

Lanval

I shall tell you the adventure of another *lai*,
just as it happened:
it was composed about a very noble vassal;
in Breton, they call him Lanval.

- 5 Arthur, the brave and the courtly king,
was staying at Caradoel,
because the Scots and the Picts
were destroying the land.
They invaded Logres¹
10 and laid it waste.
At Pentecost, in summer,²
the king stayed there.
He gave out many rich gifts:
to counts and barons,
15 members of the Round Table—
such a company had no equal³ in all the world—
he distributed wives and lands,
to all but one who had served him.
That was Lanval; Arthur forgot him,
20 and none of his men favored him either.
For his valor, for his generosity,
his beauty and his bravery,
most men envied him;
some feigned the appearance of love
25 who, if something unpleasant happened to him,
would not have been at all disturbed.
He was the son of a king of high degree

1. Logres is England.

2. In medieval poetry, only two seasons are usually recognized, summer and winter. The feast of Pentecost is frequently the starting point of an Arthurian adventure.

3. Equal in number as well as in worth: cf. Ewert, "There was no equal number of such knights in all the world" (p. 173).

but he was far from his heritage.
 He was of the king's household
 30 but he had spent all his wealth,
 for the king gave him nothing
 nor did Lanval ask.
 Now Lanval was in difficulty,
 depressed and very worried.
 35 My lords, don't be surprised:
 a strange man, without friends,
 is very sad in another land,
 when he doesn't know where to look for help.
 The knight of whom I speak,
 40 who had served the king so long,
 one day mounted his horse
 and went off to amuse himself.
 He left the city
 and came, all alone, to a field;
 45 he dismounted by a running stream
 but his horse trembled badly.
 He removed the saddle and went off,
 leaving the horse to roll around in the meadow.
 He folded his cloak beneath his head
 50 and lay down.
 He worried about his difficulty,
 he could see nothing that pleased him.
 As he lay there
 he looked down along the bank
 55 and saw two girls approaching;
 he had never seen any lovelier.
 They were richly dressed,
 tightly laced,
 in tunics of dark purple;
 60 their faces were very lovely.
 The older one carried basins,
 golden, well made, and fine;
 I shall tell you the truth about it, without fail.
 The other carried a towel.

65 They went straight
 to where the knight was lying.
 Lanval, who was very well bred,
 got up to meet them.
 They greeted him first
 70 and gave him their message:
 "Sir Lanval, my lady,
 who is worthy and wise and beautiful,
 sent us for you.
 Come with us now.
 75 We shall guide you there safely.
 See, her pavilion is nearby!"
 The knight went with them;
 giving no thought to his horse
 who was feeding before him in the meadow.
 80 They led him up to the tent,
 which was quite beautiful and well placed.
 Queen Semiramis,
 however much more wealth,
 power, or knowledge she had,
 85 or the emperor Octavian
 could not have paid for one of the flaps.
 There was a golden eagle on top of it,
 whose value I could not tell,
 nor could I judge the value of the cords or the poles
 90 that held up the sides of the tent;
 there is no king on earth who could buy it,
 no matter what wealth he offered.
 The girl was inside the tent:
 the lily and the young rose
 95 when they appear in the summer
 are surpassed by her beauty.
 She lay on a beautiful bed—
 the bedclothes were worth a castle—
 dressed only in her shift.
 100 Her body was well shaped and elegant;
 for the heat, she had thrown over herself,

a precious cloak of white ermine,
 covered with purple alexandrine,
 but her whole side was uncovered,
 105 her face, her neck and her bosom;
 she was whiter than the hawthorn flower.
 The knight went forward
 and the girl addressed him.
 He sat before the bed.
 110 "Lanval," she said, "sweet love,
 because of you I have come from my land;
 I came to seek you from far away.
 If you are brave and courtly,
 no emperor or count or king
 115 will ever have known such joy or good;
 for I love you more than anything."
 He looked at her and saw that she was beautiful;
 Love stung him with a spark
 that burned and set fire to his heart.
 120 He answered her in a suitable way.
 "Lovely one," he said, "if it pleased you,
 if such joy might be mine
 that you would love me,
 there is nothing you might command,
 125 within my power, that I would not do,
 whether foolish or wise.
 I shall obey your command;
 for you, I shall abandon everyone.
 I want never to leave you.
 130 That is what I most desire."
 When the girl heard the words
 of the man who could love her so,
 she granted him her love and her body.
 Now Lanval was on the right road!
 135 Afterward, she gave him a gift:
 he would never again want anything,
 he would receive as he desired;

