

# Feminine Quests in Arthurian Legends

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This paper examines the correlation between women, purpose, and power within the medieval Arthurian legends. Women had little to no power during the Middle Ages, and the patriarchal ideology that dominated the culture is reflected in literature. However, my essay shows that even though women play supporting roles in Arthurian legends, they often propel the plotline to heroism and adventure. Often nameless, they barely get credit for their characterization, but my analysis of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a chivalric romance, and “Lanval,” one of Marie de France’s *lais*, illustrates how the tales’ women characters wield more power than one would expect. Lady Bertilak controls Gawain through tokens and guilt, while the fairy woman from “Lanval” becomes a heroine in her own right by “saving” Lanval from Arthur’s court. Through close textual analysis and extensive research from scholars who specialize in medieval literature, I show how powerful women can be found in Arthurian legends.

Medieval literature tends to center around men, because men were the primary rulers, land owners, and knights. In most of the tales that capture the stories of King Arthur’s court, the women who influence the plotline remain nameless, thus perpetuating their limited role in a patriarchal society. The legends follow Arthur or his knights on various quests for true love, glory, honor, revenge, etc., but few acknowledge the quests of the women who advance the story. While “Lanval,” by Marie de France and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* appear to be Arthurian legends about heroes who are on quests for honor and true love, the unnamed women in the tales greatly influence the plot and journey on quests of their own. By analyzing the power dynamics between the women and men and themes that emerge in the texts that lend themselves to interpretation, I will argue that not only do the women in the two Arthurian legends have quests of their own, but that they are the powerhouses behind the works.

Before the quests of the women can be properly revealed and analyzed, it is necessary to examine what their motives are in relation to the men in their stories. In other

words, what will the women gain if they acquire these men as lovers? Three possible reasons that resonate in both pieces, but in different contexts, are love, reputation, and power. Courtly love is a significant and relevant occurrence in Arthurian legends, which makes it all the more fascinating that neither *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* or “Lanval” incorporate traditional courtly love. Both tales go against the typical Arthurian legend in terms of love, but it is apparent that the fairy woman in “Lanval” has affection for her story’s respective knight. “Lanval” reveals the possible motive for the fairy woman coming to title character’s rescue when he is being questioned for defaming the Queen. Even though Lanval reveals who she is, going against her request, she still rescues him because arguably, she is enamored with him. This is evident in the poem because when Lanval first meets her, she says to him, “No emperor or count or king / will ever have known such joy or good; / for I love you more than anything” (114-116). The fairy woman is ambiguous and mysterious, but she is not shy about her feelings for Lanval. She goes as far to say that dignitaries will not be as happy as she and Lanval,

because their love is unmatched. This contrasts with *Sir Gawain* sharply, because Lady Bertilak's romantic feelings for Gawain are not nearly as reserved and what some would call honorable. Lady Bertilak wants to sleep with Gawain, while the fairy woman declares her love for Lanval, which is considered a more romantic gesture. This is a piece associated with Romance, therefore it is possible to argue that affection is a factor within the fairy woman's quest.

Another motive that could influence the women's actions in the texts is reputation. In *Sir Gawain*, Lady Bertilak adamantly expresses to Gawain that she has heard about him in many lands and that he is one of Arthur's greatest knights. She praises him, saying, "Because I know your name – the knight Sir Gawain, / famed through all realms whichever road he rides" (1225-1226). While it is revealed at the end of the tale that Lady Bertilak was essentially a prop to test the honor and loyalty of Gawain, it is essential to separate Lady Bertilak the prop and Lady Bertilak the lady. She was a key role in the mission of fooling Gawain, but nonetheless she is a woman, and it is important to keep in mind that she probably had a personal quest separate from her formal quest. Perhaps, one of the motives that drove her quest was her hunger for a husband with a more formidable reputation. It appears that the fairy woman in "Lanval" may desire Lanval because he is a good knight, but unlike Gawain, Lanval is not celebrated because the text explains that Arthur mistreats him. Also, the fairy takes him to Avalon at the end of the piece, so even if Lanval had an impressive reputation, it would not matter much in Avalon.

