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Gambling: The Dialogue of Excess
in *Lanval* and *The Franklin's Tale*

Medieval European societies were often hostile towards outsiders. As secluded local economies and social orders could be easily destroyed by intruding forces such as foreigners or their wealth, patriarchal rulers as well as local citizens endeavored to suppress outside elements¹. In a twelfth-century lai, *Lanval*, the writer Marie de France concludes: “estranges, descunseilliez / mult est dolenz en alter terre” ‘a foreigner without support / is very unfortunate in another country²’ (36-7). However, medieval societies did not simply disapprove of foreigners; rather, they carefully censored the circulation of “excess,” i.e., all people, objects and relationships that either came from outside (geographical transgression) or deviated from local norms (social transgression). This essay compares and analyzes two tales based on Breton lais, Marie de France’s *Lanval* and Chaucer’s *The Franklin’s Tale*. Both focus on rash actions, in particular thoughtless utterance, committed by virtuous foreigners, and the consequences that ensue. These two stories start with the presence of an outsider in a community, unprotected by the local patriarchy. As the narratives unfold, the outsiders’ presence both triggers the transgressive desire of others in the community and prompts the influx of outside resources, such as money or magic. This disturbs the local order in terms of morality, authority, and economy.

¹ The outsiders either came from another country or another genre, and their foreignness would lead to conflicting politics or poetics. (Cowell 139). Hence, to further class solidarity, medieval communities limited their profit and exchange to a certain group and excluded outsiders (Cowell 35).

² All quotations of *Lanval* are from Librairie Générale Française 1990 edition edited by Karl Warnke; all English translations of *Lanval* are from https://www.madbeppe.com/text/lanval/#Text_and_Translation which has consulted the 1900 edition edited by Karl Warnke and the 1981 CMFA edition by Jean Rychner.

Both texts explicitly address the status of merits such as beauty and, most importantly, generosity, a defining virtue of nobility in the Middle Ages (Carruthers 289; Graeber 114).³ At face value, characters exchange gifts out of goodwill, but in fact, they carefully manage their monetary or emotional excess. If they act rashly, once their excess threatens the community, they are severely punished. In *Lanval*, a seemingly “polite” competition has a dark undertone. The court seeks to determine who is more beautiful – the fairy⁴ or the queen – but as they deliberate, the reader knows that a hidden and violent rivalry in leadership and wealth between King Arthur and the fairy is at stake. Lanval’s excess set this dilemma in motion: he engaged in lavish gift-giving to all the people, and spoke to the queen so harshly that he offended her. In *The Franklin’s Tale*, a knight (Arveragus), a squire (Aurelius) and a magician compete for “which was the mooste fre” “who is the most generous⁵” (1622); however, the true origin of this glorious competition is greed. Each seeks undeserved money and love while ignoring the distress of the lady, Dorigen, whom they previously cherished and took care of. The tension created in communities by the arrival of outsiders develops further with the exchange of gifts, whether monetary or moral, and intensifies when the gift-receiver can no longer repay an offering.

Even though scholars point out that *Lanval* and *The Franklin’s Tale* both advocate generosity (Strauss 136; Thormann 221; Séguy 3⁶), this virtue is not sufficient to disentangle the

³ In her article “The Gentilesse of Chaucer’s Franklin,” Mary Carruthers rephrases “Rules of the Household” by Robert Grossteste, a prominent religious and intellectual figure from the thirteenth century. Grossteste’s work states that the ideal behavior of nobles is to display generous hospitality.

David Graeber, an American anthropologist, in his book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* analyzes the historical development of the relationship between debt and social institution. In the book, he describes medieval society as “ultimately reciprocal” (114): the great works of medieval art, literature and music always relied on patronship, i.e., the generosity of the ruling class.

⁴ Marie de France does not give the fairy a name but calls her “dameiseles / pucele” (unmarried young woman) or “dame/madame.” This paper follows many previous scholars (such as Séguy, Kinoshita, McCracken and Burgess) who refer her as “the fairy.”

⁵ All quotations of Chaucer’s texts are from Broadview Editions Second Edition, edited by Robert Boenig and Andrew Taylor. All translations are from <https://chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/pages/franklins-prologue-and-tale>.

⁶ He notes: “Generosity, in the English lai, the principal quality of Lanval, is presented as an excess that causes his loss and motivates his enchanting adventure” (my trans., 3).

complex circulation of gifts across feudal hierarchies. To further examine the exchange network in the two tales, I employ the theories on gift exchange of Mauss and Derrida. In *The Gift*, Mauss claims that a gift only exists in exchange. That is, a gift is never free, as the giver always expects a gift in return within an appropriate timeframe. This distinguishes it from a donation, which either starts or maintains a state of inferiority in the receiver. Mauss highlights two features of gifting: an obligatory time limit to repay the gift, and the sense of competition of who is “the most madly extravagant” (47). One’s sense of honor or higher virtue emerges by repaying a lavish gift on time.

Derrida wrote *The Gift of Death* in response to Mauss. He clarifies and expands on the notion of “gifts exchanged.” The two striking features of the gift exchange for Derrida can be identified as “madness” and “excess.” Madness can be understood as the excess of quality or quantity of a gift, corresponding to the extravagance suggested by Mauss. I also relate this Derridean excess to foreignness, as the initial gift comes from outside the enclosed tranquil community. The very state of outsider intrusion and lack of control clearly applies to these two medieval *lais*. For instance, the impasses caused by Lanval and Dorigen’s rash promises are primed by their outsider identities and their unawareness of local rules.

“Excess” takes multiple forms in the two tales, such as the excessive presence of foreigners who do not know local rules, excessively extravagant monetary transactions, or the love motivated by excessive personal desire. Reading excess in these two tales through Mauss and Derrida, as well as the studies on social order by medievalists such as Georges Duby and Andrew Cowell, shows how individual characters interact with larger economic and social structures and gamble successfully or unsuccessfully to achieve their goals. Through analysis on the circulation of promise and emotion, first in *Lanval* and then in *The Franklin’s Tale*, this essay

ultimately investigates the storytellers' standing in the potential encounter between a stable, feudal economy and a new "capitalist" economy *avant la lettre*.

