Off His High Horse: Equine Symbols of Agency in Marie de France's *Lanval*

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Abstract: This essay examines the relationship between agency and horses in Marie de France's *Lai de Lanval* (ca. 1170–1215). By exploring the link in medieval literature between horses and identity, one can begin to understand Lanval's loss of agency and the Fairy Queen's mastery both within and outside her queendom. In my essay, I argue that Marie de France's *Lanval* presents horses as metonyms for autonomy and demonstrates an inversion of traditional hyper-masculine knighthood while elevating female power through representations of the Fairy Queen.

On the surface, Marie de France's *Lai de Lanval* (ca. 1170 –1215) follows the model of the medieval lai (a lyrical poem) by centralizing the romantic adventure of the archetypical masculine knight. However, *Lanval* subverts the expectations of the lai form by detailing the intricate relationship of Lanval's agency while under the influence of the demoiselle. To understand how individual identity and agency operate within the lai, one can study how the central characters (Lanval and the Fairy Queen) use their horses as demonstrations of individual power. Synthesizing the findings of both medieval and animal studies scholars, this essay seeks to investigate horses as an extension of Lanval and the Fairy Queen's agency and demonstrates Lanval's subjugation to the Fairy Queen's power.

Lanval is introduced at the beginning of the lai as a knight suffering due to the poor treatment he is receiving from Arthur's court, despite his extraordinary chivalric capabilities and potential social currency. Instead of receiving praise for his duties, Lanval is "envied by most

men" and ostracized by others in the court who wish for him to be "met with some mischance" (de France 23–25). Lanval does not receive the treatment he expects as a "king's son, of high lineage," exemplifying his social malaise (27). The lai demonstrates that Arthur's "courtly society is at risk of being destroyed by internal rifts, tensions, and conflicts" that threaten the ability of Lanval to succeed as a male archetypical hero (Classen 78). These internal rifts also sever Lanval's identity and connection to his horse, which is emblematic of his knightly power. While the reader is made aware of Lanval's illustrious lineage primarily through exposition, his possession of a *destrier* (a powerful warhorse) defines him as a knight. The *destrier* is described as an "integral component of the *chevalier*" akin to his sword or other heraldic vestiges (Rogers 630). Scholar Paul Rogers continues to emphasize that horses became "an indicator of social condition" and were "always associated with the knight," fundamentally linking the *chevalier* (knight) and *cheval* (horse) as a model to demonstrate the knight's power and social identity (638). Lanval's possession of a *destrier* indicates his identity as a knight but ironically emphasizes his lack of power within Arthur's court.

Medieval knights derived their power from their steeds, and thus horses represented a fundamental aspect of high status and hyper-masculine identity. The horse was a "fundamental symbol of virility" and reinforced the embodiments of "male power in medieval texts," thus a knight could not be "disassociated from his steed" (Rogers 629). The horse represents Lanval's knightly duties, as well as his ability to exert his own independence and freedom. Yet, due to Arthur's ineffectual court and kingship, both Lanval and his horse suffer poor treatment. The *destrier* is unable to support Lanval upon a light ride to the meadow and he "trembles terribly," unable to fulfill the journey (de France 46). Lanval's horse is unable to carry him, suggestive of the improper care the horse is receiving at court, much like his master. Upon arriving in the meadow, Lanval parallels his horse as they "roll in the field" and make "the field

[their] bed"—their desire to escape the confines of Arthur's court pushes them to succumb to the potential dangers of the space (de France 48–50). Contemporary readers are aware that spaces containing beautiful meadows, abundant flowers, and swift streams operate as gateways to spaces controlled by Otherworldly beings as "the lovely [meadow]" becomes one of many characteristic markers of the Otherworld (Patch 619). Both horse and rider are unable to perform the duties that are required of them and crave escape to the magical realm of the Fairy Queen.