however generously he might give and spend,
 she would provide what he needed.
 140 Now Lanval is well cared for.
 The more lavishly he spends,
 the more gold and silver he will have.
 "Love," she said, "I admonish you now,
 I command and beg you,
 145 do not let any man know about this.
 I shall tell you why:
 you would lose me for good
 if this love were known;
 you would never see me again
 150 or possess my body."
 He answered that he would do
 exactly as she commanded.
 He lay beside her on the bed;
 now Lanval is well cared for.
 155 He remained with her
 that afternoon, until evening
 and would have stayed longer, if he could,
 and if his love had consented.
 "Love," she said, "get up.
 160 You cannot stay any longer.
 Go away now; I shall remain
 but I will tell you one thing:
 when you want to talk to me
 there is no place you can think of
 165 where a man might have his mistress
 without reproach or shame,
 that I shall not be there with you
 to satisfy all your desires.
 No man but you will see me
 170 or hear my words."
 When he heard her, he was very happy,
 he kissed her, and then got up.
 The girls who had brought him to the tent
 dressed him in rich clothes;

175 when he was dressed anew,
 there wasn't a more handsome youth in all the world;
 he was no fool, no boor.
 They gave him water for his hands
 and a towel to dry them,
 180 and they brought him food.
 He took supper with his love;
 it was not to be refused.
 He was served with great courtesy,
 he received it with great joy.
 185 There was an entremet
 that vastly pleased the knight
 for he kissed his lady often
 and held her close.
 When they finished dinner,
 190 his horse was brought to him.
 The horse had been well saddled;
 Lanval was very richly served.
 The knight took his leave, mounted,
 and rode toward the city,
 195 often looking behind him.
 Lanval was very disturbed;
 he wondered about his adventure
 and was doubtful in his heart;
 he was amazed, not knowing what to believe;
 200 he didn't expect ever to see her again.
 He came to his lodging
 and found his men well dressed.
 That night, his accommodations were rich
 but no one knew where it came from.
 205 There was no knight in the city
 who really needed a place to stay
 whom he didn't invite to join him
 to be well and richly served.
 Lanval gave rich gifts,
 210 Lanval released prisoners,

Lanval dressed jongleurs [performers],
 Lanval offered great honors.
 There was no stranger or friend
 to whom Lanval didn't give.
 215 Lanval's joy and pleasure were intense;
 in the daytime or at night,
 he could see his love often;
 she was completely at his command.

 In that same year, it seems to me,
 220 after the feast of St. John,
 about thirty knights
 were amusing themselves
 in an orchard beneath the tower
 where the queen was staying.
 225 Gawain was with them
 and his cousin, the handsome Yvain;
 Gawain, the noble, the brave,
 who was so loved by all, said:
 "By God, my lords, we wronged
 230 our companion Lanval,
 who is so generous and courtly,
 and whose father is a rich king,
 when we didn't bring him with us."
 They immediately turned back,
 235 went to his lodging
 and prevailed on Lanval to come along with them.
 At a sculpted window
 the queen was looking out;
 she had three ladies with her.
 240 She saw the king's retinue,
 recognized Lanval and looked at him.
 Then she told one of her ladies
 to send for her maidens,
 the loveliest and the most refined;
 245 together they went to amuse themselves

