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Thomas Chestre

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Romance of Sir Launfal

By Thomas Chestre

Commentary by sfsu.edu

Be doughty Artours dawes,
That held Engelond yn good lawes,
 Ther fell a wondyr cas;
Of a ley that was y-sette
That hyght *Launval* (and hatte yette);
 Now herkeneth how hyt was. (1-6)

In the days of brave King Artour, who ruled England in law and order, there was a wondrous event about which a lay was written; it was called *Launfal* (and still is). Listen to it now.

Artour¹ lived happily in Kardevyle with his knights of the Round Table. There were never any better: Sir Perceval, Sir Gawain, Sir Gaheris, Sir Agravaine, Lancelot of the Lake, Sir Kay, Sir Ywain, King Ban, King Bors, and Sir Galafre, all of high prowess and reputation, and Sir Launfal, of whom this tale is told. Launfal had been in Artour's court for many years. He was very generous and gave gold, silver and rich clothes to squires and knights. Because of his largesse,² he was the king's steward for ten years; of all the knights of the Round Table, there was none so generous.

In the tenth year when Merlin was Artour's counselor, he advised the king to go to Ireland to fetch King Ryon's gracious daughter, Gwennere, which he did and brought her home. Sir Launfal and the other knights disliked her because she had a bad reputation for having lovers other than her lord, so many there was no end. Artour and Gwennere were married on Whitsunday, and their wedding was attended by princes, prelates and magnates from far and wide. At the bridal feast, all received good, rich service regardless of their rank. After the meal, all were served wine and had good cheer. Gwennere gave gifts of gold, silver and precious stones to display her courtesy; she gave brooches and rings to every knight except Sir Launfal, and he was greatly offended.

After the wedding celebration, Launfal told Artour that he had received a letter saying that his father had died and that he must go home for the burial. The gracious king said, "If you will go from me, take great spending money and my two nephews, Sir Hugh and Sir John; they will accompany you home." Launfal journeyed to Karlyoun, where he went to the house of the mayor, who had once been his servant. The mayor welcomed Launfal, the two knights and their company and asked about the king. Launfal replied, "He is well; it would be a great pity otherwise. But, Sir Mayor, in truth, I am no longer with the king, which I greatly regret. No man, high or low, for King Artour's love, will honor me again. But I ask you, out of our past friendship, if I may reside with you."

The mayor stood, considered his answer and said, "Sir, seven knights from Brittany are lodging here, and I am awaiting their arrival." The knight laughed scornfully and told his companions, "Now you see how it is to be in the service of an unimportant lord!" As Launfal was leaving, the mayor called him back and offered him a room in the orchard, which the knight accepted.

Launfal bestowed his wealth so extravagantly that he was in great debt within the first year. At Pentecost, when the Holy Ghost alights among men, Sir Hugh and Sir John requested leave from Launfal: "Sir, our clothes are in tatters and we are badly dressed, and your money is all spent." Sir Launfal told the noble knights, "Tell no man about my poverty, for the love of God Almighty," and they promised not to betray him for all the world. They joined their uncle's court at Glastonbury, and the king went to greet them, as they were his kin; they wore the same clothes they had with them when they left, now threadbare. The wicked Queen Gwennere asked after Launfal, and the knights told her of his renown and honor. They said, "He loved us so that he would have kept us always. But one rainy day he went hunting in the woods, and we wore our old robes that day, so that when we left we were in the same clothing." The good report of Launfal pleased the king but pained the queen, who wished him ill.

On Trinity Sunday, a solemn feast was held in Karlyoun, which was attended by all the earls and barons of that country and ladies and burgesses of that city except Launfal, who was not invited because of his poverty. The mayor's daughter asked him to dine with her, but he declined: "No! I have no heart for dining. I haven't eaten in three days because of my poverty. I would have gone to church today, but I lack the proper clothing to be among people. It is no wonder that I am in pain. But I ask one thing of you, damsel, that you lend me a saddle and bridle a while so that I can go riding and find comfort in a nearby park this morning." He harnessed his charger without knave or squire, and as he rode dejectedly, his horse slipped and fell into the mud and he was scorned by many all around him.

