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### The Arrangement of Love

In modern literature and film, the term or concept of “romance” is typically synonymous with a story centred around themes of “love.” However, when discussing Anglo-Norman literature, the categorization of “romance” is less contingent on the themes and plot clichés that popularized the more modern interpretation of the “romance” genre. For this paper, I hope to discuss how love and sex are represented in “Lanval,” an Arthurian lai (a narrative poem often dealing in themes of adventure and romance) written by Marie de France. By examining “Lanval,” it is clear that love and romance are represented as an arrangement, decided on by men, based on the perceived value or worth of a woman. This is important, because not only do women seem to have very little agency in “love,” love and sex seem to exist outside of meaningful connection or intimacy.

In “Lanval,” love is something that can be offered and accepted; it is a contract that allows for intimacy, sex, and status. When Lanval (the character) meets the mistress, she almost immediately professes that she loves him “more than anything” (Black et al. 190). Importantly, “love stings [Lanval] with a spark” (Black et al. 190) after he “saw she was beautiful” (Black et al. 190). Lanval seems to love the mistress due to the fact that a beautiful woman is “offering” her love to him. While the mistress’ love for Lanval, without ever having met him, could be attributed to themes of magical romantic fiction, Lanval “falls in love” with her almost instantly. The concept of “love at first sight” is a common theme throughout literature, but the initial

interaction and discussion of love between Lanval and the mistress is efficient to the point of being emotionally detached.

The mistress is represented as having a regal, magical, beautiful, and intimidating presence. However, she “grants [Lanval] her love and her body” (Black et al. 191), giving Lanval “possession of [her] body” (Black et al. 191). This speaks to how love is performed as more of an arrangement than mutual emotional connection and sexual intimacy, with the power in the arrangement belonging to the man. Interestingly, there are two detailed descriptions of the mistress (lines 93-106 and 559-574), that seem to validate her “quality,” justifying Lanval’s motivation to love her. Lanval’s motivations for loving the mistress are her looks and (the ideal male fantasy) of her mysterious appearance and declaration of love, with no representation of mutual emotional connection or intimacy. It seems that the arrangement of love between Lanval and the mistress permits emotional and sexual intimacy, as opposed to emotional and sexual intimacy being conducive to falling in love.

The definitions of love and sexuality are so correlated to an image of a “worthy” woman, that same-sex desire is perceived as a disregard or rejection of the standards of women (required for “love”). After the queen “consider[s] him” (Black et al. 193), she offers to Lanval that “[he] can have all [her] love” (Black et al. 194). The queen is “willing to be [Lanval’s] lover” (Black et al. 194), which further represents love as an optional arrangement. However, Lanval has “no interest in loving [her]” (Black et al. 194), and the queen becomes angry. She accuses Lanval of having “no desire for women” (Black et al. 194), and that he has “shapely young men / and take[s] [his] pleasure with them” (Black et al. 194). While the queen contends that King Arthur will be “greatly harmed” (Black et al. 194) by this accusation, the root of the queen’s homophobia does not seem to stem from Judeo-Christian values (ones based on the biblical

“sanctity” of marriage). Instead, this outburst reflects the queen's surprise (and embarrassment) at her perception of Lanval's rejection of the queen's offer of her love. As love is performed as an arrangement, with “worth” being of principle importance (as opposed to emotional and sexual intimacy), Lanval's rejection of the queen's love is a dismissal of the queen's worth as a woman. Lanval's rejection of the queen is not a matter of a lack of mutual love, it is a proposed arrangement that is rejected by Lanval for the queen's lack of worth. Lanval asserts that even the poorest maids who serve the mistress are “worth more than you, lady queen” (Black et al. 195). Lanval “loves” the mistress not only because she *allowed* him to choose to love her, but also because she is (described as) the “ideal” woman. “Worth” (as it pertains to beauty, class, status, and image) is seemingly the primary requirement of the woman from the male side of the arrangement of love.

In “Lanval,” power influences the possibility and quality of love, and women have very little agency in the arrangement of love. The “worth” of a woman is repeatedly mentioned throughout “Lanval,” and love is represented as a choice that men specifically seem to make consciously. The queen offers that Lanval can love her, as if love is a status that women can offer men. Furthermore, Lanval rejects the queen for lack of interest in loving her, as if love is a choice that a man gets to make as women throw themselves at him. In response to the queen, Lanval does not claim to love the mistress more than anyone else. Instead, he emphasizes the *value* of the mistress, stating that he “love[s] and [is] the beloved of / one who should be valued more highly / than all the women [he knows]” (Black et al. 195). When two maidens enter King Arthur's court, it is noted that “[m]any people gave great praise / . . . / both of them were certainly worth / more than the queen was” (Black et al. 200). This language speaks to a “game” of love that is represented in “Lanval,” where different “pieces” are “worth” more. Even still, the

knights “curse such mad love” (Black et al. 197), when the mysterious interpersonal connection of love does not seem to exist. In “Lanval,” love is a privilege of men, that women get to do little more about than offer.

“Lanval” represents man as having nearly all of the agency in the arrangement of love, especially how and whom they love. While “Lanval” superficially appears to place a significant amount of power and agency on the mistress, “she is entirely at his command” (Black et al. 193). The mistress’ offer to Lanval, “that [he] should wish to love [her]” (Black et al. 191), seems to be contingent on his loyalty to her and obedience to her wishes. However, in the context of the whole story, the “deal” (of Lanval not telling anyone of the mistress) serves as nothing more than to validate “[Lanval’s] valour, his generosity, / his beauty, [and] his prowess” (Black et al. 188). Lanval *does* break the terms of his agreement with the mistress, and yet “[w]ith her he went to Avalon, / . . . [n]o one ever heard another word of him” (Black et al. 202). “Lanval” represents love and sexuality in a way that is an idealized fantasy of the protagonist male in the story. There is no moral around love and sex in “Lanval,” or any thematic substance beyond Lanval’s perfect actions and idealized male fantasy of love.

Primarily, “Lanval” centres around a (“perfect”) woman mysteriously falling in love with Lanval. It is a male-centric fantasy, as the “worth” of the idealized image of a woman is represented as an important aspect of love and sexuality. “Lanval” represents both the titular character and his story as flawless and clean, an idealistic fiction from a male perspective. Love and sex are less about the connection and intimacy between two people, and more about the choice of a man, based on the “worth” of a woman. Love is performed as an arrangement, a contract that allows for intimacy, sex, and status. There is very little nuance found in “Lanval” and its representation of love and sex, especially when reading from the perspective of a woman.

## Works Cited

Black, Joseph, et al., editors. "Lanval." *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature*, 3rd ed., A, Broadview Press, 2017, pp. 188-202.