in the orchard where the others were.
 She brought thirty or more with her;
 they descended the steps.
 The knights came to meet them,
 250 because they were delighted to see them.
 The knights took them by the hand;
 their conversation was in no way vulgar.
 Lanval went off to one side,
 far from the others; he was impatient
 255 to hold his love,
 to kiss and embrace and touch her;
 he thought little of others' joys
 if he could not have his pleasure.
 When the queen saw him alone,
 260 she went straight to the knight.
 She sat beside him and spoke,
 revealing her whole heart:
 "Lanval, I have shown you much honor,
 I have cherished you, and loved you.
 265 You may have all my love;
 just tell me your desire.
 I promise you my affection.
 You should be very happy with me."
 "My lady," he said, "let me be!
 270 I have no desire to love you.
 I've served the king a long time;
 I don't want to betray my faith to him.
 Never, for you or for your love,
 will I do anything to harm my lord."
 275 The queen got angry;
 in her wrath, she insulted him:
 "Lanval," she said, "I am sure
 you don't care for such pleasure;
 people have often told me
 280 that you have no interest in women.
 You have fine-looking boys
 with whom you enjoy yourself.

Base coward, lousy cripple,
 my lord made a bad mistake
 285 when he let you stay with him.
 For all I know, he'll lose God because of it."
 When Lanval heard her, he was quite disturbed;
 he was not slow to answer.
 He said something out of spite
 290 that he would later regret.
 "Lady," he said, "of that activity
 I know nothing,
 but I love and I am loved
 by one who should have the prize
 295 over all the women I know.
 And I shall tell you one thing;
 you might as well know all:
 any one of those who serve her,
 the poorest girl of all,
 300 is better than you, my lady queen,
 in body, face, and beauty,
 in breeding and in goodness."
 The queen left him
 and went, weeping, to her chamber.
 305 She was upset and angry
 because he had insulted her.
 She went to bed sick;
 never, she said, would she get up
 unless the king gave her satisfaction
 310 for the offense against her.
 The king returned from the woods,
 he'd had a very good day.
 He entered the queen's chambers.
 When she saw him, she began to complain.
 315 She fell at his feet, asked his mercy,
 saying that Lanval had dishonored her;
 he had asked for her love,
 and because she refused him
 he insulted and offended her:

320 he boasted of a love
 who was so refined and noble and proud
 that her chambermaid,
 the poorest one who served her,
 was better than the queen.
 325 The king got very angry;
 he swore an oath:
 if Lanval could not defend himself in court
 he would have him burned or hanged.
 The king left her chamber
 330 and called for three of his barons;
 he sent them for Lanval
 who was feeling great sorrow and distress.
 He had come back to his dwelling,
 knowing very well
 335 that he'd lost his love,
 he had betrayed their affair.
 He was all alone in a room,
 disturbed and troubled;
 he called on his love, again and again,
 340 but it did him no good.
 He complained and sighed,
 from time to time he fainted;
 then he cried a hundred times for her to have mercy
 and speak to her love.
 345 He cursed his heart and his mouth;
 it's a wonder he didn't kill himself.
 No matter how much he cried and shouted,
 ranted and raged,
 she would not have mercy on him,
 350 not even let him see her.
 How will he ever contain himself?
 The men the king sent
 arrived and told him
 to appear in court without delay:
 355 the king had summoned him

because the queen had accused him.
 Lanval went with his great sorrow;
 they could have killed him, for all he cared.
 He came before the king;
 360 he was very sad, thoughtful, silent;
 his face revealed great suffering.
 In anger the king told him:
 "Vassal, you have done me a great wrong!
 This was a base undertaking,
 365 to shame and disgrace me
 and to insult the queen.
 You have made a foolish boast:
 your love is much too noble
 if her maid is more beautiful,
 370 more worthy, than the queen."
 Lanval denied that he'd dishonored
 or shamed his lord,
 word for word, as the king spoke:
 he had not made advances to the queen;
 375 but of what he had said,
 he acknowledged the truth,
 about the love he had boasted of,
 that now made him sad because he'd lost her.
 About that he said he would do
 380 whatever the court decided.
 The king was very angry with him;
 he sent for all his men
 to determine exactly what he ought to do
 so that no one could find fault with his decision.
 385 They did as he commanded,
 whether they liked it or not.
 They assembled,
 judged, and decided,
 than Lanval should have his day;
 390 but he must find pledges for his lord
 to guarantee that he would await the judgment,