Wretched, Launfal remounted and left to escape being humiliated. He headed west into a forest and dismounted due to the heat, folded his cloak, and sat down to rest in the shade of a tree. As the impoverished knight sat there sadly, he saw coming out of the woods two refined maidens dressed in elegant, rich clothing of silk and velvet, trimmed in gold and fur. Each wore a jeweled coronet and had white faces with rosy complexions; their eyes were brown, such as I've never seen before. One carried a gold basin and the other a fine, white silk towel, and Launfal began to sigh. They came to him across the heath, and he met and greeted them courteously. They told him, "Sir knight, may you be well. Our lady, Dame Tryamour, wishes to speak with you without delay, if you are willing."

Launfal agreed courteously and went with them meekly (they were as white as flour!). When they came into the forest he saw a pavilion, which stood with mirth and much honor. It was the work of Saracens, and was opulent beyond compare. On the top was a burnished golden eagle, decorated with rich enamel and eyes of bright carbuncles that shone like the moon at night. Even Alexander the Great or King Artour had no such jewel. Inside, on a rich bed covered with purple linen, lay Tryamour, the daughter of the King of Olyroun; her father was the powerful King of Faërie. Due to the heat, she was uncovered and had unfastened her clothes nearly to her waist, and Launfal felt that she was the loveliest woman he had ever seen. She was as white as a lily in May or as snow in winter; the new red rose could not compare with her complexion, and her hair shone like gold. She was lovely beyond description.

Tryamour told Launfal, "My sweet love, I have lost all my joy on account of you. Sweetheart, there is no man in the Christian world who I love as much as you, neither king nor

emperor.” Launfal fell in love with her immediately; he kissed her, sat beside her, and offered her his service.

“Noble and gracious sir knight,” said the lady, “I know of your condition from beginning to end; do not be ashamed in front of me. If you will take me truly and forsake all women, I will make you rich. I will give you a purse made of silk and gold, decorated with three fair images; as often as you put your hand in, you will win a mark of gold, wherever you are. Also, Sir Launfal, I give you my loyal steed Blaunchard and my own knave, Gyfré, and a banner bearing my arms with three painted ermines. I shall protect you so well that you will suffer no knight’s blow in war or tournament.”

After Launfal gave her his thanks, she sat up and washed her hands while the table was being set for a meal of fine food and drink. After supper, Launfal and Tryamour spent the night together in lovemaking. In the morning she had him arise and said, ”Sir gentle knight, if you want to speak with me anytime, go to a secret place and I will come to you quietly, but no man alive shall see me.” Launfal was joyful but could share his happiness with no one. He kissed her many times, and she gave him one warning: “Make no boast of me for any reward; if you do, you will lose all my love.”

Launfal took his leave and Gyfré brought the knight his steed. He leapt into the saddle and rode home to Karlyoun in his poor clothes. Now his heart was eased, and he waited in his room all morning. Then ten well-arrayed men dressed in indigo rode through the city on packhorses, bringing gold, silver, rich clothes and bright armor to present to Sir Launfal with pride. Gyfré rode behind upon Blaunchard and was met by a boy in the marketplace who asked where the goods were being taken. Gyfré told him, “They are sent to Sir Launfal as a gift, who has lived in great sorrow.” The boy said, “He is but a wretch. Who cares about him?” and directed Gyfré to the mayor’s house. They delivered the goods, and when the mayor saw Launfal’s treasure and nobility, he considered himself foully disgraced and invited the knight to dinner, saying that he had meant to invite him to the feast the day before but had found him gone.

“Sir Mayor, may God reward you. While I was poor you never invited me to dine. Now my friends have sent me more gold and goods than all of yours,” and the mayor left in shame. Launfal dressed himself elegantly in purple cloth trimmed with white ermine and directed Gyfré to repay all his debts.³ He held feasts for poor folk who were in distress, gave rich clothing to knights and squires, contributed to religious orders, freed prisoners, dressed minstrels, and shared his wealth far and near.⁴

A tournament was called by all the lords of Karlyoun to honor Sir Launfal and to see how his handsome steed would perform. On the day of the jousts, trumpeters blew and the lords of that castle rode out quickly in a row. Then the tournament began, knights fighting each other with mace and sword; some steeds were won, some were lost, and there were many enraged knights. Truly, there had never been a better tournament since the Round Table began; many lords of Karlyoun were unhorsed that day.