Lanval: an "Unfortunate" Outsider

Both texts start with an outsider entering a community via either feudal or marital bonds. Yet, neither the outsider nor the bond is ever favored by the patriarchal authority, and this unprotected state soon attracts immoral desire and threatens the local economy. *Lanval* depicts the newly isolated state of King Arthur's kingdom after the wars with the Scots. Arthur's distribution of gifts opens the story, showing how his court alienates Lanval:

femmes e terres departi,
fors a un sul ki l'ot servi.
Ceo fu Lanval; ne l'en sovint,
ne nuls des soens bien ne li tint.
(17-20)

he (King Arthur) distributed wives and lands
to all but one who served him.
That was Lanval; Arthur forgot him,
and none of his men favored him either.

The two Old French "ne" indicate that Lanval's exclusion from the gift-giving results from the collective ignorance of other people. These two verses of negation put the king's obliviousness and the disfavor of the king's men in parallel. It is tempting to propose that King Arthur is included in the men who dislike Lanval, because, as Alin Yessaian describes, Arthur's negligence is not accidental but rather intentional. His gift giving is not truly generous, if he misses one of his vassals (16). Similarly, Mireille Séguy disapproves of the interpretation of Arthur's behavior as "free generosity" and reads Arthur's act of distributing wives and lands as compensation for his vassals' service (4). It is notable that the tale locates "departi," 'distributed,' and "servi," 'served' at the ends of neighboring lines, hinting at their cause-and-effect relationship; this supports Séguy's suggestion. In other words, Arthur fails to pay Lanval what he deserves.

As argued, intentionally or not, it's transgressive that Arthur forgets to pay Lanval and that other knights never remind Arthur. The essential question remains: why do Arthur and other knights ignore and even detest Lanval? The tale suggests that the court is wary of Lanval's foreign identity, as the author laments, "estranges, descunseilliez / mult est dolenz en alter terre" 'a foreigner without support / is very unfortunate in another country' (36-7). Yet it would be naïve to conclude that Lanval's foreign identity is the only cause of his unpopularity in Arthur's court.

Historically, the medieval court is not mired in xenophobia. According to Georges Duby, an ideal lord-vassal relationship is an engagement of fidelity that binds two strangers across blood and produces a form of familial association, which Duby names by adopting an expression of Marc Bloch, "parent supplémentaire" 'supplemental parent or family member' (Duby *La Société* 142). The tale presents other foreign but popular knights who are part of the Round Table: for example, Ywain, the son of King Urien. Ywain not only receives a share of rewards from Arthur, but he is also well-loved by other knights. Thus, Lanval's geographical foreign background cannot fully explain others' disfavor of him.

An alternative interpretation regarding the identity of strangers is posed by Andrew Cowell. He argues that it is not a different geographical birthplace that determines strangers' identity, but their lack of knowledge of local rules:

the stranger represents a world with different semiotic rules, and the tavern is the locus for a confrontation of these rules, with the stranger's victimization usually due to his unfamiliarity with the rules of this alien locale. (139)

The postwar kingdom of Arthur is notably similar to the gambling table described in Cowell's book: the winning party eagerly distributes the booty among its members, but the stranger's share is often lessened or non-existent (34-5). The example of Ywain suggests that the rule of Arthur's court is not to exclude foreigners from participating in court activities. The local rule is,

I propose, to actively request permission to participate. A good example of this is Walwains, whose request that Lanval be included at the party is instantly approved by the queen (even though she did not invite him initially) and welcomed by other knights. This shows the flexibility in leaders' decision-making and in public opinion. That is to say, if Lanval had asked for his share or for inclusion in the brotherhood, he would likely have received what he was owed.

The Fairy: A Female Sovereign with Beauty and Wealth

As illustrated, Lanval's foreignness is fostered more by his own passivity and his careless patriarchal superior (Arthur) than by his geographical origin. Coming from another realm, the fairy is more alien to the kingdom than Lanval. She also holds superabundant and mysterious wealth. Though her beauty spurs Lanval's rash words of offense to the queen⁷, this competition of feminine beauty only scratches the surface of the actual conflict. While the rivalry in beauty seems to pit the fairy against the queen, the more profound competition concerns sovereignty: the fairy's vs. Arthur's. When the fairy first appears, the text extensively describes her lavish tent that no other legendary or historical sovereign could possess. The fairy herself is only abstractly described as:

flur de lis e rose nuvele...
 Un chier mantel de blanc hermine,
 covert de purples Alexandrine
 or pur ke chalt sur li geté;
 tut ot descovert le costé,
 le bis, le col e la peitrine:
 plus ert blanche que flur d'espine.
 (94, 100-106)

the lily and the fresh rose...
 Lined with the white ermine fur
 a precious purple cloak from Alexandria
 she partly covers herself for the warmth;
 but her sides were exposed
 as well as her face, neck and bosom
 that were as white as the hawthorn flower.

Many details demand readers' attention. First, by emphasizing the coat's precious color and exotic origin, the fairy signals vast resources beyond national boundaries, and these riches will

⁷ Lanval tells the Queen that his (girl)friend, the fairy, is much more beautiful than her, and even the fairy's maids are prettier than the Queen herself.

soon be bestowed to Lanval. In Will Hasty's words, the display of "global parameters of the cultural resources" and "the imperial scaling of things" (177) is indicated by the text's earlier description of the tent. The lavish tent illustrates the fairy's buying power which exceeds that of Emperor Augustus Caesar and Queen Semiramis. Such richness distinguishes the fairy from Lanval; though both are outsiders to Arthur's kingdom, the former holds more power to alter the economy of this lai. The most transgressive action Lanval can take is to ride out of the city, whereas the fairy's mere appearance shifts materials and transactions to an unprecedented international scope. Wealth is proven to be more significant than other factors such as physical beauty or foreignness.

The second noteworthy detail is the downplay of functionality in accessories. The flowing river and the fairy's need of a cloak for warmth suggest that this scene happens on a cool, non-winter day. The fairy's impractical attire that half covers her body but lets wind blow open the curtains reveals intentionally puts herself and her wealth on display. It remains a question whether a nonhuman can be affected by temperature, but the text presents a fairy who is, at least, trying to be human in sensation. This is not the first attempt to humanize the fairy. Glyn Burgess notes that throughout the tale, the fairy is referred to as a human young girl – "dameisele," "pucele," "meschine," and "dame," – instead of as a supernatural creature (105).