return, and be present at it.
 Then the court would be increased,
 for now there were none but the king's household.
 395 The barons came back to the king
 and announced their decision.
 The king demanded pledges.
 Lanval was alone and forlorn,
 he had no relative, no friend.
 400 Gawain went and pledged himself for him,
 and all his companions followed.
 The king addressed them: "I release him to you
 on forfeit of whatever you hold from me,
 lands and fiefs, each one for himself."
 405 When Lanval was pledged, there was nothing else to do.
 He returned to his lodging.
 The knights accompanied him,
 they reproached and admonished him
 that he give up his great sorrow;
 410 they cursed his foolish love.
 Each day they went to see him,
 because they wanted to know
 whether he was drinking and eating;
 they were afraid that he'd kill himself.
 415 On the day that they had named,
 the barons assembled.
 The king and the queen were there
 and the pledges brought Lanval back.
 They were all very sad for him:
 420 I think there were a hundred
 who would have done all they could
 to set him free without a trial
 where he would be wrongly accused.
 The king demanded a verdict
 425 according to the charge and rebuttal.
 Now it all fell to the barons.
 They went to the judgment,
 worried and distressed

for the noble man from another land
 430 who'd gotten into such trouble in their midst.
 Many wanted to condemn him
 in order to satisfy their lord.
 The Duke of Cornwall said:
 "No one can blame us;
 435 whether it makes you weep or sing
 justice must be carried out.
 The king spoke against his vassal
 whom I have heard named Lanval;
 he accused him of felony,
 440 charged him with a misdeed—
 a love that he had boasted of,
 which made the queen angry.
 No one but the king accused him:
 by the faith I owe you,
 445 if one were to speak the truth,
 there should have been no need for defense,
 except that a man owes his lord honor
 in every circumstance.
 He will be bound by his oath,
 450 and the king will forgive us our pledges
 if he can produce proof;
 if his love would come forward,
 if what he said,
 what upset the queen, is true,
 455 then he will be acquitted,
 because he did not say it out of malice.
 But if he cannot get his proof,
 we must make it clear to him
 that he will forfeit his service to the king;
 460 he must take his leave."
 They sent to the knight,
 told and announced to him
 that he should have his love come
 to defend and stand surety for him.
 465 He told them that he could not do it:

he would never receive help from her.
 They went back to the judges,
 not expecting any help from Lanval.
 The king pressed them hard
 470 because of the queen who was waiting.
 When they were ready to give their verdict
 they saw two girls approaching,
 riding handsome palfreys.
 They were very attractive,
 475 dressed in purple taffeta,
 over their bare skin.
 The men looked at them with pleasure.
 Gawain, taking three knights with him,
 went to Lanval and told him;
 480 he pointed out the two girls.
 Gawain was extremely happy, and begged him
 to tell if his love were one of them.
 Lanval said he didn't know who they were,
 where they came from or where they were going.
 485 The girls proceeded
 still on horseback;
 they dismounted before the high table
 at which Arthur, the king, sat.
 They were of great beauty,
 490 and spoke in a courtly manner:
 "King, clear your chambers,
 have them hung with silk
 where my lady may dismount;
 she wishes to take shelter with you."
 495 He promised it willingly
 and called two knights
 to guide them up to the chambers.
 On that subject no more was said.
 The king asked his barons
 500 for their judgment and decision;
 he said they had angered him very much
 with their long delay.

"Sire," they said, "we have decided.
 Because of the ladies we have just seen
 505 we have made no judgment.
 Let us reconvene the trial."
 Then they assembled, everyone was worried;
 there was much noise and strife.
 While they were in that confusion,
 510 two girls in noble array,
 dressed in Phrygian silks
 and riding Spanish mules,
 were seen coming down the street.
 This gave the vassals great joy;
 515 to each other they said that now
 Lanval, the brave and bold, was saved.
 Gawain went up to him,⁴
 bringing his companions along.
 "Sire," he said, "take heart.
 520 For the love of God, speak to us.
 Here come two maidens,
 well adorned and very beautiful;
 one must certainly be your love."
 Lanval answered quickly
 525 that he did not recognize them,
 he didn't know them or love them.
 Meanwhile they'd arrived,
 and dismounted before the king.
 Most of those who saw them praised them
 530 for their bodies, their faces, their coloring;
 each was more impressive
 than the queen had ever been.
 The older one was courtly and wise,
 she spoke her message fittingly:
 535 "King, have chambers prepared for us
 to lodge my lady according to her need;

