

## Trust, Relationships & Friendly Feelings in Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal*<sup>1</sup>

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*The fourteenth century Breton lai Sir Launfal, written by Thomas Chestre, has been approached from several different directions: honour, gender, knightly ideals, just to name a few; trust, however, has not yet been employed to look at the lai. As a category of historical analysis, trust is very promising, as it is inherent in all human relationships. In Sir Launfal, Chestre uses trust – expressed through wealth and the lack of it – to highlight Launfal's inherent worth. By formulating a context-based definition of trust, and then applying it to the text of Sir Launfal, this article shows that trust can be a useful category for historical analysis.*

In the context of society, there is perhaps nothing as necessary as trust. It is, as the Russian historian George Hosking has noted, 'one of the most pervasive – and perhaps for that reason least noticed – aspects of social life.' In order to live, he states, we need to display trust.<sup>2</sup> Once one starts focusing on trust as a category of historical analysis, it becomes clear how integral it is to everyday life: nearly every action and reaction is based on some form of trust. This is seen both in personal relationships, where trust is established over a period of time, as emotional boundaries are removed or shifted, and in public relationships that are based on social assumptions, as when a person's clothing indicates a social status that comes with a level of trustworthiness. Literature in particular can reveal a great deal about how trust has been viewed historically, since it allows for an expression of ideology relatively unrestrained by the strictures – moral, literal, social, physical – of reality. This paper will take the concept of trust as a category of historical analysis and, with the aim of coming to a better understanding of how relationships functioned, investigate its manifestations in the medieval romance *Sir Launfal*, with comparison to the earlier *Sir Landevale* and Marie de France's *Lanval*.<sup>3</sup>

*Sir Launfal*, written by Thomas Chestre in the late fourteenth century, is an intriguing version of a 'Breton lay' that has captured the attention of many scholars.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Hosking, 'Trust and Distrust: A Suitable Theme for Historians?', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 16 (2006), 95–115; p.95.

<sup>3</sup> All references to *Sir Launfal* and *Sir Landevale* are from Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury's *The Middle English Breton Lays* (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications (TEAMS), 1995); for all middle English translations, please see the Middle English Dictionary (henceforth referred to as MED), accessible online at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>.

<sup>4</sup> A few examples show the diversity of scholarship: Carol J. Nappholz reads the text from the point of humour, 'Launfal's "Largesse": Word-Play in Thomas Chestre's "Sir Launfal"', *English Language Notes*, 25.3 (1988), pp.4-9; Yejung Choi sees the story as the knightly ideal of endless finances and the hand of the most beautiful woman in existence, 'Sir Launfal: A Portrait of a Knight in Fourteenth Century

It begins in a court setting: Launfal is King Arthur's steward, noted for his generosity ('largesse'). He exiles himself from the court after being slighted by the new queen Guinevere. After a financially ruinous stay in Carlyle, Launfal meets the fairy princess Triamour, who promises him endless riches and guaranteed victory in combat. With the fairy's help, Launfal gains a reputation for his martial skills on the tournament field, and it is this that reputation eventually gets him invited to back to Arthur's court, where Guinevere tries to seduce him. He rebuffs her by revealing his relationship with Triamour – the one thing he promised never to do – and so loses all of the fairy's help. Triamour eventually does come to Launfal's aid and he rides into the Otherworld with her.

The poem's similarities to Marie de France's twelfth-century lai *Lanval* are indisputable and striking enough to have warranted extensive scholarly analysis; the same can be said for the anonymous *Sir Landevale*, tentatively dated to the early 1400s. That said, Chestre introduced significant differences to the story that change the way in which the eponymous hero is portrayed. To the extensive scholarship on Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal*, Marie de France's *Lanval* and the anonymous *Sir Landevale*, I will add a close analysis focusing on trust as a form of *interpersonal emotional currency*. I look closely at the theme of trust in Launfal's relationships, comparing Chestre's version with the anonymous *Sir Landevale* and Marie de France's *Sir Lanval*, in order to highlight the significant ways in which the changes not only create a more ambiguous hero but, in so doing, also create a story where trusting relationships are central to his character.

## I.

Hosking has written that we need to display trust in order to live.<sup>5</sup> To illustrate the pervasive nature of trust in society, he uses the example of commercial flying: when we fly, we place trust in the engineers, pilots, crew, and so forth, usually without a second thought. We have no way of assessing our own safety – the engineering and handling of the aircraft, ground control, etc., are all things we take on trust. One can go even further, though, and ask how we know who to trust while on board. Clothing, for example, offers an immediate visual clue as to who can be considered trustworthy without any previous personal interaction. In this example, then, the crews' uniforms become a marker indicating their trustworthiness. Clothing as a marker of identity is certainly not a modern invention – as early as the sixth century BCE in Greece, there is evidence that clothing was used to differentiate people on sight.<sup>6</sup> For clothing to work as a marker of trust, however, it needs to be invested with shared meaning: not only the meaning that the clothing denotes (e.g. status, gender), but also meaning based on the shared belief that any given person

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England', *Medieval and Early Modern English Studies*, 18.1 (2010), pp.1-28; E. M. Bradstock reads the theme of honour as central, 'Honore' in Sir Launfal', *Parergon*, 24 (1979), pp.9-17; Anne Laskaya analyses the text as it constructs late medieval gender dynamics, 'Thomas Chestre's Revisions of Manhood in Sir Launfal', in *Retelling Tales: Essays in Honor of Russell Peck*, ed. by Thomas Hahn and Alan Lupack (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), pp.191-212.

