamor* poet, criticizing previous scholars for their tendency to pigeon-hole the narrative into a category rather than examining how the author’s deviations from tradition contribute to a more unique story, a position with which I concur. Sturm’s interpretation is largely based on the religiously coded symbolism within the lay.

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68 Sara Sturm, *The Lay of Guingamor*
examination of *trouthe* and the social obligations at the core of the poem should be considered.

The concept of *trouthe* is first invoked when the queen, attempting to get rid of Guingamor to hide her transgressions, goads him into hunting a white boar. At dinner, as the knights boast of their prowess in hunting, she calls into question the *trouthe* of every knight at the table:

> ‘Molt vos oi’, fet elel, ‘vanter, Et vos adventures conter; Mes n’a ceanz nul si hardi De touz iceus que je voi ci Qui en la forest ci defors, La ou converse li blans pors, Osast chacier ne soner cor, Qui li donroit mil livres d’or. En merveilleus los se metroit, Qui le senglier prendre porroir.’

She challenges their claims of bravery and skill, accusing them of not being able to make good on their boasts. It is noted that the challenge is particularly meant for Guingamor; while it is not explicit how he understands this to be the case, this turnaround is key to reading Guingamor in the context of *trouthe* – the queen has shown her own lack of *trouthe* in attempting to be unfaithful to the king, and now turns to challenging Guingamor’s *trouthe* in order to goad him into leaving. Therefore, Guingamor’s quest is not only a test of his chivalric abilities but significantly becomes a test of his *trouthe*.

Guingamor goes to his uncle the king to request the use of his dogs and a horse. The king, before knowing what Guingamor wishes to request, makes a rash promise:

> “Li rois li dist: ‘Je vos otroi, Biaus niés; ce que toi plet, di moi; Seürement me demandez Ja cele chose ne vosdrez

> “The king said to him: ‘I grant it you, Fair nephew, tell me what you wish; Ask of me with confidence There is nothing that you could want

69 Burgess, “Guingamor” 153-162
Ne face vostre volonté."”70 That I would not grant you.””

Such a promise to fulfill an as of yet unspecified promise and the lack of constraint makes for a rash oath that, as previously discussed, while perhaps not formally binding, places him under social pressures to fulfill, just like the oath made by Marie de France’s knight, Lanval. Once Guingamor reveals his request, however, the king attempts to renege on his rash promise. It is not, however, because he fears for his nephew’s safety; rather, he fears that:

“Se son bon brachet li prestoit
Et son chaceor li bailloit
– N’avoit avoir qu’il amast tant,
Ne le donroit por rien vivant –
Ja mes n’esteroient veüz,
Car il les avroit luës perduz.
Ce dit, se perduz les avoit
Que tot jors mes dolenz seroit.”71

If he were to lend him his good brachet
And give him his hunting horse
– He possessed nothing he loved so much,
And he would not give it away for any living thing–
They would never be seen again
For he would lose them straightaway
He said that, were he to lose them
He would be sad for evermore

The king, though he respects his nephew, is not concerned with his safety but rather with his possessions. Further, this is an odd contrast to the other ten knights he has lost to the boar hunt – so distraught is he over the loss of the other ten knights that nobody may even speak of the forest, but he does not show the same concern for Guingamor. Since the feudal performance of love and loyalty in the court between knight and king requires a reciprocal transaction, the king’s failure to reciprocate the loyalty and love that his nephew has to him indicates a failure as a leader. Guingamor, in contrast, is shown to reflect the same values as his king, sharing his interests. While he is hunting and loses the boar and the brachet, he vows, “Se n’ai mon chien et au porc fail, / Ja mes joie ne bien n’avrai, / N’en mon païs ne tornerai.” [“If I do not have my dog and I lose the boar / I

70 Burgess, “Guingamor” 195-199
71 Burgess, “Guingamor” 217-224
shall never again feel joy or happiness / Nor shall I return to my country”].