Yet despite the intentional reference to the fairy as a mortal girl and her possible sensitivity to temperature – attempts to humanize the fairy – her beauty is presented in an outlandish manner: either symbolized by flowers (non-human beings) or mediated through nudity (a flesh without social construction). The fairy becomes a lily, a rose and a flower of hawthorn through metaphor. The flowers not only symbolize her, but also refer to her nudity. Flowers and the naked body of the fairy both are natural products nourished by water instead of

human civilization,⁸ and they demonstrate beauty in an independent and natural manner⁹. Despite all efforts to humanize her, the fairy's impractical accessories and the textual emphasis on aesthetic and monetary grandeur reveal her particularity.

Compared to Lanval's beauty, which is acknowledged only after he wears splendid clothes granted by the fairy, the fairy shows her naked body as intrinsically beautiful and authoritative. When she enters the palace of Arthur as an absolute outsider to the court, she is immediately recognized as "en tut siècle n'ot si bele" 'the most beautiful on earth' (556). In addition, her beauty "contaminates" the court -- at the mere sight of her, half naked as usual, the knights switch their political stance: "n'i ot tant vieil hume en la curt, / e volentiers sun ueil n'i turt / e volentiers ne la servist, / pur ceo que sufrir le volsist" 'even the eldest in the court, / would willingly run to / provide her service / if she had wanted' (597-599). The fairy apparently wins the heart of every knight, even those most senior advisors whose loyalty is the firmest to Arthur (though they do not openly express their unfaithful thoughts). In comparison to the knights' jealousy of Lanval, which has accumulated over years, the immediate enthusiasm for the fairy demonstrates her capacity to produce rapid influence. Such charisma reaches its peak when she takes off her cloak and exposes her flanks – at this moment, everyone expresses the willingness to serve her.

Yet as noted earlier, the fairy's beauty is described abstractly and contributes to her charm only on the surface. I propose that instead of beauty, it is the fairy's wealth that effectively contributes to her immediate popularity. Note that her richness is always extensively exhibited

⁸ Some scholars identify the fairy as a water-goddess or Melusine (a fairy who lives close to water and often gives money to her lover). For instance, in Robert Edward McCain's dissertation "Encountering the Marvelous in Marie De France," he notes that the fairy's characteristics correspond to "the practices of the ancient Celts in Gaul and the 'cult of the water-goddesses'" (Cross "Celtic Elements," McCain26), or Mélusinian fays (Laurence Harf-Lancner, McCain 53).

⁹ Her supernaturalness (for example, she can appear wherever Lanval calls her) can also be interpreted as excess, because it transcends laws of nature.

by her tent, harness and maids before the exposure of her spotless flesh, as if limitless wealth lifts her to such a high position that the abrupt sight of nudity does not seem to breach in social decorum and aesthetic taste. As Will Hasty suggests, the competition between Arthur's queen and the fairy seems to hint at a comparison of economic resources (184). The way that the fairy captivates the vassals supports this view. Moreover, when she gives her love vow to Lanval, she identifies herself as sovereign:

Se vus estes pruz e curteis
 Emperere ne quens ne reis
 N'ot unkes tant joie ne bien;
 Kar jo vus sui venue querre
 (113-116)

If you are prudent and courteous
 No emperor, no queens or kings
 Can make you happier than I can;
 Because I love you more.

Here she not only compares herself to male and female authorities but claims superiority over them because she loves Lanval more. Her vow is conditional; Lanval must be prudent and courteous. Strikingly, Arthur is also described as "li pruz e li curteis" 'prudent and courteous' (6) at the beginning of the tale. Although Burgess reasons that these two qualities reflect a "courtesy epithet" more than they offer real semantic content, Arthur's obliviousness towards Lanval situates him in opposite onto prudence and courtesy to such a degree that his negligence appears intentional and duplicitous (83). Similarly, Lanval's rash offense to the queen shows his lack of prudence. Compared to the unreliable qualities of men, the fairy's virtue is constant; according to the measurement of love and monetary generosity, she outweighs Arthur as a wise leader. This lai intrinsically shows a preference for the fairy's constant virtue and her open leadership.

Another question remains: given that the fairy shares her wealth with Lanval, why is she admired for the mere display of luxury while Lanval is disliked despite his distribution of gifts? One interpretation is that Lanval is not in a position to send gifts to everyone. Since he does, he becomes potentially more generous than Arthur and thus violates a tacit court rule: do not outdo the king in any virtue.

The fairy is wise not to send gifts to anyone at court. It is as if she knows the danger of sending gifts as described by Mauss:

The obligation to reciprocate worthily is imperative. One loses face forever if one does not reciprocate, or if one does not carry out destruction of equivalent value.

The punishment for failure to reciprocate is slavery for debt (54).

If the fairy gave any treasure to the court, the court would be in debt to her, and more dangerously, this debts would be impossible to reciprocate, since the fairy's luxury exceeds the buying power of all emperors of legend. In addition, the knights' overwhelmed reaction to her appearance confirms the supremacy of both her beauty and wealth over their queen and king. According to Mauss, for two parties who engage in gift exchange for the first time, the exchange is a latent vainglorious competition. Here the fairy is indeed capable of giving an insanely extravagant gift that triggers a transformation "from festival to battle" (105) such as Mauss describes. Bragging and intentional generosity must be limited, according to Derrida, to ensure the sustainability of two communities. Therefore, to solve the conflict, the gentle leader, i.e., the fairy, downplays generosity. She merely shows her advantages, even though she could blatantly announce her dual victory in beauty and wealth, or overpower the court by sending courtiers an unrepayable gift. Her humble behavior implies her pacific and open leadership, compared to the aggression and semi-xenophobia that the court demonstrated through its treatment of Lanval and the Scots.

The fairy knows the nuances of showing abstract gifts versus giving an actual gift. Therefore, she does not engage in concrete exchange with the court. For instance, the fairy's maids precede her to the court to demand that Arthur prepares rooms with the finest silk to welcome her arrival. However, those rooms are never used used nor even viewed by the fairy. Arthur's unfunctional and conspicuous gift is then reciprocated with a similar gift: the fairy's

unmistakable yet unconsumable beauty. The exchange between the fairy and the court is equal; it remains perpetually at the level of abstract hospitality.