<sup>5</sup> Hosking, 'Trust and Distrust', p.95.

<sup>6</sup> Harriane Mills, 'Greek Clothing Regulations: Sacred and Profane?', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie and Epigraphik*, Band 55, pp.255-265; esp. pp.255-56.

within a cultural context is not abusing this trust. When it is thought to be abused – as in situations of cross dressing, for example – that trust is undermined significantly.<sup>7</sup>

In a relationship, trust works like currency. If thought of as a way of creating and maintaining a positive social reputation, trust features in a similar manner to monetary currency: it allows for situations of credit – with deferred repayment – as well as situations where there is either immediate repayment or none at all. As Hosking has pointed out, it is not a coincidence that trust is often closely related to money. ‘Money’, Hosking notes, ‘makes possible the exchange of infinitely diverse goods and services, which are an essential part of any society.’<sup>8</sup> Trust functions in a similar manner, since it makes possible the exchange of diverse benefits and services between people: an essential part of any society. Financial credit requires a certain level of trust and the same is true of human relationships.

In the context of a medieval court, then, trust – like wealth or at least ‘credit’ – is necessary to maintain an aristocratic reputation. In *Sir Launfal*, Chestre plays with this idea, allowing Launfal to lose his monetary credibility but showing him to retain his underlying moral credibility. In relationships, trust builds by degrees, accumulating slowly upon each successive and successful reciprocation of information – emotional or physical. Trust is more than believing a person’s intended action will be ‘appropriate from our point of view.’<sup>9</sup> It requires a vulnerability that is necessary to functioning within a society. The sociologist Barbara A. Misztal argues that ‘since autonomy requires trustworthiness in social communication, trust is also a prerequisite for... the formulation of self-identity.’<sup>10</sup> This plays out in *Sir Launfal*, where Chestre creates a dynamic identity for Launfal through his interpersonal relationships, which are characterized primarily by whether Launfal is trusted or not, revealing those people who do not see Launfal’s true worth and instead focus on the external, social presentation.

Trust means that the threat, not only of physical violence but also of emotional or social damage, is reduced. As a relationship between two or more people progresses, emotional and physical boundaries are moved to allow the exchange of information that may be potentially damaging. This is particularly the case with information that could result in social ostracism. For example, in the instance of Launfal, his sharing of his low opinion of Guinevere with other knights indicates trust on both sides, as the revealing of this information by any party would significantly damage their careers. As noted by Hosking, trust is often expressed through a form of monetary exchange. In Chestre’s narrative, largesse is a part of the economy of trust. It can be read as material generosity, but along with the material

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<sup>7</sup> See the case of John Rykener, who dressed as a woman and ‘called himself Eleanor’, in Ruth M. Karras and David L. Boyd, “‘Ut cum muliere’: A Male Transvestite Prostitute in Fourteenth-Century London”, in *The Pleasures of History: Reading Premodern Sexualities*, ed. by Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp.101-116, p.101; Also, for example, Valerie R. Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man: Female Cross Dressing in Medieval Europe* (New York / London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), esp. the Introduction; Vern L. Bullough’s chapter in Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage, *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), pp.223-243.

<sup>8</sup> He mentions eight examples of ‘trust-broadening’, ranging from the sixth century BCE to post-WWII; six of these examples money played a key role, Hosking, ‘Trust and Distrust’, pp.109-112.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara A. Misztal, *Trust in Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p.9.

<sup>10</sup> Misztal, *Trust in Modern Societies*, p.13.

aspect comes an emotional aspect. Through Launfal's largesse, Chestre makes him out to be an inherent part of the court, embedded in a social structure that offers rewards that are not restricted to the material – namely, moral credit: reputation and honour built on trust. This moral credit is not, however, always visible as physical wealth – it can be noted through observation of a person's behaviour or, as in Launfal's case, is known simply by being a person of moral worth oneself.

## II.

In the first thirty-two lines, Chestre situates Launfal within a literary, knightly and courtly context. He embeds Launfal within all three contexts by listing him among Arthurian knights, such as Gawain, Percival and Kay, *that wer profitable* [10] – that is, worthy and valuable. The knights' qualities establish not only the kind of company that the Arthurian knights keep but, more importantly, the kind of company that Launfal himself keeps at court. Both in *Launfal* and *Landevale*, Launfal is named together with *Gauweyn the hende* [662] and *Gawyne so hende* [208], respectively, starting a theme of associating Launfal with people who are *hende*. Launfal is described as being known for *hys largesse and hys bounté* [31], characteristics for which he is made Arthur's steward. Although they mention his largesse, neither *Launfal* nor *Landevale* place Launfal among specifically named company. Marie isolates Launfal – both socially and emotionally – at the very moment she situates him at court, stating that he is 'the son of a King of noble birth, but far from his inheritance.'<sup>11</sup>

Chestre distinguishes his Launfal as different immediately not only by placing him among the knights of the Round Table but, even further, by saying of Launfal that, *[o]f alle the knyghtes of the Table Rounde, / So large ther nas noon yfounde / Be dayes ne be nyght.* [34-36] By listing Launfal in the ranks of men who epitomise the courtly and masculine ideals of the time, Chestre embeds Launfal within a social environment that brings with it a social and emotional regime. This sets up the paradoxical theme of both social inclusion and social exclusion that follows Launfal throughout the story, illustrated by his relationships. The inclusion-exclusion distinction is shown by those who trust him and those who do not. Implicit association is not only made between Launfal and the knights through textual proximity but also explicitly when Chestre describes Launfal as having been chosen by Arthur to be his steward due to his largesse. While in Marie's lai, Launfal is a prince, his inheritance is not within his reach, nor does he have the means of regaining any wealth, as 'the king gave him nothing and Launfal asked for nothing.'<sup>12</sup> This is financially as well as socially isolating, since not having clear access to finances excludes him from participating fully in the social networks at court.