Such a vow closely aligns his values with the king’s – what the king wishes, so does Guingamor. The narrative highlights the king’s lack of *trouthe* as he attempts to go back on his word, and only fulfills his oath when the queen pleads with him. Guingamor’s vow, however, while perhaps not made to another person, evokes a sense of personal accountability. In a sense, it is a vow to himself, or perhaps to God, sworn on his happiness and his very identity with his country. It is, of course, a vow that he should strive to fulfill.

In order to prove his *trouthe*, Guingamor must enter into an agreement with a fairy. Like Graelent, Guingamor encounters a fairy bathing in a stream and attempts to steal her clothes, resulting in a two-line reprimand that matches the one in *Graelent* verbatim. This similarity is likely a result of the Guingamor author drawing on *Graelent* as a source or of sharing a source with *Graelent* from which the line was lifted. Where Graelent rapes the fairy, however, Guingamor easily returns her clothes to her and she invites him to stay with her. She insists that he will never find the dog or the boar without her help and thus they enter into an agreement.

> “Venez o moi par tel covent,
> Et je vos promet loiaument
> Que le sengler pris vos rendrai
> Et le bracket vos baillerai
> A porter en vostre païs
> Jusqu’a tierz jor; je vos plevis.’
> ‘Bele’, ce dit li chevaliers,
> ‘Je herbergerai volentiers
> Par tel covent con dit avez.’”

> “Come with me on the following condition,
> I promise you faithfully
> That I will deliver to you the captured boar
> And I shall give you the brachet
> To take back to your land
> After three days; I give you my word.’
> ‘Fair one,’ said the knight,
> ‘I shall stay with you willingly
> On the terms you have stated.’”

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72 Burgess, “Guingamor” 406-408
73 See Schofield, Cross, Stokoe, and Illingworth for the critical discussion of the relationship between Graelent and Guingamor.
74 Burgess, “Guingamor” 467-476
The author of *Guingamor* has saturated the passage with words that evoke the idea of binding oaths. Not only does the passage employ the term *promet* here, the French equivalent of a promise or vow, but the careful phrasing on both sides of this agreement also edges closer to a formal tone; Guingamor, in accepting the terms, mirrors the fairy’s phrasing “par tel covent” and explicitly states that he is doing so willingly. The term *covent* denotes both the agreement itself and the conditions of that agreement. The word would eventually develop into the French *convenir* and then the modern English derivative “covenant”. The author’s use of this word therefore significantly calls to mind a binding oath, perhaps even including connotations of one entered into with a divine being as the term covenant is used in religious contexts, for example, God’s covenant with Noah.75 This formal tone and careful construction of the phrases used to engage in the agreement echoes the conventions formal oath. The term *plevis*, meaning to pledge, is also associated with the legal act of swearing or “engager sa foi” (to commit one’s faith). The noun form, *plevine*, refers to “promesse faite en justice” [a promise made in court] linking the term to legal proceedings.76 This word is significantly placed at the end of the conditions; the fairy swears on her own *trouthe* and thus seals the agreement.

The fairy’s agreement with Guingamor does not indicate that they establish a relationship particularly influenced by passion or romance. Guingamor’s request for her to love him comes after the formation of the agreement and the maiden’s acceptance is somewhat lackluster as she “Guingamor respont en tel guise / Qu’ele l’amera volentiers”

[She replied to Guingamor to the effect that / She would gladly love him].\(^77\) Their love is established not through direct dialogue as it is in every other lay, but rather through a mere few lines of narration. Additionally, the fairy’s granting of her love is distanced; she replies “to the effect” that she would love him. There is never an explicit indication that they engage in any kind of physical relationship like Guingamor’s counterparts. In short, the *Guingamor* poet seems much more concerned with the fulfillment of oaths and is perhaps including a romantic relationship between the fairy and the knight as a mere nod to convention.

It is unclear, however, whether Guingamor’s trip to the Otherworld and the subsequent passing of three centuries results from a failure to keep his word, a cunning deception on the part of the fairy maiden, or simply a conflict in narrative traditions. To take the increased passing of time as a punishment for some transgression seems a stretch given that the fairy offers no warning of consequences as her counterparts normally would, and as she herself does later when Guingamor wishes to return home. Additionally, given the apparent concern with explicit consent to the terms of the agreement, this seems unlikely to be a matter of uninformed consent.

