

The lion, the christ,
and the portrayal:
how chrétien de
troyes reflects and
crit...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

During the Middle Ages, the connection between animals—or “beasts,” as they were so often referred to—and humans were often blurred, confused, and complicated overall. This state of uncertainty creates much difficulty with finding the true meaning and significance in the ways that these beasts are portrayed within literary texts. The uncertainty that inevitably coincides with this type of relationship, however, also allows space for authors to project their own purposes, views, and political agenda into their works. Oftentimes within these medieval texts the beasts, or other relationships between the beasts and humanity, are explored in order to characterize a particular concept, emotion, or even the potential relationship between the human and the divine. More specifically, lions are commonly used within the Bible to symbolize Jesus Christ himself, and that same animal is used within medieval literature to perform that same function. Though this allegorical involvement of animals could be used to express the story of the gospel, some authors may use this as a means to define and express their own views or experiences with Christianity itself. Chrétien de Troyes uses his own characterization of the lion, and its relationship and interactions with the knight Yvain, to personify the gospel message at work in *The Knight with the Lion*, defining the personal meaning behind this message along with challenging the expectations of medieval Christians.

The lion is an animal, according to David Badke's *Medieval Bestiary*, is “the king of beasts.” That description alone is reminiscent of the title that Jesus Christ was given on the cross: “The King of the Jews” (New King James Version, John 19: 19). The symbolic reference that a lion is Jesus Christ through that independent description however, just barely scratches the

surface of how lions were used to depict a Christian figure. Joyce E. Salisbury, in her book *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages*, writes that, “ lions sleep with their eyes open, showing that when Christ is buried, his Godhead remained awake...[The] bestiary writes that when a lioness gives birth to cubs they are born dead and remain so for three days until their father brings them to life by breathing on them, just as the Father brought Christ to life on the third day” (86). With this being common knowledge to a standard audience of the Middle Ages, the biblical significance and relationship of the inclusion of a lion within a written work would not be easily dismissed by that audience (Harris 1148): they would understand the lion’s biblical symbolism with little to no difficulty. Both descriptions of the lions within medieval literature make it apparent that lions were seen as powerful, loving, life-giving, mystical creatures that will forever go undefeated. This, too, closely reflects how Jesus was portrayed in the Bible, as perceived by medieval Christians. Chrétien de Troyes’ lion, however, does not display these qualities on the surface—and, in many ways, defies this aura or expectation of invincible, limitless power that other authors tend to assign to lions in their works.

When Chrétien introduces the lion as a character, it seems to display characteristics that are not usually attached to Christ-like figures. Chrétien writes, [Yvain] headed immediately towards the place where he had heard the cry, and when he arrived at a clearing, he saw a dragon holding a lion by the tail and burning its flanks with its flaming breath...He asked himself which of the two he would help. Then he determined that he would take the lion’s part, since a venomous and wicked creature deserves only harm: the

dragon was venomous and fire leapt from its mouth because it was so full of wickedness. Therefore my lord Yvain determined that he would slay it first. (Chrétien 337) Here, this contrast between the lion and the dragon is significant. To show a lion— “ associated with gods, lords, and heroes, represented as an emblem of defense and justice...[and] Christ” (Burns 68)—fatally dangling from the mouth of a dragon—associated with the “ anti-Christ” and the “ bloodthirsty” (Burns 68)—does not display any semblance of the all-powerful savior of humanity. Instead, Chrétien uses imagery that forces the audience to view the lion as helpless and desperately in need of a savior for itself—nonetheless, from a dragon. Since the dragon is associated with the Devil (as the lion is associated with Christ), their entire interaction seems to be a contradiction of the gospel message. The symbolic Messiah is helplessly dangling from the jaws of the symbolic Devil! This initially characterizes the lion as weak and incapable of fighting evil or wickedness—and these characteristics would project onto the idealization of who Jesus Christ was, and the potential reality of his level of power. Instead of Christ appearing as a noble warrior that cannot be defeated, this situation with the lion makes Christ look as if he was a helpless and useless creature that was incapable of performing the duties expected of him. Instead of dying and then defeating death, it appears as though Christ’s death was just a normal death—one that had no true significance, or any internalized power waiting to be awakened.