In Chestre, Launfal is on good terms with Arthur, whereas in Marie's version, Arthur seems to hold the knight in little regard, apportioning as he does 'wives and

<sup>11</sup> Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby (eds.), *The Lais of Marie de France* (London: Penguin Books, 1999; 2<sup>nd</sup> edn.), p.73.

<sup>12</sup> *The Lais of Marie de France*, p.73.

lands to all, save to one who had served him.<sup>13</sup> Chestre twists this social dismissal of Launfal around, instead having Guinevere give *[e]verych knyght ... broche other ryng, / But Syr Launfal sche yaf nothyng* [70-71]. Launfal's slighting by the Queen is made significant because the audience is already aware that, while only Launfal is badly treated, the other knights also share his misgivings about her. While in *Landevale*, Guinevere's wickedness is not mentioned until much later in the poem, it makes clear that

[t]he kyng was good, alle aboute  
 And she was wyckyde, oute and oute  
 For she was of suche comforte  
 She lovye men ondir her lorde;  
 Therby wist thei it was alle [297-301]

Because the understanding that everyone was aware of Guinevere's wickedness is stated so late in the poem, the positive connotation of this shared knowledge between Launfal and the others is not as strong as it is in *Launfal*.

As mentioned previously, in Chestre's version, Launfal is made the King's steward for his largesse. In *Landevale*, the hero – *[a] yonge knyght of muche myght* [19] – spends *blythely*, giving *geftys largely* [22], to the point where he ends up in great debt.<sup>14</sup> In *Marie*, Launfal is 'in a plight, very sad and forlorn' and, although many envied him for his 'valour, generosity, beauty and prowess', he had no income other than what Arthur deigned to give him.<sup>15</sup> While in Chestre, Launfal's virtues earn him social credit, embedding him within the gender and social ideals of the court, in *Marie's Lanval*, the virtues make him a target for envy, isolating him from the very social and emotional networks that those qualities should allow him to engage with.

The emphasis on largesse in Chestre is significant, for it is a vehicle through which trust is shown: there is a connection to wealth as a vehicle for expressing, and receiving, trust. By exhibiting largesse, Chestre's Launfal not only expresses himself according to knightly norms, but he also creates a positive reputation that adds to his moral standing when it comes to being trusted and asking for trust in return. Yet, it is not as simple as that. In *Landevale*, the hero also exhibits largesse, but there is no mention of his relationships to the other knights. And, as shown above, in *Lanval*, Marie makes it clear that Launfal was liked for some of his traits – largesse among them – but, in contrast to Chestre's version, there is no indication of any positive relationships between him and the knights resulting from this. By situating Launfal within a trusting social circle and making it clear that he exhibited largesse, Chestre shows him to have interpersonal credit, upon which he can later draw.

The embedding of Launfal in the court's social circles is marked again by Chestre in the manner in which Guinevere is introduced. Chestre states that Launfal *lykede her noght* [44] and follows this directly by saying that *[n]e other knyghtes that wer hende*. [45] Chestre states this before the audience is told the reason for this sentiment: the very next line reads that Guinevere was not liked because *the lady bar los of swych*

<sup>13</sup> *The Lais of Marie de France*, p.73.

<sup>14</sup> *The Middle English Breton Lays*, p. 423.

<sup>15</sup> *The Lais of Marie de France*, p.73.

word / *That sche hadde lemmannys under her lord, / So fele ther nas noon ende.* [46-48] In his explanation of why Launfal dislikes the Queen (and that his dislike is shared by others), Chestre creates a moral and courtly identity for him – *hende* covers both<sup>16</sup> – in the context of his already strong social acceptance.<sup>17</sup> In *Landevale*, there is no mention of Guinevere to speak of and certainly no mention of her disreputable behaviour, which comes in just over half way through the poem at line 298.<sup>18</sup> The sharing of moral and emotional ground between Launfal and the other *hende* knights makes Launfal's situation quite opposite to that of Marie's Launfal. Of the latter, it is even said that for him '... no one put in a good word' and that '[t]here were those that pretended to hold him in esteem, but who would not have uttered a single regret if misfortune had befallen him.'<sup>19</sup> Launfal's good qualities isolate him and draw negative emotional attention: '[b]ecause of his valour, generosity, beauty and prowess, many were envious of him.'<sup>20</sup> If there is an emotional community here, it is established in opposition to Launfal, through a narrative of envy, neglect and moral distinction. Unlike Chestre, who protects Arthur and focuses on Guinevere as the source of the problem, Marie offers a radically critical view of the court collective, emphasising the hero's loneliness.