By contrast, even though Lanval has lived in Arthur's court for years, he barely knows the rules. As argued earlier, when Lanval sends out gifts, he challenges Arthur's achievement in generosity. When Lanval has no fairy's wealth to distribute, he constantly offers an excessive, abstract "gift" that can be summarized as negative emotion. During the fairy's absence, Lanval has been displayed emotion and dismissive silence. In front of Arthur or other knights, in the court or in the prison, Lanval remains "entrepris" 'embarrassed,' "dolenz" 'painful, sorrowful' and "ensis" 'forlorn.' Gerson, a fourteenth century scholar, remarks that sorrow cannot be expressed by voices, but rather only by silence (Gerson *On The Passions*, Rosenwein 232). Lanval's refusal of any conversation mediates his ill humor at court and keeps other knights away.

One unspoken rule at court is to conceal all negative emotions and inappropriate intents; this is evidenced by Lanval's colleagues, who first hide their jealousy of Lanval, never remind Arthur to reward him, then conceal their disagreement with Lanval's harsh punishment at Arthur's hands. But Lanval never conceals his negativity. Instead, his affront to the queen ignites her anger, prompts her tears and false accusation, though a moment ago she delightfully offered Lanval her love. In parallel, Arthur has spent a refreshing day hunting outside, but when he returns and hears of Lanval's offense, he is so agitated that he keeps pushing the court to punish Lanval until the fairy's arrival puts a stop on his paranoia. Therefore, compared to the fairy's infinite wealth and captivating charm that penetrate the court, Lanval's extreme negativity contaminates the court.

Apart from his contaminating negativity, the excessive gifts Lanval sends out constitutes a threat to Arthur's reign. In particular, the origin of Lanval's gifts is not revealed until the last scene of the lai. It's worthy highlighting that Arthur's major concerns are the secret of Lanval's infinite wealth and his questionable loyalty, rather than his belief in another woman's beauty. Lanval is charged with two offenses: attempted adultery, an accusation fabricated by the queen, and bragging about the fairy's beauty. Yet when Arthur gives the order to imprison Lanval, these two charges merge, and the punishment, alienated from the crimes, becomes a pure demonstration that Lanval has another master. Clearly, Arthur is more aware of and threatened by Lanval's hidden master who is richer than he, than he is by the queen's tearful complaints. Lanval's distribution of untraceable external wealth is a true act of adultery vis-a-vis Arthur's sovereignty. Duby describes the worst case of adultery as: "(the lady) is fertilized by another man and her children of the other blood ... one day carry the ancient name and claim the heritage" (*Le Chevalier* 54). Earlier we cited Duby's idea that the lord-vassal relationship was a form of father-son relationship (*La société* 142). Here Arthur doubts Lanval's loyalty as a vassal and his legitimacy as a "son." Arthur is intolerant of an alternative cuckoldry in which his son/vassal secretly chooses another parent/sovereign. His final solution to this crisis must be to either expel Lanval or confront Lanval's second master.

Overall, the lai employs "excess" in multiple ways to portray two outsiders, Lanval and the fairy. Lanval suffers from excess: he self-identifies as an excessive member at court and never asks for what he deserves; when he receives excessive wealth from the fairy, he lavishly bestows gifts onto others and thus enters into competition with Arthur; when he loses the fairy and her money due to his offense of the queen, he spreads his negative emotions which contaminate the whole court. As a result, he is a constant outsider and is punished as an outlaw.

The fairy, however, knows the rules and carefully engages in the gift exchange. She displays her excessive wealth through beauty and thus shapes the transgressive competition of leadership with Arthur into a polite encounter. Though the tale first implies that foreign identity is a significant obstacle to integrating into and succeeding in a community, the performance of the fairy and other foreign knights disproves the xenophobia in Arthur's court. Wise governance over the excess, i.e., being a knowledgeable and moderate manager of one's behavior and resources, determines the destiny of any outsider figure.

The Franklin's Tale: Unsupported Marriage and Immoral Love

Lanval ends with the fairy firmly rejecting the invitation to stay longer at court. She swiftly departs with Lanval to fairyland. With the departure of those identified as excess, Arthur's kingdom resumes its balance. In *The Franklin's Tale*, there are more nuances in the "excess" of characters and gift exchange. Moreover, the excesses that eventually disappear to restore the local tranquility are symbolic objects. A reading of the excess and competitive exchange will be similarly fruitful in analyzing this Middle-English tale itself, adapted from a Breton lai.

Dorigen, the lady in *The Franklin's Tale*, is also an outsider. She moved to Armorik (Britanny) after marrying the knight, Arveragus. Critics are generally interested in the egalitarianism of the couple's marriage vow given the premarital dynamic according to which the lady is socially superior to the knight¹⁰. But these scholars ignore the fact that this marriage ritual is unattended by patriarchal authority. While their mutual deference of authority is described at length, the text never talks about when, where and with whose witness their vows were made. Readers only know that after Arveragus reveals his lovesickness to Dorigen, "That

¹⁰ Such as Alan Gaylord, Maire Nelson and Carol Pulman.

pryvely she fil of his accord / To take hym for hir housbonde and hir lord” “that privately she fell in agreement with him / To take him for her husband and her lord’ (741-2). Their marriage appears to be a mere individual performance (Thormann 214), without participation of any authority. The suspicious “pryvely” and the absence of a wedding description cast doubt on the legitimacy of their marriage, yet Chaucer simply changes their titles to husband and wife to imply that they engaged in a marital ritual.

Their marriage strikingly lacks the witness or approval of a superior. For example, they never mention God in the marital vow, though religion and supernatural powers exist in the tale.¹¹ In addition, Dorigen’s father is absent from the text. In the Middle Ages, regardless of social class, marriage was not a free choice, but rather an arrangement orchestrated by parents in service of class, economic and political interests. While the higher nobility faces more limited choices, sometimes marriage was arranged across social strata; for instance, a lord might reward his vassal by bestowing his daughter on him. In return, the vassal repaid the lord by further service and consolidated loyalty (Shahar 132-8). In the case of *The Franklin’s Tale*, if Dorigen’s father had intended to marry her off to Arveragus, the newly wedded couple would have stayed in the father’s fief to repay his generosity. However, the couple moves directly to Arveragus’ home territory. Even if we may overlook the possibility that they fled the patriarchal order under Dorigen’s father, we recall that their marriage was not authorized by patriarchal authority. Later, unsupported by local patriarchy, Dorigen is placed in her friends’ care during Arvergaus’ absence, instead of that of a higher court elder who could guard and guide her.¹²

¹¹ Albeit ambiguously, as a mixture of paganism and Christianity, magic and astronomy. For instance, the disappearance of the rocks is seen as magical illusion in the text, yet as more of an astronomical calculation for critics such as Ben Parson, and Paul Strohm

¹² According to Shaehar’s chapter on “Women in Nobility,” if a woman did not inherit the fief of her, her husband did not have a county for her to manage, and she had no children, she would probably serve as a noble attendant to a female superior, or as governess of the superior’s daughters during the absence of her husband (152).