Upon further interpretive investigation, however, the imagery of this helpless creature most likely references the story of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion.

According to the gospel of Mark, when Christ was crucified, he cried out

<https://assignbuster.com/the-lion-the-christ-and-the-portrayal-how-chretien-de-troyes-reflects-and-criticizes-medieval-christianity/>

loudly, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” or, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27: 46). This situation almost directly reflects Yvain’s initial view of the lion: the lion cried out, and refused to fight back against the dragon in this moment even as it was literally hanging out of the dragon’s mouth. Jesus Christ, too, cried out, and did not fight against any authority forcing him to hang on the cross until death had overtaken him. Chrétien’s intent behind introducing the lion in such a helpless situation was not to make the lion appear weak or inadequate (and certainly not to force those qualities onto their perception of Christ), but rather to initially remind them of the brutality of Christ’s crucifixion, and the powerful redemption that resulted from his death conquering of death, and eventual resurrection.

This situation, as well, puts Yvain in a place to make a fate-determining decision: he must choose between good and evil. While Yvain does not assign any noble or messianic qualities to his perception of the lion in this particular moment, he does recognize and acknowledge the inherent evil and wickedness of the dragon. The dragon, too, was labeled the “king of the serpents,” contrasting the lion’s status as “king of the beasts.” In that moment, Yvain sides with the lion, ultimately choosing goodness over evil. With this, Yvain has chosen to align himself with the lion, who, despite these initial circumstances, becomes his greatest and most powerful ally.

The choice that Yvain makes in that moment serves him well, and he gains a companion that never ceases to fail him. Once their alliance has formed, however, the lion displays characteristics that are not only uncommon for a Christ-like figure, but are uncommon for a lion, as well. Once [Yvain] rescued the lion, he still thought it would attack him and he would have to do battle
<https://assignbuster.com/the-lion-the-christ-and-the-portrayal-how-chretien-de-troyes-reflects-and-criticizes-medieval-christianity/>

with it; but the lion would never have done that. Listen to how nobly and splendidly the lion acted: it stood up on its hind paws, bowed its head, joined its forepaws and extended them towards Yvain, in an act of total submission. Then it knelt down and its whole face was bathed in tears of humility...[The] lion stayed by his side and never left him. (Chrétien 337) The lion here is submissive; it expresses gratitude and humility, thanking Yvain for choosing him over the dragon. These rather uncommon characteristics assigned to a lion, however, intentionally draw attention to the lion's emotional and communitive intelligence. As Harris writes, "[The] lion acts more like a dog than like the king of the beasts; but Chrétien always paints after nature: since he has never seen a man with a lion, he describes a man with a dog which has the strength, courage, and nobility of a lion" (Harris 1148). Chrétien uses these qualities intentionally: he creates a relatable, imaginable character out of an animal through making it humble and constantly displaying a heart of service, though Chrétien still makes sure that the animal keeps its most important qualities—strength, courage, and nobility, as Harris stated—even if, in this moment, they are not the most prominent qualities about the lion.

With this description of the lion, Chrétien continues to characterize the lion with qualities that were important Christ-like qualities from a biblical point of view that coincides with his own cultural point of view. Specifically speaking, the lion is showing loyalty to his new master—or to his "lord." After this initial interaction, the lion never willingly leaves Yvain alone again, just as a knight would live by his oath of fealty to his lord (Schlager 141). The lion's life, now, is dedicated to serving Yvain, and that devotion cannot—and shall