We should take into account the idea that Guingamor’s primary motivation is to prove his *trouthe*, and specifically is trying to prove his *trouthe* to a court that lacks it. Further, given his close alignment with the king’s concerns and his vow to himself that he will not return without the boar and the bracket, the fairy could be read as a figure for assisting in the achievement of *trouthe*, rather than one who punishes those who fail to keep it. The fairy emphasizes that the only way Guingamor will achieve his quest is

\(^77\) Burgess, “Guingamor” 498-499
through her assistance and this proves to be true. The story shifts to emphasize the necessity of social bonds in enabling individuals to keep their *trouthe*, holding each other accountable. Had it not been for the queen’s insistence, the king would not have kept his rash oath earlier in the story. From such a perspective, the king has not only demonstrated his own lack of integrity, he has also chosen to not aid Guingamor’s attempt to prove his. Thus, the fairy replaces the king as Guingamor’s patron, aiding him in his quest for *trouthe* and criticizing a court that not only is not ethical itself, but also fails to inspire *trouthe* in its vassals.

As in the other lays, the *Guingamor* poet flips the role that women play in the narrative, contrasting the female fairy to the human court. The king’s most significant appearance in the story is the scene in which he rashly promises Guingamor anything he requests, then attempts to go back on his word, explicitly demonstrating a lack of *trouthe* alongside his queen who goes so far as to physically force herself on Guingamor. The fairy, therefore, contrasts their behavior – not only does she aid Guingamor where the king does not want to, she also differs from the fairy mistresses of the other *Lanval* variations in that her own romantic relationship to Guingamor takes a backseat to the rest of the narrative. In fact, it almost seems out of place.

Guingamor insists on returning to see for himself, and the fairy agrees but warns him not to eat or drink anything in the human realm. This, however, is not any kind of mutual agreement or contractual stipulation, it is represented as a fundamental rule. Inevitably, Guingamor, rather than fulfilling his promise to return to the fairy kingdom, gives in to his hunger. Finally, the fairy maidens arrive and rescue Guingamor, carrying him back to the Otherworld and reprimanding him. Once again, there is a lack of real
consequences for failing to heed the warning of the fairy; however, this contributes to a certain conception of justice less concerned with consequences and more concerned with the importance of social bonds in keeping *trouthe*. The narrative develops an ideation that encourages individuals to aid each other in keeping to their word. The fairy mistresses in carrying Guingamor back to the Otherworld allow him to fulfill his vow that he would return.

Guingamor’s failure to heed the fairy’s warning not to eat from an apple tree opens up potential interpretations on several levels. On the surface, the apple tree invokes the idea of Eden and the Fall of man, similar to the orchard in *Graelent*, and thus might indicate Guingamor has failed ethically somehow. The connection to God’s covenant with Adam and Eve surely reinforces the notion that Guingamor himself has broken a significant covenant. As discussed before, Sturm has read this in terms of the temptation. However, we might further consider the subversion of gendered expectations that comes from such a reading as Guingamor, a man, is reenacting the original sin rather than a woman. Further, Guingamor’s trespass culminates in a sort of reversal of the consequences of the original sin. Where the original sin resulted in the banishment of humans to the harsh world outside of Eden where they were now susceptible to pain and decay and death, Initially, Guingamor’s physical decay mirrors the consequences of the original sin as pain and the threat of death intrude upon the untouchable Otherworldliness that the fairy introduced to the narrative: “Tost fu desfez et envielliz / Et de son cors si afoibliz / Que du cheval l’estut cheoir” [He at once became disfigured and decrepit, / and so enfeebled in body / That he could not help falling from his horse].

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78 Burgess, “Guingamor” 645-647
detail that he falls from his horse symbolizes his fall from the chivalric standard.

However, the fairy maidens arrive and although they scold him for failing to keep his promise, we assume that by crossing the river they also take him back to the Otherworld with them, thus restoring him to a place where death will not touch him. Thus, the lay of Guingamor suggests not only the possibility of a society concerned with aiding one another in pursuit of *trouthe* but also suggests the healing power of such a perspective, such that it could reverse the original sin and restore the virtue of the human court.