In both *Lanval* and *Sir Landevale*, the hero leaves court without much ado, one day simply mounting his horse and leaving to 'take his ease' (*Lanval*)<sup>21</sup>, and '[w]ithoute grome or squier, / ... rode forthe yn a mornynge / To dryve away longynge.' [lines 32-34, *Landevale*] His reason for leaving in *Landevale*, as mentioned above, is directly related to his debt. Chestre makes much more of an event out of Launfal's departure than either *Lanval* or *Landevale*: not only do both say that Launfal simply left court to be alone, but there is no sense of Launfal's leaving anything behind. While Chestre makes it clear that Launfal is leaving court because of Guinevere's snubbing, he makes Launfal's departure more than a stage in the plot to get his character into the woods to meet the fairy. By having Launfal share the reason for his departure with his fellow knights, Chestre creates a sense of loss: Launfal leaves behind confidants when he departs. He is not only leaving court, he is also leaving people with whom he shares a relationship. He *tok hys leve to wende / At Artour the kyng, / And seyde a lettere was to hym come / That deth hadde hys fadyr ynome – / He most to hys beryynge.* [74-78]

Unlike Marie – who highlights Launfal's foreign origins clearly and early on – this is Chestre's only suggestion that Launfal is from another geographical location. Marie places Launfal's foreignness – his alien status within the court and its social and emotional context – in the foreground, whereas Chestre does the exact opposite in calling attention to it only in the context of a lie by Launfal. These few lines have two implications. The first is that the King is unaware of Launfal's immediate

<sup>16</sup> *hende* – '1(a) Having the approved courtly or knightly qualities, noble, courtly, well-bred, refined' – MED.

<sup>17</sup> In his 1960 edition of *Sir Launfal*, A.J. Bliss sees *hende* as 'often used with little' meaning, A.J. Bliss, *Sir Launfal* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd., 1960), p.140.

<sup>18</sup> 'The kyng was good, alle aboute, / And she was wyckyde, oute and oute, / For she was of suche comforte / She lovyd men ondir her lorde' – *Landevale*, *The Middle English Breton Lays*, 1995), p. 430, lines 297-300.

<sup>19</sup> *The Lais of Marie de France*, p.73.

<sup>20</sup> *The Lais of Marie de France*, p.73.

<sup>21</sup> *The Lais of Marie de France*, p.73.

background - otherwise the lie about his father's death would not be effective; the second is that Launfal does not wish to tell the King the truth behind his leaving.<sup>22</sup> Launfal, however, harbours no doubt about sharing the truth with his fellow knights, as indicated by the fact that he takes *leve, wythoute fable, / Wyth knightes of the Rounde Table*. [85-86]

Through this Chestre displays both Launfal's social competence in the court environment, as well reiterating his place within the knightly group. Chestre's repetition of the phrase *wythout fable* – repeated in lines 458 and 1033 – keep the concept of truth and thus trust in the reader's mind. Launfal's social standing is further underlined when Arthur farewells him by saying that '*yf thou wylt fro me wende, / Tak wyth the ... my suster sones two – / Bothe they schull wyth the go*'. [80-83] Arthur fully supports Launfal by offering the services of his two nephews, his sister's sons.<sup>23</sup> The nephews will play a more significant role later on in the story, not only linking Launfal back to the court but also confirming that his relationships with the other knights are still intact. There is no comparable scene in either *Lanval* or *Landevale*: they both move straight from the knight's departure from court to his encounter with the fairy.

Arthur's nephews, Hugh and John, and the Mayor of Carlyle are characters added by Chestre: they are not found in either *Lanval* or *Sir Landevale*.<sup>24</sup> The scenes involving Arthur's nephews, as well as that of Launfal's encounter with Carlyle's Mayor, are important in continuing to illustrate Launfal's interpersonal credit and the trust that he can call on. Launfal finds himself shunned upon honestly answering the Mayor's inquiry about the King's health: Launfal's response to '*How faryth our Kyng?*' [96] is *without lesyng*, saying that he is '*departyd fram the Kyng, / And that rewyth me sore*.' [101-102]<sup>25</sup> This is the first instance in which Launfal's interpersonal credit is questioned, and it is questioned on the basis of his assumed social standing. Despite being a former servant of Launfal's, the Mayor does not trust him after finding out that the knight is estranged from the King. The Mayor's distrust is evidence that he falls into the group of people who do not recognise Launfal's inherent moral credibility. The Mayor only sees Launfal's estrangement from the King, and his reaction has the immediate effect of making Launfal an outcast, continuing the theme started when he was snubbed in front of the whole court by Guinevere.

Guinevere's shunning of Launfal is instinctive in that she has no reason to shun him: when she arrives at court, he is well-liked as the steward and would have been seen as trustworthy, reliable and honourable. Her treatment of him, therefore, has no rational basis, and it is never fully explained by Chestre why he alone of the

<sup>22</sup> While this can be read as Launfal simply not wishing to cause himself any avoidable trouble, it can also be read as Launfal wishing to spare Arthur any humiliation.

<sup>23</sup> Family members such as nephews were traditionally close and cherished companions of the king.

<sup>24</sup> Chestre does seem to have borrowed four scenes from the lai *Graelent*, which is believed to have been based on Marie's work: 'Guinevere's conflict with Arthur's knights, Launfal's conversation with the mayor's daughter, the episode in which gifts are brought to Launfal's abode, and the disappearance of Gyfre and Blauncharde immediately after Launfal speaks of his fairy-lover. *The Middle English Breton Lays*, p.201-201; for a reliable translation, see Russell Weingartner (ed. & trans.), *Graelent and Guingamor: Two Breton Lays* (New York: Garland, 1985).