The relationship between Lanval and his horse throughout the lai can be used to uncover the changes to Lanval's identity and subjugation to the Fairy Queen. Lanval desires to establish a firm identity within a community that supports him; yet the lai makes it clear that to do so, Lanval must abandon his previous identity and commitment to Arthur's court. This transfer can best be investigated through Lanval's treatment of his horse throughout the lai. If the *destrier* is indicative of Lanval's identity as a knight within Arthur's court, then Lanval's abandonment of his horse can be read as Lanval's symbolic rejection of Arthur's court as "horse and rider are a reflection of one another, and their identity is intertwined" (Miller 966). When the young damsels invite him into the Fairy Queen's tent, Lanval promptly leaves his horse behind. This separation is significant as it represents Lanval's departure from the mortal realm, Arthur's court life, and his typical identity. Lanval's abandonment of his horse is a significant indicator of societal upset and a complete departure from his traditional identity. As described by Rogers, a knight would hardly ever travel dismounted, and the "loss of one's steed is always extremely disruptive" to the narrative, indicating that the loss of Lanval's steed is important to both the narrative and Lanval's character (631). As Lanval follows the women and leaves his horse it is clear that Lanval is abandoning his own identity in order to be placed within the world of the Fairy Queen.

Lanval is transported into the Fairy Queen's court and is instantly transfixed by its glory, as well as the lavish

treatment he receives. The Fairy Queen provides for Lanval, unlike Arthur, and she gives Lanval appropriate social treatment in exchange for being "lavished" by him (de France 141). While Lanval is doting on the Fairy Queen and brought within her queendom, his horse is completely forgotten, and he is unconcerned with its care. Lanval's disregard for his steed indicates that he desires to abandon his typical knightly identity to become an agent of the Fairy Queen. When Lanval is with the Fairy Queen he becomes indifferent about leaving Arthur's court, as she alienates Lanval from his identity, as well as the mortal world, by providing for him "all [he] requires" (127). The Fairy Queen is in complete control of her own identity and sways Lanval away from his own: Lanval lingers willingly in the fairy realm, having forgotten his previous responsibilities, and must be commanded to leave by the Fairy Queen, who does not permit him to stay. The Fairy Queen guides Lanval back to his previous identity (embodied by his horse), where he finds that the Fairy Queen's damsels have cared for his horse and have "saddled it up expeditiously" (191). The maintenance of Lanval's horse by the fairy realm represents a spiritual and individual refreshment indicative of the Otherworld's capabilities and the Fairy Queen's power over Lanval (Patch 621). Once reunited with his horse, Lanval is brought out of his trance and becomes "disturbed" about the validity of his encounter (de France 198–199). Thus, Lanval's horse remains a symbol of his ties to the mortal world and his courtly responsibilities to Arthur. Although Lanval longs to be within the effective queendom of the Fairy Queen, he is initially unsure if he should abandon his identity and allegiance to Arthur that is represented by his horse.

Once Lanval has returned to Arthur's court, he is villainized by Arthur's queen and subsequently Arthur. To prove his innocence, Lanval must break his promise to the Fairy Queen by revealing her identity to Arthur's queen. Dejected, Lanval is separated from both communities that he desired to be a part of—Arthur's court and the court of the Fairy Queen. Alienated from his initial sense of identity

and fearing the Fairy Queen will be "lost to [him] for ever," Lanval succumbs to deep misery (148). While Lanval awaits trial for the perceived abuses against Arthur's queen, there are no references to his horse, symbolizing Lanval's position as a societal outcast without hope of advancement or escape. Lanval becomes dependent upon outside aid and is no longer in control of his fate. As is corroborated by Classen, "even the most extensive efforts by his friends and other knights" do not have the ability to "support him against the queen's accusations" (68). Thus, Lanval's agency is transferred to the power of the Fairy Queen, the only one capable of saving him. As Lanval awaits his trial, two of the Fairy Queen's agents arrive riding palfreys (a type of horse traditionally associated with women). As I have explored, horses become symbols of power and individual agency, making it apparent that the Fairy Queen (and her female agents) have control while the men are at the will of these women.

The power that these Otherworldly women command within the lai is expressed through their mastery of horses. As they arrive at Arthur's court, damsels do not dismount until they are "just before the dias," taking up physical space and commanding power (de France 487). Arthur, like Lanval, is at the mercy of the women who not only occupy a physically higher position by arriving on horses but they make demands of the king. The connection between palfreys and powerful female identity is further supported by the Fairy Queen's entrance at the court of Arthur, as she rides astride a "pure white palfrey" both "gentle and elegant" (551–552). The Fairy Queen controls her identity and her court, providing for her courtiers, unlike her male foil, King Arthur. She is described as more wealthy and powerful than any mortal king or queen—Semiramis and Octavian specifically—and the inclusion of the description of her horse only emphasizes her power (82, 85). The lai's emphasis on "the horse [as an] important element worthy of description" conveys a link between the hero's prowess and their horse, placing the Fairy Queen as a heroic figure (Rogers 632). Thus, the lai elevates the Fairy Queen by

providing her with powerful equine symbols that convey her strength in comparison to the men around her.