4. Ewert gives Yweins; Warnke, Walwains. Gawain seems more likely, since he is the one most concerned with Lanval throughout and since he always moves with his companions, as in this case.

she is coming here to speak with you."
 He ordered them to be taken
 to the others who had preceded them.
 540 There was no problem with the mules.⁵
 When he had seen to the girls,
 he summoned all his barons
 to render their judgment;
 it had already dragged out too much.
 545 The queen was getting angry
 because she had fasted so long.⁶
 They were about to give their judgment
 when through the city came riding
 a girl on horseback:
 550 there was none more beautiful in the world.
 She rode a white palfrey,
 who carried her handsomely and smoothly:
 he was well apportioned in the neck and head,
 no finer beast in the world.
 555 The palfrey's trappings were rich;
 under heaven there was no count or king
 who could have afforded them all
 without selling or mortgaging lands.
 She was dressed in this fashion:
 560 in a white linen shift
 that revealed both her sides
 since the lacing was along the side.
 Her body was elegant, her hips slim,
 her neck whiter than snow on a branch,
 565 her eyes bright, her face white,
 a beautiful mouth, a well-set nose,
 dark eyebrows and an elegant forehead,
 her hair curly and rather blond;
 golden wire does not shine

5. The following two lines are added in (S) to explain this remark: "There were enough men to care for them / and put them into the stables."

6. Warnke and Rychner give *jeünot*; Ewert, *atendeit*, "waited," which is not quite as callously selfish.

570 like her hair in the light.
 Her cloak, which she had wrapped around her,
 was dark purple.
 On her wrist she held a sparrow hawk,
 a greyhound followed her.⁷
 575 In the town, no one, small or big,
 old man or child,
 failed to come look.
 As they watched her pass,
 there was no joking about her beauty.
 580 She proceeded at a slow pace.
 The judges who saw her
 marveled at the sight;
 no one who looked at her
 was not warmed with joy.
 585 Those who loved the knight
 came to him and told him
 of the girl who was approaching,
 if God pleased, to rescue him.
 "Sir companion, here comes one
 590 neither tawny nor dark;
 this is, of all who exist,
 the most beautiful woman in the world."
 Lanval heard them and lifted his head;
 he recognized her and sighed.
 595 The blood rose to his face;
 he was quick to speak.
 "By my faith," he said, "that is my love.
 Now I don't care if I am killed,
 if only she forgives me.
 600 For I am restored, now that I see her."
 The lady⁸ entered the palace;
 no one so beautiful had ever been there.

7. (S) adds the following attractive if doubtful lines: "A noble youth led her / carrying an ivory horn. / They came through the street, very beautiful. / Such great beauty was not seen / in Venus, who was a queen, / or in Dido, or in Lavinia."

She dismounted before the king
 so that she was well seen by all.
 605 And she let her cloak fall
 so they could see her better.
 The king, who was well bred,
 rose and went to meet her;
 all the others honored her
 610 and offered to serve her.
 When they had looked at her well,
 when they had greatly praised her beauty,
 she spoke in this way,
 she didn't want to wait:
 615 "I have loved one of your vassals:
 you see him before you—Lanval.
 He has been accused in your court—
 I don't want him to suffer
 for what he said; you should know
 620 that the queen was in the wrong.
 He never made advances to her.
 And for the boast that he made,
 if he can be acquitted through me,
 let him be set free by your barons."
 625 Whatever the barons judged by law
 the king promised would prevail.
 To the last man they agreed
 that Lanval had successfully answered the charge.
 He was set free by their decision
 630 and the girl departed.
 The king could not detain her,
 though there were enough people to serve her.
 Outside the hall stood
 a great stone of dark marble
 635 where heavy men mounted
 when they left the king's court;
 Lanval climbed on it.
 When the girl came through the gate
 Lanval leapt, in one bound,

640 onto the palfrey, behind her.
 With her he went to Avalun,
 so the Bretons tell us,
 to a very beautiful island;
 there the youth was carried off.
 645 No man heard of him again,
 and I have no more to tell.