emphasizes her cruelty and his misery: “Teus cent maus me fetes suffrir!
/ Mieuze me vaudreit la mort tenir! / Pur c’ert li lais de mei nomez: / Le
Chaitivel iert apez. / Ki /Quatre Dols le numer / Sun propre nun li
changera” (223–28) [You put me through a hundred agonies of this sort.
I’d be better off dead! For this reason the lay will be named for me and
entitled The Wretched One. Whoever calls it Four Woes would be
altering its appropriate title].

Unlike the instances of specular counsel discussed above, this one
proposes no specific strategy. It is a matter of ethics, not logistics, and of
changing the addressee’s attitude, so she will begin to perceive his plight
– and the two of them as a couple.62 Moreover, the disconsolate suitor’s
argument on behalf of his own title specularizes – apparently for the
first time – the lady’s egocentrism, offering her access, at last, to an
independent observer’s perception of her vain insensitivity.63 Her
assent to his persuasive argumentation suggests a change in her self-
perception, one whose benefits also accrue to the textual production of
Chaitivel itself, as Marie retells it in a manner conducive to its
instructive reception.64 Despite contrasts with the other instances of
counsel, this example also offers an effective rhetorical appeal to its
addressee, with particularly fine passages of deliberative or persuasive
discourse in direct style. As do all of Marie’s lais, it also makes the
specular encounter a crucial accessory to the commemoration of a
reciprocal relationship within a couple by means of a signifier featured
near the poem’s end, in this instance the poem’s title: given their mutual
assent thereto, this title – “Le Chaitivel” – is akin to the perennials in
Deus Amans, the scalding basin in Equitan, and the chivalric vestments
in Bisclavret; all four are emblematic of a closing reciprocity condi-
tioned by specular counsel.

MEDIATORY JUDGMENT: LANVAL

Among Marie’s Lais only in Lanval is the specular encounter invested
with the mediatory function of judgment, in a climax that at last sets
the eponymous knight before a true reflection of himself. Prior to this
denouement, Lanval is repeatedly confronted with inaccurate or contra-
dictory self-images, in a story that frequently interrelates issues of
judgment and identity. As in Guigemar, the protagonist’s status is
initially positive with but one exception, Lanval’s failure to receive merited material rewards: he is an outsider at court, and Arthur overlooks him when lavishing his largesse on his vassals. This flaw in the vital feudal reciprocity is all the more inappropriate given Lanval’s meritorious service and superlative qualities that earn him the envy – even the enmity – of many of his peers (21–26). Significantly, though largesse figures among Lanval’s major virtues, this material privation prevents him from exercising it properly, until the problem is rectified with the help of a compensatory judgment from the otherworld.

As in the case of Guigemar, Lanval’s earliest specular encounter partakes of the marvelous and occurs in a rurally liminal setting. Two damsels summon him to their fairy mistress, a creature whose attributes – “tant est pruz e sage e bele” (72) [she is so meritorious, wise and beautiful] – make her virtually the feminine double of the mortal she has chosen to honor. Again as in Guigemar, the hero’s initial encounter introduces the theme of reciprocity, though here the informant and the ideal feminine other are one: “De luinz vus sui venue quere! / Se vus estes pruz e curteis, / Empereere ne quens ne reis / N’ot unkes tant joie ne bien, / Kar jo vus aim sur tute rien” (112–16) [I’ve come from afar seeking you. If you are worthy and courteous, no emperor, count or king ever experienced such joy or contentment, for I love you more than anything else]. His affective reciprocation is spontaneous, absolute, and redolent of the zeal of the newly converted: “Ne savrı¨ ez rien comander / Que jeo ne face a mun poeir, / Turt a folie u a saveir. / Jeo ferai voz comandemenz; / Pur vus guerpirai tutes genz” (124–28) [There is nothing you could request that I would not do if I could, whether in folly or in wisdom. I shall carry out your orders; for you I shall forsake all others]. This eager response foreshadows his ultimately permanent disappearance into the fairy’s realm.

In addition to amatory reciprocity, this precursor of Mélusine offers him unlimited material prosperity. Above all, she is able to compensate abundantly for his single deficiency in the world of feudal transactions. Thus, upon returning from his sojourn with the fée, “Lanval donout les riches duns, / Lanval aquitout les prisuns, / Lanval vesteit les jugleürs, / Lanval feseit les granz honurs! / N’i ot estrange ne privé / A ki Lanval n’eüist done” (209–14). [Lanval gave lavish gifts; Lanval freed prisoners; Lanval arrayed minstrels; Lanval bestowed major fiefs! There
was neither stranger nor intimate friend to whom he would not have given something.] The anaphora highlighting Lanval’s euphoric generosity to intimates and foreigners alike pointedly contrasts his largesse with Arthur’s earlier neglect of this “foreign” hero.67

Lanval’s new prosperity, however, is soon mitigated by a second negatively specular judgment emanating, once again, from within the court. Like Méluśine, the fairy’s gifts are contingent upon total secrecy.68 Lanval violates this interdiction when the queen, whose attentions he has spurned, falsely accuses him of homosexuality.69 Lanval is now caught between the contradictory self-images tendered by the fairy and the vindictive queen, the one covertly exalting his profile as a worthy beneficiary of a supernatural agency, the other a grotesque caricature. The resulting dilemma pits disclosure of the fairy’s correct but secret specularization of his own ethos and loss of her ideally reciprocated love, against allowing the queen’s mendacious calumny to prevail at the expense of the court’s esteem. Impulsively, Lanval opts for the former course, championing alone the true, though gravely imperiled, reflection of himself.

The intrigue thus moves through successive judgments – the king’s, the fairy’s, then the queen’s – each reversing its predecessor while necessitating a further judgment. The crisis stems from Lanval’s assertion that his mistress surpasses the queen in beauty, which activates the process leading to a decisive judgment, enacted before the court. A collective body will presumably determine the truth and prescribe the appropriate – positive or negative – sanctions.70 But the trial is suddenly interrupted by the fairy’s arrival:

Reis, j’ai amé un tuen vassal;
Veez le ci: cee est Lanval!
Acheisunez fu en ta curt.
Ne vuil mie qu’a mal li turt
De cee qu’il dist, cee saches tu,
Que la reine ad tort eu:
Unkes nul jur ne la requist.
De la vantance ke il fist,
Si par mei peot estre aquitez,
Par voz baruns seit delivrez!
(615–24)

Fictions of identity in medieval France