The Fairy Queen is described in great detail compared to the sparsity of what is known about Lanval. There is extreme detail given to the descriptions of her "bliauts of dark silk with [laces]" (de France 59) and "[mantles] of dark silk" (571), while there is no description of Lanval's own armour, clothing, or features. Additionally, the Fairy Queen's own horse is given an elegant descriptive passage: "a pure white palfrey was her mount; / gentle it was and elegant / … on earth was no such animal," while Lanval's steed is given no literary detail (551–554). As expressed by Rogers, it would be important to describe the knight and his horse as if they were connected—"the more formidable the knight, the more deadly and powerful his steed"—however, it is the Fairy Queen's horse that receives this treatment (Rogers 638). Thus, it is intriguing to explore why Lanval's own horse receives so little attention, while the Fairy Queen's is given an extended passage. One can assume that due to this treatment of the Fairy Queen's horse and vestments, she is the central role and main indicator of agency within the lai. The descriptions of the women's clothing, and their horses, only embolden the aspects of their individual agency in comparison to Lanval's. Marie de France forms a narrative of female agency and empowerment within the lai through descriptions of female characters' horses and clothing, highlighting Lanval's lack of individual identity within the lai by contrast.

While Lanval struggles to find an identity, the Fairy Queen's power and eminence is emphasized, elevating her above Lanval. Marie de France allows the women in the lai to fulfill active and powerful roles demonstrated primarily through the poetic descriptions of their garments and animal companions. The Fairy Queen, with her mastery of her horse and descriptions of her hunting garments, is clearly portrayed as a woman in control. The detailing of the Fairy Queen and her damsels is reminiscent of the mythic cataloguing of armour that a male hero would typically undergo in medieval literature. The emphasis on the Fairy

Queen's vestiges is corroborated by Rogers, as male heroes are often the subject of lengthy descriptive passages, wherein "elements worthy of description," such as their horses and armour, would be highlighted to the reader (Rogers 632). Additionally, the Fairy Queen controls a "sparrowhawk," a common symbol of a king's (or a man's) authority (de France 573). As medieval scholar Miller describes, a male knight or hero is often depicted with a "falcon at his wrist" (962). This inversion of gendered description emphasizes how the women take on more focal roles than the men within the lai. Marie de France characterizes the women in Lanval with more detail than the men, seeming to attribute more narrative focus to their actions and agency.

Lanval is dependent on the Fairy Queen to rescue him, as she is completely in control of her own identity and power, in contrast to Lanval relies on the identity he garners from his role within his community. The Fairy Queen operates separate from the confines of this mortal community, and "not even Arthur [can] retain" her (de France 631). The Fairy Queen takes Lanval away from Arthur's court by placing him upon her own steed, rather than providing him a horse to ride alongside her. She "[carries] off this fine young man" on the back of her palfrey, transplanting him within her community at Avalon (644). Lanval's agency is transferred to the Fairy Queen, and he rides off with her as a dependent, not as an equal. As she carries away Lanval, he leaves behind his own horse, abandoning his previous identity and ties to Arthur's community. Additionally, without a horse Lanval is left without a method of transportation and becomes entirely dependent on the Fairy Queen. Lanval's happiness derives from his perceived identity and his ability to function within an effective community. To achieve his desired community, Lanval rejects the identity affiliated with Arthur's corrupt court by leaving behind his horse and becoming a full subject of his new queen. Furthermore, he achieves this happiness by becoming dependent upon a woman to rescue him rather than using his own power.

Horses in Marie de France's *Lai de Lanval* represent the identity and agency of their owners. Examining horses

as multifaceted symbols of the individual within medieval literature can provide an analysis of how the characters operate both within the lai and medieval courtly structure. Marie de France's *Lanval* focuses closely on the individual power of the Fairy Queen and the transfer of Lanval's agency to her control. Investigating the deep connection between *chevalier* and *cheval*, this paper demonstrates Lanval's subjugation to the Fairy Queen. The lai's traditionally chivalric equine symbols elevate the Fairy Queen's agency and subvert expectations of gendered power.

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