The constable engaged Launfal in battle; there were many grim strokes on each side, but Launfal knocked his opponent out of his saddle to the ground. Gyfré leapt on the dismounted knight’s

horse and rode away! Seeing this, the Earl of Chestre was nearly mad and attacked Launfal, striking him so hard on the helm that the crest flew off (so says the French tale). Launfal knocked the earl off his horse and forced him to the ground. Then a great host of Welsh knights surrounded Launfal (I don't know how many); shields were split and spears shattered, but blows delivered by Launfal and Blaunhard unhorsed many of them. So Launfal won the prize of the tournament and held a rich feast at the mayor's house for many lords, which lasted a fortnight. And Lady Tryamour came to his room every day, often at night, but she was seen only by Launfal and Gyfré.

Sir Valentyne of Lombardy heard of Sir Launfal's prowess and was greatly envious; he was wondrously strong and fifteen feet tall! He felt he would burn with jealousy if the two could not meet in battle, so he sent for his messenger and told him to go to Britain and invite the knight to a joust:

"Tell Sir Launfal that he should come and joust with me for the love of his lady if she is courteous, gracious and a gentlewoman, and to keep his armor from rusting. Otherwise his manhood will be disgraced." The messenger crossed the sea with favorable winds and delivered Sir Valentyne's invitation:

"Sir, my lord Sir Valentyne, a noble and clever warrior, has sent me to invite you to joust with him for your lady's sake." Launfal laughed quietly and said he would be there in a fortnight, and gave a horse and ring and striped robe to the messenger. He took leave of Tryamour, kissing her many times. The sweet lady told him, "Have no fear, sir gentle knight; you shall slay him that day."

Launfal traveled by ship to Lombardy, with only Blaunhard and Gyfré out of all his company. When he arrived in the city of Atalye, where the jousts were to take place, he was met by Sir Valentyne and a great army. All who saw Sir Launfal dressed in bright arms with helm, spear and shield for battle agreed that they had never seen such a fine knight.

On their first charge, both Sir Launfal and Sir Valentyne shattered their lances, and in their next encounter, Launfal lost his helmet (as the tale is told). Sir Valentyne laughed happily, and Launfal had never been so shamed in any fight before. Then Gyfré proved his worth! Invisible, he jumped on Blaunhard and replaced his lord's helmet, and Launfal thanked him many times for his mighty deed. Then Sir Valentyne knocked Launfal so hard that he dropped his shield, but Gyfré caught it before it hit the ground and returned it to Launfal. On their third pass, Launfal smote Sir Valentyne so that both he and his horse died, groaning with grisly wounds.

Sir Valentyne's army swore vengeance and threatened to hang and draw Launfal, but he drew out his sword and quickly laid them out as gently as dew settles on the ground. When he had slain them all, Launfal returned to Britain with solace and pleasure.

News of Launfal's noble deeds reached Artour's court. The king was holding a feast on St John's Day for earls, barons and greater and lesser lords, and he sent Launfal a message asking him to act as steward of the hall due to his knowledge of largesse. Launfal left Tryamour and went to manage Artour's feast; he found much mirth and honor at court with lovely ladies and a

great company of knights. The rich, royal feast lasted forty days, after which the lords went home.

After supper, Sir Gawain, Sir Gaheris, Sir Agravain and Sir Launfal went to dance on the green under the tower where Gwennere and sixty or more maidens lay. Loved for his largesse, Launfal was chosen to lead the dance. The queen leaned out of the window and said, "I see generous Launfal dancing and will go to him. Of all the knights there, he is the fairest; he has never had a wife. Whether good or ill befalls me, I will go and know his will, for I love him as my life!" She went quietly onto the lawn with sixty-five of her fairest maidens to enjoy themselves with the knights. She went to the head of the line, between Launfal and Gawain, followed by her maidens. They were a delight to watch as knights and ladies in turn danced to the music of honored minstrels: fiddlers, citole players, and trumpeters. They spent the summer's day away in play until it was nearly nightfall.

When the dance began to slow, the queen took Launfal aside and said, "Sir knight, I have loved you with all my might more than these seven years, and I shall die if you do not love me," but Launfal answered, "I will never be a traitor, by God!" She said, "You coward! It is a pity you were ever born! You are worthy to be hanged, high and hard. You love no woman, and no woman loves you. You deserve to be destroyed!"

Launfal was greatly shamed and could not hold his tongue in response to the queen's accusation. He told her, "For seven years and more I have loved a woman more beautiful than you have ever seen. Her lowliest maiden might be a better queen than you!" Gwennere was so angry that she and her ladies went as quickly as possible to her tower, where she lay down and made herself sick with rage, swearing such vengeance on Launfal that everyone in the land would be talking about him within five days.