Unrecognized and unsupported, the marriage of Dorigen and Arveragus constitutes an excess in the patriarchal society of their homelands. This excess is not easily forgotten or forgiven; it is alarmingly transgressive. Their love attempts to create a new vassal-lord relationship, blatantly motivated by selfish desire. Paul Strohm deems their marriage vows “a creative extension of ideas of vassalage and lordship” (105), but he disregards the peril of such creation: without the governance of a male sovereign, their household attempts to establish an autonomous, closed feudal society. By claiming “Love wol nat been constreyned by maistrye” ‘Love would not be constrained by mastery’ (764) and “Love is a thing – as any spirit – free” (768), the storyteller, the Franklin, essentially despises arranged marriage and the inequality in marriage motivated by class or gender. For him, the supremacy of love is founded on romantic, mutual desire:

an aristocratic marriage, founded on private sexual passion, attempts to merge with the form of companionate, consensual marriage... a marriage between middle class agents who contract between themselves, without intermediaries; no father or family hands Dorigen over to Arveragus, while patriarchal authority is maintained, at the cost of a certain hypocrisy (Thormann, 216-7).

This “private sexual passion” is the foundation of the couple’s marriage, unvalidated by feudal tradition. More conspicuously, it equates their love with Aurelius’ immoral desire for Dorigen. Indeed, in nature, these two loves are similar: both Arveragus and Aurelius suffer mentally in the desire for a specific person, Dorigen; both escape patriarchal control while violating social decorum (i.e., desiring somebody belonging to a higher social class, or desiring another’s wife, respectively). The love of each man is thus vulnerable both to intrinsic struggles and to an attack from the outside.

Moreover, a feature of the Breton lai is that people live “freely” up to standard when the utmost authority is seemingly absent in the story: “Vertical power relations are tempted by the

ideal of reciprocity of responsibility, however unequal the partners” (Kinoshita & McCracken 91); thereafter, the crisis “resolves itself in a cascade of seemingly selfless donation” (Epstein 171). Struggling in their improper love for Dorigen, Arveragus and Aurelius attempt to acquire something above their rank. They eventually cease to pursue their personal desire and adopt the higher virtue of generosity, but their adoption is often an incompetent mimicry. For example, Arveragus is not a lord by profession; his inadequacy to manage the household as husband of a lady is shown by the confusing, headless state of his marriage, caused by his absence. When medieval lords go to foreign battles, noble wives often gain authority and overcome their loneliness by taking over their husbands’ duties (Beauvoir 164; Shahar 149). When Arveragus leaves for warfare, he has no fiefdom for Dorigen to manage and no supervisor to guard her; therefore, Aurelius “saugh[sees] his tyme” (966) to seduce Dorigen. The spouses are unequal and there is a lack of patriarchal support, such that Arveragus’ absence creates an immediate vacancy open to excessive imprudence and immorality.

It is also noteworthy that the nature of love is excess, according to Andreas Capellanus’ *The Treatise on Love*: “Love is a certain inborn suffering derived from the sight of and excessive meditation upon the beauty of the opposite sex” (Miller 292). In this story, Arveragus and Aurelius’ loves are excess violating social norms. So these two opportunists hide their immoral desires and avoid scrutiny or punishment by a higher authority, until they sense an opening to reveal their lovesickness to Dorigen. Though they encounter different outcomes, the fact that they can choose to display or conceal their emotions and intent already shows their higher degree of freedom, especially when compared to Dorigen.

Male Tears and Homosocial Bond

With regard to emotions, men's tears help them to achieve their desires. At the beginning of the tale, Arveragus laments his unworthiness to desire Dorigen; his tears move Dorigen and are richly rewarded by her pity and marital vow. Aurelius' lovesickness is also used as an excuse to demand love from Dorigen: "Madame, reweth upon my peynes smerte" 'Madame, have pity on my sharp pains', he says (974). After being rejected, Aurelius' yearlong crying not only invites the care of his brother but also contaminates him:

His brother weepe and wayled pryvely,
Til ate laste hym fil in remembraunce...
(a book) Of magyk natureel, which his
felawe...
Hadde prively upon his desk ylaft.
(1116-7, 1125, 1128)

His brother weeped and wailed privately,
Until at last he remembered...
(a book) of natural magic, which his friend
Had secretly left on his desk.

One man's tears trigger another man's tears, and eventually lead to a solution that involves importing outside forces. "Pryvely" appears twice in the passage, first in relation to the brother's crying, and second in relation to the position of the magic book, hinting at an equivalence between male tears and an intrinsic but mysterious power. Notably, Arveragus and Aurelius hide their tears and romantic yearnings only until they 'see their time' (966) acquire Dorigen's pity. Given that tears entail the physical existence of body fluid (in contrast to other emotions that are only expressed visually), here male tears turn into an excess of masculine prowess, whose exposure initiates an exchange. Men show their tears to demand a gift of the source of their sorrow. It seems like that the agency entailed in demanding pity, or reaching a solution, lies in both male tears and the ability to hide intentions. It is also clear in the two men's wooing words, where they emphasize that their effort in hiding lovesickness is worthy of Dorigen's attention, and hopefully, a gift. In comparison, Dorigen loses the capacity to act "pryvely" as soon as she agrees to marry Arveragus in secret, "pryvely she fil of his accord" 'secretly she fell in

agreement with him' (741). This is perhaps a patriarchal punishment for her disregard of her father's place in deciding her marriage. Without the ability to hide, Dorigen cannot keep her disdain for Aurelius a secret, and so she mocks him via a rash promise.¹³ Her vulnerability is thus associated with an inability to act "pryvely," the very skill the men master and strengthen with their tears.