Perhaps this removal of the knight from the human court could even be said to highlight his initiation into this gentler system of justice and *trouthe* such that with this new knowledge he would no longer be able to remain in the human world in the service of a king who lacks any regard for *trouthe*. 
CHAPTER FOUR: LAUNFAL

Thomas Chestre’s version 

Sir Launfal, written in Middle English in the fourteenth century, stays fairly true to Marie de France’s version. However, the Middle English word *trouthe* is never mentioned in *Sir Launfal*. Instead, the term ‘soth’ or ‘forsoth’ is used nine times throughout the narrative. *Sooth* in Middle English denoted truth or honesty of the more factual kind.\(^79\) According to Green, “in the late fourteenth century, *truth* was beginning to usurp the sense of *sooth*. By a natural synecdoche the acknowledged reliability of a speaker will come to be applied to that speaker’s statements.”\(^80\) Thus, someone with a reputation for being honest would be assumed to be correct. Chester’s diction throughout the poem might point to the blurring semantic line between *trouthe* and *sooth*.

Launfal loses his money not because of a punitive withdrawal of his payment, but rather because of his own overspending. Launfal, like Lanval and Graelent, enters into an agreement with a fairy that restores his wealth and his position at court. Launfal makes a broad oath very similar to Lanval’s: “‘Swetyng, whatso betyde, / I am to thyn honour!’”\(^81\) Essentially, Launfal like his predecessor offers an open-ended promise that whatever happens, he will do as she wishes, to which the fairy asks, “Yf thou wylt truly to me take / And alle wemen for me forsake / Ryche I wyll make the.”\(^82\) The conditional if-then phrasing of this echoes a more formal agreement. Laskaya & Salisbury note in their

\(^80\) Green, *A Crisis of Truth* 25
\(^81\) Thomas Chestre “Sir Launfal” in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, eds. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995) line 311
\(^82\) Chestre, “Sir Launfal” 316-318
translation that the phrasing here is quite similar to contemporary marriage vows. In this oath, the fairy stipulates only the knight’s devotion to her as a condition of her financial patronage. The agreement formed between Launfal and the fairy focuses primarily on the financial well-being of the knight, rather than any relationship between them as in Lanval however, as the fairy goes on for another fifteen lines about the bounty she will grant him – a purse that always provides him with money, a horse and a servant, a coat of arms, and invulnerability in battle. Unlike her counterparts in previous versions, Tryamour never explicitly includes a promise of her body or love in the oath.

The geis, as in Lanval, is not imposed after the initial agreement is enacted. Instead, Launfal sleeps with the fairy and in the morning she adds the stipulation that he will lose her love if he boasts of her for a reward. There is also no indication of Launfal acknowledging this stipulation; where he thanks the fairy for granting her love and her gifts, the line following the fairy’s introduction of the geis simply tells us that Launfal takes his leave. This condition is also phrased as a “warning,” making it seem less tied to the oath through which she tests him; their “contract” is tied much more closely to the financial benefits that make their agreement memorable and “thinglike”.

It is intriguing that Tryamour specifies she wishes Launfal to forsake ‘alle wemen” when Lanval and Graelent both made much broader oaths. Still it seems rather than an injunction against sleeping with another woman this could be a request for Lanval to abandon the human court. Although King Arthur rules the human court, he is largely passive and ineffectual in the narrative, overshadowed by his queen, Guinevere, who consequently becomes a figurehead for the Arthurian court as a whole. Amy Vines suggests that the primary tension of the poem is Lanval’s choice between two figures of
patroness, Gwenore and Tryamour, such that they constitute “opposites on a continuum predicated on the system of largess, constructing two competing earthly models of female patronage.”

Certainly, Gwenore and Tryamour are contrasted in their practices of largesse, and this aspect contributes to the ethical models that they represent.