Artour came home happy from hunting and went to his chamber. Gwennere immediately cried to him, "I spoke playfully with Launfal, and he shamed me by asking me to be his lover, and he boasted of his lady, whose ugliest maid might be a queen above me!" Furious, Artour swore an oath to slay Launfal and ordered knights to bring him to be hanged and drawn.

Launfal had gone to his room to seek solace from Tryamour, but she was gone, as she had warned him. The unhappy knight looked in his purse, once ever-full, and it was empty. Gyfré had ridden away on Blaunchar, Launfal's white armor turned black, and all he had won melted like snow in the sun. He said, "Alas, sweet Tryamour, how shall I live without you? I have lost all my joy and you, which is the worst for me, beautiful lady." He beat his body and head and cursed his mouth in great distress. In sorrow, he fell to the ground in a swoon.

At that moment, four knights came and bound him and took him to Artour. Then his woe was doubled! "Vile traitor," said Artour, "why did you boast that your lover's ugliest maiden is fairer than my wife, which is a foul lie, and before that, you asked her to be your lover."

"The queen is lying," Launfal replied angrily. "I have never, since I was born, sought her for any folly. But she said I am not a man and don't love women. I answered her and said that my

love's worst maiden is more worthy to be queen. I'm telling the truth and am ready to do all the court wants."

Twelve knights were sworn on the book.⁵ They deliberated, and because of the queen's reputation for adultery they laid the blame on her and were prepared to free Launfal. They all agreed: "If he might bring his lover about whom he boasted, or the maidens more beautiful than the queen, Launfal would be proven truthful in every way. If he does not bring his love, he should be hanged like a thief." Launfal pledged his head on the terms, and Gwennere swore that "If he brings someone fairer, put out my grey eyes!"⁶ These conditions agreed upon, Sir Perceval and Sir Gawain stood as guarantors for Launfal until the time limit set for him to produce his love, which was twelve months and a fortnight. But Sir Launfal was inconsolable in his grief and would gladly have given up his life, and all who heard this were sad.

The assigned time was coming near and Launfal was brought by his guarantors before Artour. The king recounted the charges and told him to bring his lady to court, but Sir Launfal said he could not. Artour therefore ordered the barons to condemn him to death, but the Earl of Cornwall refused: "We will not do so! Condemning the gentleman who has been so gracious and generous would bring shame on us all. Therefore, my advice is to recommend banishment."

As they discussed this, they saw ten beautiful maidens come riding, and they thought that the lowliest of them could be their queen! The courteous knight Gawain said, "Do not fear! Here comes your gracious lady." Launfal answered, "Gawain, dear friend, my lover is not among them."

The maidens rode to the castle and told Artour to quickly prepare a room for their lady, who was of a king's kin. "Who is your lady?" asked Artour. "You will know," answered one of the maidens, "for she is riding here."

The king ordered his finest room prepared and again instructed his barons to judge the prideful traitor Launfal. Having seen the lovely young women, they said they would decide soon. But then they began to disagree; some condemned Launfal in order to please the king, while others wanted to acquit him. They debated fiercely, and just as they were about to pass judgment another ten maidens arrived, more beautiful than the first ten. They rode on jolly Spanish mules with French saddles and bridles and shining harnesses. They were beautifully dressed, and each man greatly desired to see their clothing. Gawain thought Launfal's salvation had arrived, but Launfal sadly told him, "Alas, I don't know them or from whence they come."

The maidens entered the palace and dismounted before the dais. They greeted the king and queen, and one spoke to Artour: "Prepare your hall and hang the walls with rich cloths and hangings for my Lady Tryamour's arrival." He immediately welcomed them and asked Lancelot to take them to join their companions, with mirth and honor. Suspecting guile by which Launfal would soon be cleared through his lady who was coming, Gwennere said to Artour the king:

“Sir, if you are courteous and if you value your honor, you should avenge that traitor who is causing me grief. Launfal should not be spared; our barons are scorning you because they love him.”

Just then a woman came riding on a white horse; she was incomparably beautiful and too extraordinary to be of this world. She was as bright as a briar blossom, with grey eyes and a lovely, radiant face. Her complexion was rosy, and her hair shone like gold. She had a lovely body, with a slender waist. She wore a jeweled gold crown and was dressed in purple with a mantle lined with rich white ermine. Her saddle was opulent, with saddle cloths of decorated green velvet and fringed with rich gold bells, and the rest of her brilliant, bejeweled equipage was worth the best earldom in Lombardy. She carried a falcon and rode slowly through the town so that all could see her, followed by two white greyhounds with gold collars. When Launfal saw her, he cried, “Here comes my love! She can save me, if she will.”