There is more to uncover in the secret tears and hidden intentions – namely, "freedom" 'generosity, freedom.' People articulate their "freedom" in displays of emotion and intention to gain more "freedom." In the context of the final competition over "[w]hich is the mooste fre" (1622), multiple editions of the text¹⁴ as well as many scholars interpret "freedom" as generosity. Mireille Séguy reads "fre" as noble, but this nobility is obviously not that of birth, since Dorigen is of the highest birth but is excluded from the competition. Other definitions relate "fre" to independence and freedom¹⁵. Straus refers "fre" back to Franklin, whose name originates from the phrase "freed man," and to his freedom to speak frankly as a storyteller. Thus, the story fundamentally asks which character is the freest, rather than the most generous. In the tale, men freely hide and manipulate their intent and tears to approach their goals.

Arveragus's tears win him a wife of nobler lineage. Aurelius' tears come too late to elicit Dorigen's pity, but are potent to the extent that they catalyze his brother's own tears and bring both men to Orléans to provoke a third man's tears:

¹³ Dorigen promises Aurelius: "[y]e remove alle the rokkes, stoon by stoon.../ Thanne wol I love yow best of any man" 'You remove all the rocks, stone by stone.../ Then I will love you best than any men' (993, 997), even though she perceives his love as "swiche folies" 'such follies' (1002).

¹⁴ The Browdview, the Riverside.

¹⁵ Barrie Straus and Oxford Dictionary. The latter defines "freedom" as "not in servitude to another." Example in Middle English: "a1325 (► c1250) *Gen. & Exod.* (1968) l. 2018 Ghe bed. To maken him riche man and fre." Source: <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/74375>.

This Briton clerk hym asked of felawes,
 The whiche that he had knowe in olde
 dawes,
 And he answered hym that they dede were,
 For which he weep fol ofte many a teere.
 (1179-1182)

This Breton clerk asked him of the fellows,
 Whom he had known in old days,
 And he answered him that they were dead,
 For which he wept very often.

Notably, Aurelius and his brother always cry “*pryvely*,” so the magician (“*Briton clerk*”) never sees their tears. The magician’s tears seem to come out of nowhere, just like his natural magic; tears are shared by these three men and become the basis of their homosocial bonding. I suggest that tears bind them to Arveragus as well. Critics often conclude that the male network in this tale is based on generosity. For example, Britton Harwood defines the bond between Arveragus and Aurelius as founded on their ability to safely pass Dorigen between them; Cliodhna Carney describes the party of Aurelius, his brother and the magician as “a pseudo-aristocratic coalition” (Harwood 45; Carney 100) endeavoring to cope with Arveragus’ noble generosity. However, as argued earlier, the contest of generosity is actually that of freedom. The skill of artfully managing emotion and intent through the manipulation of tears binds the men together in their own economy, while Dorigen is excluded and alienated as a mere bargaining chip.

One feature that distinguishes the magician’s tears from other male tears is that he cries in public, instead of “*pryvely*.” This difference portrays him as a frank trader who states his intentions clearly. He cries but does not expect any compensation for his tears. In addition to the emotional straightforwardness that he shows by crying in public, the magician is also straightforward in other ways, such as when he firmly names his price of one thousand pounds to make the rocks disappear, instead of bargaining with Aurelius to up his price. His businesslike attitude shows his preference for exchange on transparent terms, unlike Arveragus and Aurelius’ constant risk-taking actions that expect, but do not explicitly demand, a higher reward.

The magician's direct request for money and his short-term stay in Aurelius' house are analogues to the fairy's nudity and steadiness in Arthur's court in *Lanval*. In addition, both figures possess supernatural power. The fairy's beauty is abstract, yet her wealth and nudity are described with concrete detail. As for the magician, the nature of his magic is undefined to the point that critics endlessly debate whether it is a trick of illusion or an astrological calculation, and whether the magician is a cunning scammer or an honest craftsman;¹⁶ nonetheless, he clearly distances himself from displaying his emotion in the exchange, and limits his dealings with Aurelius to financial terms. The mastery over intent and non-manipulative emotion takes these two supernatural figures beyond both feudal stratification and courtesy, exceeding the courtly politeness that typically considers rewards or gifts given-in-return as proper. Such mastery gives them the potential to bring the property of a community, whether it be one thousand pounds or Lanval himself, to a foreign realm. Moreover, the magician and the fairy's straightforward demands showcase their credo that returning a gift is more than simply following decorum: it is business, the norm of the economy. They are, to an extent, the rising capitalists in the stories that pioneer and excel in international trading, while other characters -- feudal representatives such as Arthur or Dorigen's unmentioned father, or opportunists¹⁷ recently intrigued by gift exchange, such as Arveragus or Aurelius -- can only woefully watch them come and go with profits.

Ineffective Female Tears

Unlike the valuable male tears, Dorigen's tears are ineffective and only have an influence over herself. When Arveragus is away, just as Lanval became unpleasant at the queen's party due to the fairy's absence, the lonely Dorigen's sorrow is accentuated within her social circle:

“For his absence wepeth she and siketh, /... (Hire freendes) telle hire nyght and day / That

¹⁶ See footnote 8.

¹⁷ Ibid.

causeless she sleeth herself' 'For his absence she weeps and sighs, / ... (Her friends) preach to her day and night / Worrying that she kills herself without cause' (817, 824-5). Although it carries lethal potential for her own life, her sadness does not affect others. Moreover, her friends regard her suicidal inclination as "causeless," even though her longing for her husband is clearly its source. That is to say, others are unwilling to perceive her emotion, and thus easily dismiss the rationality of her intention. Derrida describes the condition of gifting as "a given and desired forgetting" (35). By "forgetting" he means that the gift-sender appears to forget about the gift as well as the expected return; if the gift-sender calculates too purposefully, the gift exchange is rendered a mere business exchange. Following this definition, Dorigen's tears are an even purer gift that expects nothing from viewers (after all, her friends won't bring Arveragus back from battle), whereas Arveragus' tears expect a reward. Yet the public denies the authenticity of Dorigen's sorrow, possibly out of unwillingness to repay this gift, or because due to the importance of homosocial bonding male tears are valued over female tears.

Still, Dorigen's tears and emotions await attention and feedback. After Aurelius reminds her of her debt, Dorigen lives through a tearful mental struggle. She hardly hides her tears, but Arveragus notices them only after a long while: "[he] asked hire why that she weepe so soore. / And she gan wepen ever lenger the moore" ' [he] asked her why she wept so sorely. / And she began to weep more and more' (1461-2). Here Dorigen's excessive tears signal her urgent need for help: if men use their tears to call for aid and solve problems, why shouldn't she be able to do the same?