<sup>25</sup> It should be remembered that this estrangement would come as a surprise to Arthur: in the King's mind, Launfal has left court for prosaic reasons having nothing to do with the personal relationships between him and Launfal, or Launfal and the Queen.

knights who disapprove of her receives no gift. It simply symbolises Guinevere's inability to recognise Launfal's inherent worth. His interpersonal credit is still intact but is only recognised by specific individuals: the knights of the Round Table, Arthur's nephews, the Mayor's daughter and, eventually, Triamour. His social credibility continues to decline as he falls into *greet dette / Ryght yn the ferst yere*. [131-32]

This results in Arthur's nephews, Hugh and John, telling him that '*... our robes beth torent, / And your tresour ys all yspent, / And we goth ewyll ydyght.*' [139-141] It was Launfal's responsibility to clothe and care for the nephews, and, as he is no longer capable of doing that, they are within their rights to leave. Chestre uses this opportunity to make it clear that despite Launfal's descent into poverty, the nephews still hold him in high regard. When Launfal replies by begging them to tell '*no man of my poverté, / For the love of God Almyght*' [143-45], they *answerede and seyde tho / That they nolde hym wreye never mo, / All thys world to wynne*. [145-46] Chestre uses the nephews to emphasise that Launfal is deserving of being treated with the respect due to a man who is *hende*, even when his external situation does not reflect it. This is made even clearer in line 151, when Chestre says that Arthur sees the *knyghtes hende* – not his nephews, not just knights but *knyghtes hende*. This reflects on Launfal's moral credibility, since he is consistently associated with these men.

Launfal trusts the king's nephews to keep the secret of his poverty: he uses his interpersonal credit, built up throughout their past relationship, to ask for a favour that is of no benefit to them. Again, Chestre creates a situation where he can highlight Launfal's interpersonal credit through his interaction with men who are *hende*. His begging the nephews to keep his poverty a secret shows trust in his relationship with them: he is risking damage to his reputation, and through that, his interpersonal credit, if they fail to do as he asks. '[F]ortune tests your friends' claims Geoffroi de Charny, 'for when it abandons you, it leaves you those who are your friends and takes away those who are not.'<sup>26</sup> This sentiment seems to have been written for Launfal's situation. His friends are loyal even when fortune abandons him: the nephews return to court in torn clothes, and Gawain and Percival stand surety for him despite Arthur's displeasure. Guinevere and the Mayor, however, treat him badly when fortune tests them – Guinevere's reason for her behaviour is unknown, and the Mayor is very hesitant to take the risk of sheltering Launfal while he is not in the King's favour.

When questioned about Launfal's well-being upon their return to court, the nephews affirm that Launfal is doing well. It is worth quoting in full, as Chestre has added great detail to make the scene realistic and believable:

He faryth as well as any man,  
And ellys God hyt schelde!"  
Moche worchyp and greet honour  
To Gwenore the Quene and Kyng Artour  
Of Syr Launfal they telde,  
And seyde, "He lovede us so

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<sup>26</sup> Richard W. Kaeuper and Elspeth Kennedy, *The Book of Chivalry of Geoffroi de Charny* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996); p.131 (lines 44-46).

That he wold us evermo  
 At wyll have yhelde.  
 But upon a rayny day hyt befel  
 An huntynge wente Syr Launfel  
 To chasy yn holtes hore;  
 In our old robes we yede that day,  
 And thus we beth ywent away,  
 As we before hym wore." [161-74]

It also serves to reiterate the trust that Launfal inspires in the nephews, as it is with *[m]oche worchyp and greet honour* [163] that they speak to the King and Queen of him. Just as Launfal's lie regarding his father's death, the nephews' response is designed to keep his social credit intact by hiding his poverty. Chestre ties Launfal ever more directly into a knightly, masculine network that functions separately from the atmosphere of the Queen and the Mayor, who make themselves related alien figures in the story's emotional development by their respective uncourtly and unmanly refusal of practical help to such a deserving figure. Despite her initial introduction as *hende* [42], Guinevere does not reveal herself to be such. She cannot be paired with any of the other *hende* characters in the story – instead, she is paired with the unmindful, mercenary and low-born Mayor. The exchange between the nephews and the King and Queen, far removed from Launfal, is strongly contrasted with the scene that follows, where the audience is back with Launfal in Carlyle.

While Launfal may have the loyalty and support of his fellow knights from Arthur's court, his social credibility is not thriving. Far from it, in fact: asked to dinner by the Mayor's daughter, his reply reveals all the facts hidden from the King and Queen by Hugh and John. This scene, absent from *Lanval* and *Landevoale*, is present in the anonymous *Graelent*, thought to have been a source for Chestre:<sup>27</sup>

"Damesele," he sayde, "nay!  
 To dyne have I no herte.  
 Thre dayes ther ben agon,  
 Mete ne drynke eet y noon,  
 And all was for povert.  
 Today to cherche I wolde have gon,  
 But me fawtede hosyn and schon,  
 Clenly brech and scherte;  
 And for defawte of clothynge,  
 Ne myghte y yn the peple thrynge.  
 No wonder though me smerte!" [194-204]

Launfal refuses the kind invitation. It seems that he cannot be helped except by figures in his own natural knightly and courtly circle. What he receives from the Mayor's daughter – a bridle and saddle – is a way of maintaining his knighthood rather than by joining the townspeople, and it also turns out to be the first step in his social and emotional recovery. The tendency of Launfal to remove himself from

<sup>27</sup> *The Middle English Breton Lays*, pp.201-202.

socially uncomfortable situations presciently contains the means of its cure. He is reliant on people recognising his inherent worth, which is exactly what the Mayor's daughter does, and what Triamour will do. If one reads social credit as reputation that can, and does, translate directly into physical and emotional rewards, then the theme of trust takes on even more significance here. The two scenes bracketing the nephews' audience at court – the Mayor's clear distaste at Launfal's break with the King and Launfal's ashamed encounter with the Mayor's daughter – show that his social credit is sorely depleted. He has no way of re-establishing and then maintaining his social credit as he is because he has no means of getting funds. Yet, the indignity of being refused acceptable lodging is only the beginning of Launfal's loss of dignity. While the scene with the nephews reinforces Launfal's moral credit, the scene with the Mayor's daughter highlights his lack of the financial credit that should accompany it.