Tryamour came into the hall with her maidens, dismounted, and dropped her mantle on the floor so that she could be better seen. She and King Artour greeted each other sweetly. The queen and her ladies stood to see her; by comparison, they were as dark as the moon against the sun in the daylight. Tryamour told the king, “Sir, I have come here to clear Launfal the knight. He never sought the queen’s adulterous love. He didn’t ask her, but she asked him to be her lover! And he answered her that his lover’s lowliest maiden was more beautiful than she.”

King Artour said, “Every man can see that it is true that you are more beautiful.” With that, Dame Tryamour turned to Gwennere and blew on her such a breath that she never saw again. The lady then leapt on her horse and bade the courtiers “Good day!” Gyfré brought Blanchard out of the forest and stood beside Launfal, who mounted and rode away with his lover and her maidens. With solace and pride, Tryamour went the way she had come, and returned to the isle of Olyroun. Every year, on a certain day, one can hear Sir Launfal’s steed neigh and see him. Anyone who asks for a joust to keep his armor from rusting need go no farther.

So it was that Launfal, noble knight of the Round Table, was taken into Faërie, to be seen no more in this land. And I can tell you no more of him.

Thomas Chestre made this tale of the noble and chivalrous knight Sir Launfal. Jesus that is heaven’s king, give us all His blessing, and that of His mother Mary. Amen.

Commentary

In *Sir Launfal* we see many moral themes: oathkeeping and rash oaths, loyalty, human valuation, forgiveness, generosity, poverty, and the use of wealth and power. It seems to meet the popular expectation of romance, with its fairy lover, courtly pleasures and questing knights. Yet many readers may be shocked by the negative characterization of Artour and Gwennere. In fact, a number of romances are critical of Arthur’s kingship and court, often pointing towards the contemporary monarchy, and *Sir Launfal* is one of the harshest and bleakest.

The center of the plot seems to be Launfal's broken promise to Tryamour, which is interpreted by most critics to be a vow of secrecy about their relationship. The text, however, uses the word "boast" both in Tryamour's warning and Artour's accusation. Prohibition of boasting was part of the code of *avantance*, in which the male was to protect his lover's reputation by not revealing her identity. Launfal's "crime" has greater implications than the violation of courtly convention; rather, he breaks *trouthe*, the trust in one's word upon which all relationships rested.

But the kernel of Chestre's poem lies not with Launfal, but with Gwennere. From the beginning of the poem when she shames Launfal and indirectly causes his poverty, it is clear she does not fulfill the responsibilities expected of royalty to preserve the integrity of the court. Gwennere's infidelity, favoritism, and perversion of justice represent realistic threats to political and social stability. Marital infidelity in the monarchy endangered rightful succession through the birth of illegitimate heirs. Favoritism was particularly dangerous, as seen during the early fourteenth century, when *Sir Landevale*, one of Chestre's sources, was written, and later in the century when *Sir Launfal* was likely composed. In both periods, the preferential treatment and reward of certain peers by royalty caused resentment and factions amongst the magnates and undermined the court's stability, which was frequently inherently fragile.

The judicial system was a major concern of social critics as well as the populace, for it extended throughout the culture, from court to local level. Chestre devotes a large portion of his poem to condemning the judicial system, particularly Artour's failure as chief justiciar to act impartially and to preside over the court rationally. Corruption is also represented by the judges who are willing to ignore justice in order to please the king.

Administration of justice is a perennial problem and as McKisack notes, "fourteenth-century England, for all its multiplicity of courts, statutes, and justices was not a law-abiding country" and that the keepers of order were faced with uncontrollable obstacles (203). Unfortunately, much of the failure came from within the judicial system itself.

The structure was headed by the king, council and parliament, then the great central courts, down to local courts.⁷ Justice encompassed legislative, administrative, and statutory control of the country, as well as individual pleas and trials. There is no question that corruption and inequities occurred at every level, including bribery, coercion, false testimony, jury tampering and other methods. In the pathetically humorous poem "London Lickpenny," a poor Kentish husbandman goes to the courts at Westminster to plead his case; he tries the King's Bench, the Court of Common Pleas and Chancery but, as he laments in the poem's refrain, finds "for lacke of money I may not spede" ("without money I cannot succeed") with judges and clerks.