However, unlike the tears of Arveragus or Aurelius that are immediately addressed by their lover or family, or even compared to the diffusion of Lanval's sullenness at court, Dorigen's tears, despite their abundance, are quickly censored and forbidden by Arveragus, i.e.,

denied as an exchangeable excess: “Ne make no contenance of hevynesse / That folk of yow may demen harm or gesse” ‘Do not make a sad expression / That people may guess that there is anything wrong with you’ (1485-6). Arveragus easily controls Dorigen’s tears, which are never mentioned again. In addition, he commands a squire and a maid to escort Dorigen to Aurelius: “[h]e nolde no whight tellen his entente” ‘he would not tell anyone his intent’ (1492). Critics have long discussed Arveragus’ hypocritical intent. Arveragus claims all his actions are for Dorigen’s good, including forbidding her tears and hiding her from the public. Yet, his forceful command implies that he intends to trade Dorigen’s chastity for his knightly morality of keeping promise (Britton Harwood 42; Barrie Straus 157). Janet Thormann reads Arveragus’ actions as “follow[ing] a high-risk strategy, and the reward is commensurate with the risk” (97). Arveragus’ authority is just as confined as Arthur’s: male authority governs the body of others within the feudal system. Arthur imprisons Lanval and urges the judges to punish him, while Arveragus rules over Dorigen’s tears and body, sending her as a gift and then awaiting a generous return.¹⁸

What becomes of Dorigen’s tears – an unexchangeable excess – now halted by her husband? A similarly unexchangeable madness. When she meets Aurelius in the market,

And he saleweth hire with glad entente
 And asked of hire whiderward she wente.
 And she answered half as she were mad...
 (After she tells him Arveragus’ command)
 And in his herte he caught of this greet
 routhe,
 Considerynge the beste on every syde,
 That fro his lust yet were hum levere abyde.
 (1509-1511, 1520-22)

And he greets her with glad intent,
 And asks her where she is going.
 And she answered in half madness...

 And in his heart he had great pity for this,
 Considering the best on every side,
 That he would rather abstain from his
 pleasure.

¹⁸ Although Arveragus proposes not to claim mastery over her in their marital vows, when he forces her to go to Aurelius, he clearly exercises a form of mastery that corresponds to a medieval doctrine on marriage: “A man is the head of a woman... the head has charge of the whole body” (Bartholomaeus Anglicus *On the Properties of Things*, Miller 386).

Dorigen is located at the bottom of the tear economy. Prohibited from externalizing her pain through tears, Dorigen turns her agony inwards to herself, and as a result, “half as she were mad.” Her emotions and freedom, externally controlled by Arveragus, inwardly destroy her. She becomes not only mad, but also an incomplete “half.” In particular, her madness is neither that of a Maussian “madly extravagant” gift-giver (47), nor that of a Derridian gift-giver who madly desires to forget a gift (35). In fact, her madness makes her inferior and invisible; for exchange, her tears and suffering are rejected. By contrast, Aurelius develops his mental integrity, first by his expression “glad entente,” second by his feeling of “greet routhe” ‘great pity.’ To an extent, Aurelius temporarily possesses flexible reasoning skills to “consider[yng]e] the beste on every syde;” this is almost comparable to the magician’s omniscience.

Conspicuously, Aurelius’ mental development is unrelated to Dorigen, but is, rather, connected to Arveragus. His excessive love for Dorigen, manifesting itself only after Arveragus’ absence, has no valid foundation: he never recognizes any merit in her. Contrastingly, he, his brother and the magician openly acknowledge Arveragus’ worthiness. For Aurelius, the joy of being with Dorigen is far less than his desire to form homosocial bonding with an honorable knight. Cliodhna Carney notes that Aurelius’ love for Dorigen vanishes after hearing about Arveragus’ generous act,¹⁹ but in fact, this love disappears with a return — the emergence of an equal homosocial bond based on generosity (98).

The Dialogue of “Excess” in the Two Tales and their Storytellers

The excess in *Lanval* is embodied in outsiders – Lanval and the fairy – and has obvious spatiotemporal points of entry and departure in relation to the local community. The excess in *The Franklin’s Tale*, by contrast, is a group phenomenon that exists latently in every character.

¹⁹ That Arveragus commands Dorigen to fulfill her rash promise and to live with Aurelius

As discussed, Dorigen is initially a foreigner who eventually becomes a product of exchange, i.e., a gift; Arveragus' and Aurelius' love for her is external to the patriarchal order. With the switch of Aurelius' heterosexual desire to a homosocial bond, the last unresolved excesses are the one thousand pounds and the rocks.

Bearing in mind that the lai is set in ancient Armorik, where pounds were unlikely the currency, the contract of one thousand pounds is arguably anachronistic. In fact, the specificity of the number and the unit only refers to "an amount that is exorbitant but not unimaginable" (Epstein 188) to facilitate readers' comprehension. The one thousand pounds seem to be a random amount that is conjured and released forthwith, just as the storyteller, the Franklin, advocates after *The Squire's Tale*: "Fy on possessioun" (686). Aurelius cries similarly, "Fy on a thousand pound!" (1227). Janet Thormann interprets Aurelius as taking this expense as incidental (224), and Ben Parson describes Aurelius' cry as hollow and reckless (131). Nevertheless, there is a fundamental difference between the monetary renouncement of the Franklin and Aurelius. For the Franklin, his feast represents free hospitality— like Lanval, he never asks for, but rather waits for, a return. Aurelius' excessive expense is, in nature, gambling, which primarily aims for a more advantageous return and betrays the value of generosity.

Coincidentally, the other excess, the rocks, is also set on the gambling table. The rocks embody guiltless natural existence, and yet Dorigen gambles on them simply because she perceives them as a constant source of ugliness. Ironically, when a supernatural power makes the rocks disappear, Dorigen becomes miserable, as she is now indebted to Aurelius – She promised to love him if he could make the rocks disappear.