In the beginning of the poem, Gwenore, adopting the active role in ruling the court, “yaf yftes for the nones, / Gold and selver and precyous stonys / Her curtasyre to kythe.” She invokes the feudal relationship, providing lavish gifts for all the knights in the court; the specification that she does so “to make her courtesy/honor known” illustrates the performativity of this agreement mimicking a ritual oath. The gesture creates a bond between the knights and Gwenore. The phrasing of consciously trying to demonstrate her honor also suggests a superficiality to the act as though she is not genuinely/properly engaging in the feudal relationship but hopes to appear as though she is. Surely, she does not properly participate in the gift-economy when she fails to offer a gift to Lanval – it is later explained that she harbors a hatred for him – and thus drives Lanval from the court and divorces a good knight from any financial support. Tryamour’s intervention thus repairs this, as she steps in to offer Lanval

The physicality of oaths in Sir Launfal provides insight into the conception of trouthe and justice developed through the poem. The agreement is made very “thing-like” through the gifts that Trymour gives such as the pouch – a physical object for Launfal to keep rather than merely wealth that he will spend. Chestre’s poem also emphasizes the eventual loss of these objects in addition to the absence of Tryamour after Launfal breaks

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83 Amy Vines “Creative Revisions: Competing Figures of Patroness in Thomas Chestre’s Sir Launfal” in Women’s Power in Late Medieval Romance pp.115-139 (Cambridge; D.S. Brewer, 2011) p.117
84 Chestre, “Sir Launfal” 67-69
his oath, where previous iterations focus only on the loss of the fairy. Further, as soon as Launfal breaks the geis, “hys armour that was whyte as flour / Hyt becom of blak colour.” This transformation functions on two levels. The fairy world is traditionally associated with the color white. The fairy maidens’ skin, their dresses, and the horse Blaunchard are “whyt as flour” while Lady Tryamour herself is “whyt as lylye yn May / Or snow that sneweth yn wynterys day”. Clothing Launfal in this color associates him with the Otherworld.

Tryamour’s coat of arms also bears three ermines, creatures known for their white winter coats and traditionally symbolic of purity because it was believed that the ermine would rather face death than soil its pristine fur. The fact that Tryamour gives Launfal a banner bearing her coat of arms, three ermines, emphasizes the bond between Launfal and Tryamour. He is essentially her vassal, bearing her symbols and colors, and the transformation of his armor from white to black symbolizes the end of their bond. On another level, the color white is often taken as a symbol of purity or moral goodness, while the opposite is true of the color black. The transition of Launfal’s armor from white to black, then, represents a shift away from the Otherworld purity and morality. His armor becomes tarnished, symbolizing the corruption and dishonesty of the mortal court to which he has now contributed by breaking his oath. Launfal’s loss is not only the stipulated and expected consequence of breaking his oath, it also serves as a visual marker representing his lack of trouthe. Punishment rather than reformation takes center stage in Chestre’s conception of trouthe.

85 Chestre “Sir Launfal” 742-3
Queen Gwenore’s rash oath and the direct consequences reinforce the emphasis on punitive measures in dealing with breaches of *trouthe*. When Launfal is taken to trial and asked to present the woman he claims is more beautiful than the queen, “Than seyde the Quene, without lesynge, / ‘Yf he bryngeth a fayrer thynge, / Put out my eeyn gray!’”86 This oath binds her to her word. Further, the line following this pledge, “Whan that wajowr was take on honde” solidifies it as a binding verbal contract that is agreed upon by more than one party.87 Thus, her oath is socially binding. However, given the rash nature of the oath and the fact that we know that Gwenore already has such a terrible reputation and is known for her lack of *trouthe* and has said untrue things with the intent to deceive, we and the arthurian court can assume she would likely have not followed through.

Therefore, when Tryamour arrives, it is she herself who blinds the queen and ensures that the oath is upheld. This blinding acts as a physical marker of Gwenore’s lack of truth, mimicking the mutilation was a common punishment for those who were known for reneging on agreements. Punishments could take the form of cutting out a tongue to symbolize their false words or taking the hand that they could swear with.88 Thus, Tryamour’s blinding of the queen solidly casts her as both a symbol for *and* an enforcer of a punitive form of justice that prioritizes the practice of *trouthe*.