Chestre, however, takes Launfal's humiliation a stage further than simply having him destitute and begging for a bridle and saddle to leave town. Whereas Launfal's exchange with Hugh and John when asking them to lie to the King was private, the scene following his saddling of his horse is the direct opposite:

He rood wyth lytyll pryde;  
Hys hors slod, and fel yn the fen,  
Wherefore hym scornede many men  
Abowte hym fer and wyde. [213-16]

This public humiliation, albeit without anyone's personal involvement, shows Launfal as having lost every indication of knightly identity. He not only falls off his horse, which he had to saddle himself, but the equipment is not even his own. To add insult to injury, this happens in front of an audience who finds him contemptuous. This scene, too, is of Chestre's invention, since *Lanval* and *Landevale* leave Launfal's knightly dignity, such as it is, intact. The Launfal who finally meets Triamour is a different man from that in either *Lanval* or *Landevale*. The Carlyle scenes see Launfal reduced to less than a knight, with no social credibility left. Yet, while Chestre's Launfal may have lost his social credibility and most of his dignity, he is not isolated to the same degree as the heroes of *Lanval* and *Landevale*. He is still a man whose worth is recognised by the right people – *knyghtes hende* –, even though he has lost the physical attributes of a knight. The last scene, however, where his horse stumbles and he falls into the mud, while seeing him lose his dignity and any social credit he may have had, is not witnessed by men of his rank. His reputation, and thus his social credit, is still intact among the people in his social circle.

It is at this point that Triamour's limitless money enters the story. Money is an instrument for expressing trust. That is, to a knight, money is an important way of expressing status and, through that, of gaining and maintaining reputation and relationships. His financial, and thus social, destitution is at the forefront of the audience's mind when he encounters Triamour. Though riding a charger, Launfal lacks hose, shoes and a clean set of breeches and shirt: '*No wonder though me smerte!*' [204] It is in this state that he encounters Triamour. Chestre devotes thirty-six lines to describing and situating her, both physically and socially. Launfal finds her in a lush pavilion, draped in exquisite cloth and jewels – the fairy is half-dressed due to the

heat, only the better to accentuate her physical beauty, which in turn represents her inherent goodness. Her social pedigree is established by the statement that her father is the *Kyng of Fayrye, / Of Occient, fer and nyghe, / A man of mochell myghte*. [280-82]

This lavishness, both physical and social, serves to contrast with Launfal's current situation – a knight who has no social position left and looks like a beggar. After declaring that she loves *[k]yng neyther emperour* [306] as she does him, Triamour says that she knows his *stat, ord and ende*. [314] Her mention of *[k]yng* and *emperour* equates him in status as well as in moral standing, ignoring his outward appearance but resting, instead, on his inherent moral worth. Chestre's logic here is simple: Launfal's inherent moral worth is recognisable to the right people – people who apprehend Launfal as *gentyll and hende*. [313] Those who do not apprehend his inherent moral worth, and thus do not trust him, are not the right people. Gyfre the knave, for example, repeatedly shows that he is *hende* in both the sense of being 'skilful' and 'obedient', making him a fitting servant for his new master. His assisting Launfal without question shows he is someone who instinctively recognises the *hende* quality in others. Gyfre assists Launfal without question because he knows Launfal to be *hende*, without need of explanation. This is quite the opposite of the Mayor, who wanted an explanation of Launfal's situation before granting him any time.

Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury gloss *stat* as 'situation', which fits the context. But there are numerous options for glossing *stat*, options that would be more apt if the text is read as illustrating Launfal's interpersonal credit in terms of trust, through his relationships. Given the way in which Chestre has set up Launfal's character so far, it could very well be read as 'moral state' or 'a person's social rank'. The first definition is particularly intriguing, as it changes the tone of Triamour's overture to mean that, despite Launfal's destitute appearance, she is aware of his moral worth. This also ties in with the nephews' agreement to lie for Launfal: despite his current destitution, they are acting on his inherent moral worth, which is independent of his financial and social status. In *Landevale*, the term used is *state* – 'I know thy state, every ende.' [126] 'A moral or spiritual state or condition' is an apt gloss for this term, indicating a level of understanding of the knight's character that goes beyond the material and immediate.<sup>28</sup> This implied understanding of the knight's moral worth by Triamour in both *Launfal* and *Landevale* is not present in Marie's *Lanval*. While *Landevale* and *Launfal*, through Triamour, indicate that the knight has inherent moral worth which deserves to be – and will be – rewarded, Marie's version has Triamour issue an implied ultimatum, saying that 'if you are worthy and courtly, no emperor, count or king will have felt as much joy or happiness as you.'<sup>29</sup> To her, his worth is not fixed but dependent on external factors such as behaviour.