In his treatment of the importance of the law in the "Matter of England" romances, Rouse points out the ideal of the king governing and being governed by the law of the realm in order to keep peace, and that it was used as "a model both to criticize and to advise contemporary rulers" ("Identity" 72). Literary depictions of the king's judicial failure, as in *Sir Launfal*, comment on the entire system. Written in the late fourteenth century, the poem also recalls specific criticism of Richard II. Though McKisack reports that he, like Edward III, attempted to curb corruption through statutes (207), Richard II, like Edward II, was determined to be all powerful, which eventually led to his deposition. His perversion of parliamentary procedures and disregard for

the people are voiced (not without some bias) in “The Charges Against Richard II,” including lawmaking and justice:

He said expressly, with harsh and insolent looks, that his laws were in his own mouth, and sometimes, within his breast; and that he alone could change or establish the laws of his realm. Deceived by which opinion, he would not allow justice to be done to many of his lieges, but compelled numbers of persons to desist from suing common right by threats and fear.

Sir Launfal is indirectly derived in part from Marie de France’s *Lanval* through its early fourteenth-century adaptation, *Sir Landevale*, one of Chestre’s main sources. Some scholars believe that her knowledge of court procedure was based on an actual trial, and Chestre followed her fairly closely. Because Gwennere inserts her rash oath into the terms of Launfal’s pledge, she is bound by it. Blinding and other harsh corporal punishment was seldom practiced in the fourteenth century though it lingered as a literary motif, perhaps to highlight the severity of the crimes. The fact that the execution of Gwennere’s sentence is performed by a supernatural agent, presumably because no one in the court would do so despite the legal demands of justice, reflects the lack of hope for redemption of the culture. Launfal’s choice not to reintegrate into his society, which is unusual for romance heroes, reflects not only his preference to live in an ideal rather than corrupt world, but the struggle, then as now, of individuals to satisfy their personal desires while fulfilling societal expectations, which he found impossible.

This translation is based on *Sir Launfal* in *Middle English Romances*. Ed. Stephen H.A. Shepherd. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1995. The poem is dated to the end of the fourteenth century.

Notes

¹ The spelling of characters’ names in Middle English literature differs between poems and even within works (as does spelling of words, since English was not yet standardized). Arthur and Guenevere have been normalized by scholars for consistency in reference. In all translations in this volume, variants of Arthur and Guenevere have been unchanged to preserve individuality in characterization, while names of knights and some locations have been normalized for recognition by the modern reader.

² *Largesse*, the giving of gifts to peers and vassals, was an important element of medieval economy among the nobility, as it forged loyalty and service, as well as providing material support.

³ “All that Launfal hadde borwyd before, / Gyfré, be tayle and be score, / Yald hyt well and fyne” (418-20). The debts were repaid by collecting the tally sticks that recorded the transaction. See *King Edward and the Shepherd* for more detail on the tally-stick system.

⁴ The original text reads:

Launfal helde ryche festes;
Fyfty fedde povere gestes
That yn myschef wer;

Fyfty boughte stronge stedes;
Fyfty yaf ryche wedes
 To knyghtes and squyere;
Fyfty rewardede relygyons;
Fyfty delyverede povere prysouns,
 And made ham quyt and schere;
Fyfty clothede gestours. (421-430)

The repetition of the first word in each line (anaphora) is used for emphasis. While “fifty” might be used to impress generosity, even within the sometimes convoluted syntax of Middle English poetry it makes little grammatical sense. Scholars point out the theory that “fifty” comes from an error in which “L,” an abbreviation for “Launfal,” is misread as a Roman numeral. If “fifty” is replaced with “Launfal,” the poem reads properly. Scribal error may be blamed, since the hero’s name is used in the corresponding passage of Chetre’s Middle English source, as well as in the Old French version.

⁵ That is, made jurors. The word “Bible” is not used in English literature until the fourteenth century, and then infrequently; it is more often referred to as the “book.”

⁶ Grey eyes were a sign of moral purity, and the description here is ironic.

⁷ This discussion omits manorial and ecclesiastical courts, which are not pertinent. A full discussion of the complexities of the medieval English legal system is impossible here, with its intricacies and interactions between common law (based on oral precedent), king’s law (based on written record and statute), criminal and civil law, and the jurisdictional powers of ecclesiastical, royal, local and manorial courts.