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86 Ibid., 808-810
87 Ibid., 811
88 Green, *A Crisis of Truth*, p.54
CONCLUSION

Through the use of verbal contracts formed with human knights, fairies in the four variations of Marie’s *Lanval* function not only to critique but to actively set right the wrongs of the male ruler. This thesis has examined the diction and structure of these verbal oaths and the ways that they play out in each narrative. The precise diction of these oaths reveals the author’s concern with, or at the very least awareness of the legal structures that would have guided the enactment of these contracts. As this analysis reveals, the consequences of breaking the contracts made with a fairy in these four lays, though ostensibly minimized by their eventual forgiveness of the protagonist, is often more finely tuned to the conditions established by the verbiage of the agreement. The difficulty in reading them has thus far stemmed from repeated overgeneralization of these scenes gathered under one motif of the fairy mistress taboo when attention should have been given to the deviations from this standard. When we examine the contracts as a response to other events in the lay, i.e. kings’ failure to fulfill their duty of providing for their subjects’ economic well-being, we reveal a pattern in which fairies intervene in the human court as a contrast to the corrupt kings not only to reveal the lack of *trouthe* in the court, but also to test the knights to whom they appear through the creation of verbally binding agreements. It is through these tests of *trouthe* that the knights either come to be rewarded or face the consequences of their ethical failures.

Reading the fairy mistresses of these four lays in relation to *trouthe* allows them to come to behave as moral educators for the knights with whom they engage rather than mere vessels for wish-fulfillment or arbitrary tools for driving the narrative as previous scholarship suggests. This interpretation speaks to the power of a distinctly feminine
conception of justice, ethics, and education, one based not on the punitive measures favored by the kings in the lays, but rather on leading by example and finding a means to reconciliation. Such a model aligns much more closely with the traditional practice of folk law that, as Green says, was “far more like directed negotiation than imposed adjudication; rather than saying, if you harm your neighbor this is how you will be punished, the folk law said, in effect, these are the kinds of compacts you must make in order to restore the peace.”

The fairies primarily contest the masculine ethic and leadership imposed by the kings, and in some cases critique the objectification of women upon which these masculinity-driven social structures are built, offering alternative systems that call for a return to the roots of chivalry and feudal arrangements. Rather than enabling or reinforcing the prevalent demonstration of men’s chivalry and trouthe through possession and appropriation of women’s bodies, the fairies instruct their chosen knights in a system that is dependent on traditional values such as their strength and skill in battle. Further work on this subject might add to existing scholarship on the contrast between the fairy mistress and the human queen, comparing them in terms of their trouthe and explore the physical spaces in which these women operate as the human queen offers quite a different depiction of feminine ethics. It is notable that each knight at the end of his tale in some way abandons the human world and is presumably transported to the fairy realm. Removing the knight from the human court highlights for audiences the superiority of the Otherworld; the knight, instilled with a new conception of trouthe can no longer remain in a court that lacks it.


Kingma, S. (2021). “‘Ther fell a wondyr cas / Of a ley that was ysette’: Social Critique Enacted by Fairies in the Breton Lays of Lanval, Graelent, Guingamor and Sir Launfal.”


AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY

Abigail Roberts, born February 27th, 2001, was adopted from China and raised in Damariscotta, Maine. She graduated from Lincoln Academy in 2019, and in May 2023 received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English, graduating Summa Cum Laude. She is a member of Phi Beta Kappa and was awarded a McGillicuddy Humanities Fellowship for 2023. Abigail has fulfilled many roles on the University of Maine campus and in the Honors College including Honors Teaching Associate, Writing Center Consultant, Secretary and Co-Captain of the Equestrian Team, and the Undergraduate Student Representative on the Faculty Senate Library Committee.

Following graduation, Abigail is working with TRIO Student Support Services as a Summer Outreach Ambassador providing support to incoming students. She plans to continue at the University of Maine in the fall as a Graduate Teaching Assistant while working on a Masters degree in English and will continue working in the Writing Center as a consultant and the Tutor Coordinator.