Power is also an important possibility to consider when looking at the different motives behind Lady Bertilak and the fairy woman, because unlike love and reputation, both of the women desire power within their relationships with these men. Bertilak holds power over Gawain when she tries to seduce him; she wants to have control over him, but

Gawain fights back partly out of loyalty towards the master of the castle and partly because is appalled and frustrated that she is making the sexual advances. Harvey De Roo offers a similar explanation in his article, "What's in a Name? Power Dynamics in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" where he states, "Gawain and the lady struggle for power, in terms of expected and denied behavior, itself based on conflicting definitions of the hero's identity" (232). Gawain evidently expects a certain level of behavior from Lady Bertilak, and she does not meet his expectations. This in turn creates a power struggle, because while Gawain would normally possess the power, that normality wavers due to her dominance. Similarly, the fairy woman holds power over Lanval by making him swear to not tell anyone about her. The fairy is in turn controlling what Lanval can and cannot do or say, proving that in some ways, she does desire power from her relationship with Lanval. Both of these sources of power crumble respectively within their tales, which is an indicator of just how powerless women in this society can be.

The power dynamics within these Arthurian texts are tense and distracting; therefore, it is imperative to explore power dynamics between the men and women, because such analysis can reveal possible explanations of their quests and even more importantly, their characterization. The difference between the two Arthurian legends in terms of power dynamics is that in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the power boomerangs back and forth between Lady Bertilak and Gawain. In "Lanval," the power remains solely with the fairy woman. In the beginning of Gawain and Lady Bertilak's relationship, Gawain has the power because he is not only the male in their dynamic, but also the guest. Without even realizing a relationship between them exists, Gawain naturally has the power because of the time period and etiquette. This changes the first time Lady Bertilak sneaks into Gawain's

chambers and Gawain, being a man and a guest, tries to shoo her away by saying, “But my gracious lady, if you grant me leave, / will you pardon this prisoner and prompt him to rise” (1218-1219). Immediately, Lady Bertilak turns the tables and says, “‘Not so, beautiful sir,’ the sweet lady said. / ‘Bide in your bed – my own plan is better’” (1222-1223). Not only is she disobeying him, but she adds that her staying in the room is a much better plan, clearly taking back the power from Gawain. Also, another way Lady Bertilak controls Gawain is how she offers the green girdle to him. It is ironic that she says in the text, “You refuse my ring because you find it too fine, / and don’t care to be deeply indebted to me; so I give you my girdle, a lesser thing to gain” (1827-29), because in reality he is in debt to her considering the girdle would save his life. Her gift of a lifesaving artifact to him makes her even more powerful, because it shows that while there is a tug and pull within Gawain and Lady Bertilak’s power relationship, she gains the upper hand in the end, proving that she is on a quest to control Gawain.

“Lanval” has a considerably simple power dynamic between Lanval and the fairy woman compared to Lady Bertilak and Gawain. It wavers some, but not nearly as much as the fore mentioned tale. As Sharon Kinoshita brilliantly puts it, “Lanval is, if anything, a male Cinderella story in which the usual gendered stereotypes are inverted” (269). In a stereotypical Arthurian legend, the knight saves the lady in distress, thus having the power in the relationship. “Throughout most of the tale,” Kinoshita writes, “he plays the passive or subordinate role elsewhere assigned to courtly heroines” (269). Lanval’s role in Marie de France’s *lai* is incredibly feminine and helpless, which prompts the question: who truly has the power in this piece? The fairy woman, who is an actual woman, or the man whose character arc seems similar to that of a medieval woman? The answer is of course,

debatable, but the fairy woman’s possession of power throughout the majority of the *lai* shows that even though she does not have a name and is visibly seen very little throughout the story, she controls not only Lanval, but the entire ending of the poem. When they first meet, the fairy woman gains the power, because she says, “I command and beg you, / do not let any man know about this” (144-45). By “commanding” him, she ends the power struggle for the moment, because he will do anything she asks of him due to her unmatched beauty and wealth. However, the Queen gains power in Lanval and the fairy woman’s relationship when she accuses Lanval of dishonoring her. She then has the upper hand, because Lanval is forced to defend himself in court, but cannot produce the lady he speaks of. The fairy woman gains the power back from the Queen once she shows herself to the court and takes Lanval back to Avalon. While the story centers around Lanval, he holds very little power within both his relationship with the fairy woman and his relationships with Arthur and the Queen as well, showing that Kinoshita is right when she says that the gender stereotypes are reversed from their normal state in medieval literature. In both *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and “Lanval,” the women fight and win their dominance within their respective power dynamics, showing that both women desire control over men within their quests. However, in “Lanval,” the fairy woman’s dominance is much more consistent while Lady Bertilak’s dominance changes as she attempts to woo Gawain.

