

Elements of the Fantastic in *Lanval* & *Yonec*

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Marie de France's two poems, *Lanval* and *Yonec*, share a strong element of the fantastic and otherworldly, but in each of the poems the purpose of this element is different. Whereas *Lanval* tells the story of a human losing touch with the real world and leaving it for another, *Yonec* tells of an inhabitant of the faerie world losing his connection with that world and becoming part of this, at the cost of his life. In each story Marie's treatment of the marvelous furthers her purpose. She describes the faeries in *Lanval*, for instance, in terms that illicit wonder and awe, emphasizing the contrast between the human world and the fae world. Her treatment of the fantastic in *Yonec*, on the other hand, shows a much stronger connection to humanity; in this poem we see explicitly what the heroine sees of the otherworld, and hers is a very human perspective. In *Lanval* Marie uses the marvelous to emphasize the lackings of the real world, while in *Yonec* she uses it to demonstrate the importance of the real world.

Marie de France uses her descriptions of the faeries' beauty and exotic clothing to sharpen the contrast between Arthur's court and the otherworld in *Lanval*. Semiramis and her entourage dazzle the members of Arthur's court at first with the manner in which they are dressed - "purple taffeta, / over their bare skin (96)." and other such alluring fabrics. Marie says of Semiramis herself, "there was none more beautiful in the world (111)." Yet all of this beauty and exotic fabric serves only to alienate the faeries from the court. The more wonderful they are, the farther they are from humanity - and we see just how great the chasm is between them and the court when they leave with Lanval, and "No man heard of him again... (130)" The faeries' beauty serves not to make a connection between them and humanity, but to emphasize the difference that exists there. In contrast, Marie's treatment of the fantastic in *Yonec* is earthy and

almost repulsive. Yonec's mother, on her sojourn to Muldumarec's world, sees every detail of their life in that other place. In this poem we (the readers) follow the human sojourner into the otherworld and see what she sees; Marie describes in detail the "...city near that place/ All enclosed by a great wall (72)." We see the silver city in *Yonec*; we do not have even a glimpse of Avalon in *Lanval*. In *Yonec* the characters (and the readers) are drawn towards the real world, and away from the faerie realm, as the actions of the characters themselves show. Muldumarec finalizes the rift between himself and his homeland when he gives his human lover his sword, forever removing it from the land where it was made. "He gives her... his sword/ ...forbids her with a strong word/ Ever to yield it... (84)" He gives, with the sword, his loyalty; not to the world of his birth but to the world of men, where his lover is, and where his son will be. When Muldumarec gives his loyalty, the reader follows suit – Marie has succeeded in convincing us of the prevailing importance of the real world. Her account of the supernatural in *Yonec* leaves the reader with the belief that the real world is preferable to the otherworld, whereas her portrayal of it in *Lanval* leaves the reader gazing after Semiramis' palfrey with an inconsolable longing.

In each poem we can follow Marie's theme of the real world vs. the fantastic world by watching the behavior of the two faeries. While there are certain similarities (both faeries must be called by their human lovers, both are beautiful beyond human beauty, both live in expensive homes, and each has certain magical powers), the two behave very differently in their relations to their homelands and the human world. Semiramis' subjects are just as eager to invite Lanval into their midst as she is; her maidens come to bring Lanval, telling him, "We shall guide you there safely (16)." Muldumarec's subjects, on the other hand, are not so conciliatory towards the human in their midst; he tells his lover that "...if my people found you here, /They would torture

you...(80-81)” In *Lanval* the lovers are drawn toward the fantastic, but in *Yonec* they are driven towards the real world.

Marie’s different treatment of the fantastic in each poem leads to contrasting reactions in the readers. *Lanval* leaves the reader yearning for a chance to escape into the otherworld, as Lanval did. Marie’s presentation of the marvelous and the alien elicits awe and longing from the readers, and plays upon the natural human desire for an escape from the real world, an escape like Lanval’s – complete and final. Her approach to the same subject in *Yonec* is so different that the poem leaves the reader thinking of earthly things rather than otherworldly. This second poem inspires the reader towards heroism and battle-glory, and the righting of earthly wrongs, rather than the desire to simply leave it all behind. In *Lanval* Marie uses the fantastic to draw us out of this world, at least in spirit; in *Yonec* she uses it to strengthen our love of our own realm. (895 words)