In stark contrast to Triamour, Carlyle's Mayor (like Guinevere) acts on, and continues to act on, what he sees as Launfal's explicit lack of social credit: he refuses him acceptable lodging when he notes Launfal's lack of royal favour, and he fawns over him when Launfal returns wealthy. Upon being presented with Launfal after his enriching encounter with Triamour, the Mayor, *seygh that rychesse / And Syr Launfales noblenesse, / [and] he held hymself foule yschent*. [400-402] Predictably, he

<sup>28</sup> *state* – 1(a) A moral or spiritual state or condition; 1(d) physical appearance, physical form; stature, build – MED.

<sup>29</sup> *The Lais of Marie de France*, p.74.

attempts to get himself back into Launfal's good – and now financially and socially secure – graces by claiming that he had planned to invite him to the feast but, before he could, Launfal had disappeared. The Mayor sees only the superficial social expression of Launfal's credit, being oblivious to his moral credit. Unlike Triamour and Gyfre, he does not recognise Launfal's worth, taking his cue of Launfal's worth from his outer appearance and apparent possession of wealth. Guinevere's reaction, again, is the opposite of her initial behaviour towards Launfal: when he returns to court wealthy and renowned, she approaches him with sexual intentions. Chestre draws a clear distinction between people who 'know' (*wot*) Launfal's worth and true 'stat' entirely (*ord and ende*) [314] and those who do not: there is no ambiguity.

*Stat*, then, if read as meaning Launfal's 'moral state', as well as the state of his affairs, shows that Triamour recognises Launfal's worth despite his outward appearance. The reward for this moral worth is physical wealth – pack-horses fully laden, [*s]ome wyth sylver, some wyth gold* [379]: a tangible expression of Launfal's moral standing. A similar scenario happens in the early fifteenth-century romance *Sir Cleges*, where Cleges loses his wealth through largesse, only to regain it, and more, for showing himself to have inherent moral worth that is recognised by the right people.<sup>30</sup> Cleges also encounters men who treat him according to his outer appearance and perceived lack of social standing, but eventually his moral worth is recognised and justly rewarded. Launfal finds himself rewarded financially by Triamour, allowing him to express his true knightly identity on the tournament field, with the assistance of Gyfre the servant.

### III.

In *Lanval*, the hero returns to Arthur's court where the 'noble and the worthy' Gawain exclaims that 'we treat our companion Launfal ill, for he is so generous and courtly, and his father is a rich king, yet we have not brought him with us.'<sup>31</sup> The knights go to Launfal's lodgings and persuade him to join them. This scene is very different in Chestre's version, where Launfal is in foreign lands when he is summoned to his former court – he is physically absent from the group, not simply excluded as in *Lanval* or *Landevale*. After he has used Triamour's gifts to a name for himself in numerous tournaments, Launfal's exploits come to Arthur's attention, and he is invited back to court to be steward of the hall for Saint John's feast. Both *Lanval* and *Landevale* highlight the hero's social isolation: in both, he is living in close proximity to the court – in the former, he is purposefully excluded and is then invited to join, and in the latter, he is already present at the festivities.<sup>32</sup> In Chestre's version, Launfal's wealth is not mentioned at all by the knights: it is not an attribute

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<sup>30</sup> *Sir Cleges – The Middle English Breton Lays*, pp.367-407; Cleges is a courteous and generous knight at Arthur's father's court; due to overextending his largesse, he falls into poverty, where he laments his loss of social position at Christmas when he hears of the festivities but is unable to join in. His wife, Clarice, encourages him to turn to God and his family, which leads him to find cherries in his garden in the middle of winter. Taking the cherries to the king puts him in contact with three men (the porter, usher and steward) who treat him as a beggar, due to his ragged clothing. The king, however, recognises Cleges and reinstates him to the court as his steward.

<sup>31</sup> *The Lais of Marie de France*, p.76.

<sup>32</sup> *The Middle English Breton Lays*, p.428.

that is directly associated with him, although they praise his generosity ('large Launfal') – rather, it is Launfal's martial reputation that brings him to Arthur's attention.

In all three versions, Launfal loses Triamour and his social status, by revealing his relationship with her to Guinevere.<sup>33</sup> In *Lanval*, Marie is circumspect with Launfal's reaction to Triamour's loss, saying that 'He now regretted this, for as a result he had lost her.'<sup>34</sup> Yet, this is followed by an emphasis on his psychological isolation, saying that he is 'suffering from great pain ... [and is] distraught and anguished'.<sup>35</sup> Marie makes it clear that Launfal is alone in every sense but the literal: when the King asks for pledges, no one steps forward, as Launfal is 'alone and forlorn, having no relation or friend there.'<sup>36</sup> Gawain and all his companions then do come forward, but the point has been made: Launfal is alone. The text goes on to say that the knights 'went to see him every day, as they wished to know whether he was drinking and eating properly, being very much afraid that he might harm himself.'<sup>37</sup> The impression this gives is not one of caring, but instead, a way of keeping a watchful eye on a potential problem, as Launfal's reaction implies he cares about his lover's reaction rather than his loss of standing among the court.

In *Landevale*, Launfal's reaction to Triamour's loss is clear and immediate – *Alas! he hath hys love forlorne* [261]. In the equivalent surety scene, *Landevale* is more similar to *Launfal* than to *Lanval* in that he [*b*]orowys... *founde to com agene / Sir Gawayne and Sir Ewyne*. [315-16] The knights *quytten [Landevale] as treue men* [303]: Launfal's worth is proven by men who are steadfast in their fidelity to friends.<sup>38</sup> The isolation that is so keenly stated by Marie is absent here; instead, it is clear that Launfal is supported by *treue men*.