The power dynamics between the women and men in these Arthurian legends show that gender roles are extremely deceiving, because textual evidence reveals that Lady Bertilak and the fairy woman fight for authority within their relationships. To further understand the men in the tales, it is critical to examine multiple themes and motifs that become relevant throughout the texts. Two examples of themes that appear

within both *Sir Gawain* and “Lanval” are culpability and denial, which Arthurian legends often employ to make the audience much more emotionally connected to the piece. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain feels extremely guilty about accepting Lady Bertilak’s gift of the green girdle, because although he does not accept her ring, he still accepted a gift from a married woman. This ambiguity ties into the hunting of the fox the men of the castle partake in. Lady Bertilak can be seen as a fox because she’s cunning and changed her tactics, but Gawain can also be seen as a fox, because he goes to mass after he was given the girdle and lies about it: “Then fully and frankly he spoke of his sins / no matter how small, always seeking mercy” (1880-1881). His claim is contradictory because he does not confess that he took a token from Lady Bertilak and therefore commits sin. De Roo mentions that the pentangle, which Gawain proudly boasts on his coat of arms, is now compromised. The pentangle is a token of truth, and consists of five important virtues, including fellowship, cleanness, pity, courtesie, and franchise. He says, “Gawain violates the logic of the pentangle, thus contributing directly to his downfall, and his diatribe against women is a discourteous – and delightfully incriminating – attempt to shift the blame” (“Undressing” 311). Therefore, Gawain is denying that he committed any sin by lying during mass and also when the Green Knight reveals that the old woman that was always by Lady Bertilak’s side is actually Morgan le Faye. At this, Gawain curses women for their trickery and denies that the blame should not be on him for accepting the token. These themes suggest that perhaps a part of Lady Bertilak’s quest was to prompt Gawain to admit the error of his ways.

“Lanval” employs the themes of guilt and denial, but much more sporadically and in an almost concealed manner. For instance, whenever he is being tried in Arthur’s court for dishonoring the Queen, Lanval

“acknowledged the truth, / about the love he had boasted of, / that now made him sad because he’d lost her” (376-378). Lanval feels remorse towards the fact that he had to reveal his lady to defend himself, which shows that he has genuine affection for her. The fairy woman, however, feels no guilt about taking Lanval away from Arthur’s court, because taking him away is a phase of her quest. Not only is her quest about controlling the man she wants, she also wants someone who feels unwelcome and outcasted in their court, as Lanval was. In some ways, the fairy woman is a heroine, because not only does she save Lanval from punishment for dishonoring the queen, but she also saves him from a difficult life in the castle. Examining “Lanval”’s employment of the fairy motif, a motif common in Celtic literature, leads to additional explanations of the fairy woman’s quest. According to Colleen P. Donagher, the fairy mistress motif is extensive in literature and opens a variety of interpretations. Donagher writes, “Normally, however, the story involves a woman who, on the basis of a mortal man’s reputation, comes from the other world to choose him for her lover; imposes a *geis* or prohibition on him, which he later breaks; and then punishes him for his disobedience, usually by a withdrawal of her love” (69). Perhaps it was Marie de France’s intention to make the fairy woman save Lanval from his mediocre life at Arthur’s court, because that was her quest. She wanted a man she could control, rescue, and bring back to Avalon with her ladies in waiting. Characters in both tales employ different themes such as guilt and denial, and “Lanval” especially contains historical motifs like the fairy mistress. However, the intensity of these themes varies depending on the Arthurian legend, which affects the interpretation of the piece and the quest of the specific woman.

Women certainly were not known to embark on quests in medieval literature, but there is strong evidence that women in almost all medieval literature venture on their

own personal quests. Even though these quests fail to be at the forefront of the stories due to misogynic societies, it is imperative that these quests get deciphered to properly understand what the women desired. Analyzing two Arthurian legends that capture women in supporting roles, such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and "Lanval," by Marie de France, reveals that Lady Bertilak and the fairy woman identify with quests of their own. By examining the possible motives behind the women, the power dynamics between the two genders, and motifs that emerge within in the texts that contribute toward the interpretation of the quests, one can conclude that Lady Bertilak's formal quest is to aid her husband in tricking Gawain, but her informal quest is to control Gawain because she cannot control her husband. Similarly, the fairy woman's quest in "Lanval" is to find a husband who is isolated from his kingdom, so she can control him (by saving him) and return to Avalon. Both tales have differences within each woman's respective quests, but in the end, it seems that the Wife of Bath was not far off in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, when she says in her own tale that what women desire most is control over their husbands.

## Works Cited

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