Dorigen gambles at her whimsy, while Aurelius gambles for an immoral desire. Consequently, both are severely punished, because the storyteller dislikes gambling or explicit

trading.²⁰ After the disappearance of the rocks, Dorigen suffers and almost commits suicide. Aurelius, however, does not suffer for long after acknowledging his incapacity to pay the magician, most likely because he has already generously hosted the magician for a long time: “[he] dooth to his maister chiere and reverence” “[he] treats the magician in friendly and respectful manner” (1257). Aurelius’ generous feast and lodging catering to the magician certainly places him in a good light in the Franklin’s view, especially because hospitable feasts are the Franklin’s credo.²¹ In addition, providing lodging may be a type of gift that acts as a substitute for the one thousand pounds, as Cowell illustrates in *At Play in the Tavern*:

if the practice of charity is broadened to the general realm of the “gift,” then it was central to the medieval aristocracy as well... the gift of lodging played an important role... [gifts of lodging] were emblems of the rejection of ritualistic charity in favor of personal profit and desire for the sign (of money). (24)

Although the magician initially asks for money, Aurelius repays him with hospitality. Due to the magician’s compromise,²² the economy stays in the feudal realm instead of advancing to a money-service capitalist economy which might make the Franklin uncomfortable.²³

In *The Franklin’s Tale*, every character exhibits certain excessive traits that suggest capitalist transgression of feudal values, and the story proceeds in constant negotiation between these two economic poles. Arveragus first marries for individual desire, but eventually prioritizes knightly ethics over his marriage. Similarly, the magician initially shows his capitalist greed and speculation, yet is ultimately persuaded by feudal generosity. The two gamblers (Dorigen and

²⁰ In the *General Prologue*, the Franklin boasts about his feasting and hosting behavior; in the *Prologue*, he publicly declares his disdain for his son’s gambling habits.

²¹ “His table dormant in his halle always / Stood redy overed al the longe day.” “In his hall his dining table always / Stood covered (with tablecloth) and ready all the long day” (*General Prologue* 353-4).

²² The magician waives Aurelius’ debt, because he wants to be generous, and Aurelius already hosted him for long.

²³ Even though the Franklin presents himself as “a worthy vavasour” (*General Prologue* 360) who actively engages in local political and social life and shows off his feasting behaviors as well as expensive accessories, he appears avoidant when talking about money or its transaction. He vaguely yells: “[f]y on possessioun” (686).

Aurelius) are punished for risk-taking behaviors that are not motivated by honor or virtue, but by joke or immoral desire.

The Franklin and Chaucer seem cautious about the rising market economy, and almost frightened by unthinkable pure money-service capitalism; this fear leads them to denounce the power of money via Aurelius and the magician who pronounce “Fy on a thousand pound!” At the same time, Chaucer is a beneficiary in the new vassal economy (Strohm 108), as is the Franklin. Hence, they allow time for each character to make an investment, that results in neither great harm nor great gain, except that the male characters gain quasi-equal recognition for generosity in the feudal value system. In other words, Chaucer and the Franklin are ultimately optimistic about the new capitalist economy, the management and exchange of certain amounts of excess. However, their imagination is limited, and thus their envisioned reward moves only halfway into capitalist expediency, while the other half is steeped in the pre-defined honor ingrained in the feudal system.

In *Lanval*, excess and transgression are easier to identify due to a semi-xenophobic environment. Lanval does not receive any gift in Arthur’s court because he is a passive outsider. Based on Cowell’s theory of medieval gambling, withholding a gift from an outsider binds the group together and leads to a dichotomy between the noble and bourgeois classes — the former a “charitable community,” and the latter a “profit-seeker” (35). It’s overly simplistic to categorize Lanval as a mere profit-seeker, since his generous gifting behavior brings him unwanted attention. However, his sole profit-seeking move – to leave the city, cross the river, and meet and swear loyalty to the fairy – proves to be successful. Strikingly, most of the individual actions in *Lanval* are motivated by irrational impulses, which carry no objective advantage or reward: the knights’ tacit jealousy toward Lanval only reveals their moral defects; Lanval’s rash insult to the

Queen causes tremendous loss of both his reputation and the fairy; the queen's false accusation is her vain revenge on Lanval, but essentially puts her beauty into question in public. Compared to all the impulse-driven acts, the profit-driven action in *Lanval* brings limitless prosperity. Readers may sense Marie de France's welcoming attitude towards the capitalist economic stance.

Unlike other medieval texts where characters perform their stereotypical duty without hesitation, the Breton lai opens up more possibilities: without knowing the consequence, characters endeavor to step into ideal roles by investing their trust and goodwill in the circulation of wealth and morality (Thormann 223). In the end, they never lose the thing that they seem to lose during exchange,²⁴ which corresponds to Derrida's paradox of "giving what one does not have" (48). Derrida rejects the common thought that people can only give what they possess, listing a variety of common expressions used when gifting abstract things that may not belong to the individual, such as time or oneself.²⁵ In the same way, in *Lanval* and *The Franklin's Tale*, abstract currency, such as supernatural forces, legendary wealth and homosocial bonding, are presented and exchanged in a non-material way. We can go one step further in interpreting Derrida's paradox: in the confusing transactional state between feudal and capitalist societies, it's safer and wiser for the non-ruling class to give what they do not have – such as Lanval distributing the fairy's wealth, the magician borrowing supernatural power, or Aurelius promising an amount of money which he does not possess – and wait for a negotiated return. If they really owned the things they seek to give, they would become capitalists who possess and trade without social or moral boundaries, and the future would become disastrous: Lanval would

²⁴ "Les protagonistes ont été changés par l'épreuve de la perte (ou de sa possibilité), et ce qui se retrouve, en réalité, n'est jamais tout à fait ce qui a été perdu" (Séguy 9).

²⁵ "All the figures of this topic (expressions like 'to give one-self') are difficult to contain within the limits of a rhetoric the margins or 'terms' of which can no longer, in principle and in all rigor, be fixed... (To give an impression, to give a feeling, a show or a play) are all expressions that appeal irreducibly to the idiom and in principle therefore they have only a limited translatability" (Derrida 49).

challenge Arthur's sovereignty; the magician's power could counter natural or godly power, and his capitalist greed would surpass feudal virtue; and Aurelius would suffer bankruptcy, which does not exist within the structure of feudal charity. While our storytellers tentatively welcome the economy inclining towards capitalism, they are not prepared to envision such a capitalist market, and thus they twist the stories back to the original state and expel unsettling excesses.

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