Chestre deals with Launfal's betrayal of Triamour differently. While he was *unfawe* [732] at the loss of Triamour, the following twelve lines are devoted to the loss of the physical trappings when her affection has disappeared. Launfal checks his purse before truly lamenting the loss of his lover: to be precise, it is seventeen lines before Launfal laments '*my creature, / How schall I from the endure, / Swetyng Tryamour? / All my joye I have forelore – / And the – that me ys worst fore – / Thou blyssfull berde yn bour!*' [745-50] The loss of his lover and the associated benefits have not left Launfal as isolated as in the other two versions, since his absence from court has not diminished the loyalty the knights have for him. Chestre makes this clear by showing that Launfal easily finds sureties to stand for him after Guinevere's accusation: *Launfal therto two borwes fonde, / Noble knyghtes twayn: / Syr Percevall and Syr Gawayn*. [812-14]

Right from the beginning, Chestre has shown Launfal to have moral credit and to be worthy of trust by men known of known high moral standing. This last

<sup>33</sup> It is interesting to note that Geoffroi de Charny, in his *Book of Chivalry*, states that a knight should 'keep secret the love itself and all the benefit and the honorable rewards you derive from it; you should, therefore, never boast of the love nor show such outward signs of it in your behaviour that would draw the attention of others.', *The Book of Chivalry of Geoffroi de Charny*, p.119 [lines 200-203].

<sup>34</sup> *The Lais of Marie de France*, p.78.

<sup>35</sup> *The Lais of Marie de France*, p.77, 78.

<sup>36</sup> *The Lais of Marie de France*, pp.77, 78.

<sup>37</sup> *The Lais of Marie de France*, p.78.

<sup>38</sup> See *quytte* – *The Middle English Breton Lays*, p.442.

scene involving him and the knights is a culmination of the moral credit he has built up: it saves his life. Chestre has the Earl of Cornwall, in reply to the King's demand that Launfal be put to death, state that they will not comply, as it would be a great shame upon them all *to dampny that gantylman, / That hath be hende and fre* [842-43]. In *Landevale*, the Earl calls Launfal a man that is *more large and fre / Then eny of us that here be*. [343-44]. *Large* glosses as munificent, open-handed. In *Lanval*, not only is there nothing to specify Launfal's moral worth, but the Count of Cornwall's statement implies social distance when he says that '[t]he king accused his vassal, whom I heard you call Lanval.'<sup>39</sup> *Launfal* and *Landevale* both make clear that the Earl of Cornwall knows Launfal well enough to make a statement as to his moral worth. In *Lanval*, however, the Earl's phrasing implies he does not know Launfal enough to put a name to a face. Chestre's turn of phrase implies a closeness between Launfal and the knights at court, a bond that is based on mutual trust and moral recognition. Just as Chestre never reveals Launfal's history, he never reveals why Launfal engenders such loyalty and trust in his fellow knights. Rather, the support of the knightly group and the failure or inability of those outside that group to provide Launfal with what he both needs and deserves seem indistinguishable matters to Chestre.

## Conclusion

Myra Stokes sees Marie's Launfal as 'literally and psychologically alienated from his social environment.'<sup>40</sup> While there is a literal isolation in Chestre's *Sir Launfal*, it is temporary. Indeed, it is Chestre's most marked alteration to the text that he has Launfal physically isolated by self-exile psychologically and emotionally very much integrated into a network consisting of his peers. *Launfal* illustrates Launfal's moral credibility from the start, by showing how he is able to trust his fellow knights, and they him. This trusted connection is continually brought to the fore throughout the text, in scenes that Chestre added himself – for example, the scene with Arthur's nephews, and the scene depicting his encounter with the Mayor's daughter, both serve to show Launfal's connections to people who recognise and seek to reward his moral worth. Making explicit the trust inherent in the relationships that Launfal has with his fellow knights, Chestre embeds Launfal in a social network that his is a part of regardless of his geographical location.

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<sup>39</sup> *The Lais of Marie de France*, p.78.

<sup>40</sup> Myra Stokes, 'Lanval' to 'Sir Launfal': A Story Becomes Popular', in *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, ed. by A. D. Putter and Jane Gilbert (Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), pp. 56–77; p.57.

### ***Author Biography***

Deborah Seiler is a doctoral candidate at the University of Western Australia; her thesis looks at upper-class male friendship in late medieval England, c.1300-1400. Her research interests include masculinity, relationships (friendship, in particular), sexuality, and the interdisciplinary potential of social psychology in historical research.

### ***In Memoriam of Philippa Maddern***

My first memory of Philippa is of her standing at the front of rather dingy seminar room, giving a lecture on medieval history. Her relaxed enthusiasm was infectious, her humour was relaxing and her love of history was palpable.

No matter how confused or lost I was, just a short time with Philippa would result in everything making sense: I would leave her office full of clarity and excitement. Flagging enthusiasm and confidence were restored by her clear conviction that not only could you do the work but that the work was very much worth doing. She always took the time to speak with me and to answer my emails (so often full of panicked and rather rambling questions). When she was late for a meeting with me – not an infrequent occurrence –, she would turn up with the phrase: “Sackcloth and ashes, Deb! I come to you in sackcloth and ashes!”

I was very lucky to be able to tell Philippa that Patricia and I were organising this *Festschrift* for her before she passed away, something for which I am very grateful. Her reaction to the news was joyful and her reply typical: she said she was honoured to have been able to teach us and that she had learnt as much from us as we ever did from her.

Thank you, Philippa.