not—be shaken. With the lord-vassal relationship being a well-known and well-understood cultural norm in Chrétien's time, it is no wonder that a Christ figure would have to take on those qualities as well. These qualities, however, do also line up with the characterization of Jesus Christ in the Bible, as one who came not to be served, but to serve, according to the gospel of Matthew 20: 28. On the surface, this appears to put Yvain in a godlike position, threatening to characterize him with a god-complex. This interaction between the lion and Yvain, in one sense, shows that a Jesus-figure is worshipping a knight—that the Jesus-figure has replaced his view of God with Yvain, creating an understandable idol. This, however, is not the case. The lion is actually displaying love, affection, and an offer to Yvain for companionship. According to Dickens, love, affection, and friendship were viewed as the “ basis for human return to God (through community)” in the Middle Ages (Dickens iii-v). This physical act of submission depicts an intimate relationship between the lion and the knight—between the Christ and the man—that can only grow to benefit the man in the future: through salvation. The lion, therefore, is actually offering a mode to salvation in this moment to Yvain. This alliance that forms between the unlikely pair, does, in the end, result in Yvain's life being prolonged, as he is later saved by the lion in a dire situation.

Further into the story, when it came time for Yvain to fight with the demons, the way that the lion comes in to rescue him is when the lion truly takes on godlike characteristic. After the lion is separated from Yvain and the demons, the fight commences, and the lion holds nothing back when the time comes to return the favor—when the time comes for the lion to save Yvain. So my

lord Yvain had every reason to fear for his life; but he was left to hold his own until the lion clawed beneath the threshold enough to work itself completely free. If now the fiends are not defeated then they will never be, because the lion will allow them no respite as long as it knows them to be alive. It pounces upon one and throws him to the ground like a log. Now the fiends fear for their lives, and there is not a man there whose heart does not rejoice. The demon who was dashed to the earth by the lion will ever rise again if he is not rescued by the other. His companion ran over to bring him aid and to save himself, so the lion would not charge him once it had killed the demon it had already thrown to the ground. Indeed, he was much more afraid of the lion than of its master. (Chrétien 365) The lion here withholds nothing as he saves Yvain from what looks like a fatal situation. The demons themselves fear the lion and understand its capabilities and true threat to their own existence (Chrétien 364). Yvain here is fighting a battle, however, with the supernatural—the supernatural cannot be easily destroyed with a sword, but they could effortlessly destroy Yvain's armor (Chrétien 364). This is when the lion truly comes into action: it breaks free from the locked room that it was previously forced into (due to the apparent advantage the lion gave Yvain as a companion), intervenes in the battle between Yvain and the demons—who were “too skilled in swordplay, and their shields could not be dented by any sword, no matter how sharp or well-tempered” (Chrétien 365)—and, in the end, completely saves Yvain's life. The lion destroys the demons, in such a way that victory for them was not even a possibility in this fight. This is the depiction of a hero and savior that represents the Christian Messiah that the audience was waiting for—that the medieval audience would have been expecting this whole time. The lion was strong, fearless, <https://assignbuster.com/the-lion-the-christ-and-the-portrayal-how-chretien-de-troyes-reflects-and-criticizes-medieval-christianity/>

and unstoppable—and always arriving just in time. In addition to the undeniable power of the lion in these moments, the demons were genuinely afraid of the lion. The lion was displaying supernatural powers that were overwhelmingly more powerful than those of the demons. This was divine intervention, as Julian Harris states: “ When it becomes clear that Yvain can not possibly win without outside aid...can the lion be regarded as anything else than a symbol of God?” (1159-1160).

This, too, reflects the common story repeated throughout all gospels when Jesus casts out demons: they immediately know and understand his power without it ever needing to be proved to them, and they fear it as a result. These demons did not even need a demonstration of strength or power from the lion before determining that the use of this lion would make for unfair battle circumstances, between the demons and Yvain. Even though the demons tried to conceal the power that the lion held within, it could not, in the end, be contained: it broke free from the locked room, and that pure power won the battle in the end. Effortlessly. In this moment, the lion is exemplifying the power and strength of the Christian God.

The relationship between animal and man, as explored through Chrétien de Troyes' *The Knight with the Lion* offers a unique way for the man whose name proclaims his religious identity to share the gospel message with anyone who will listen to his stories as he tells them. Initially he portrays the lion as weak and helpless, and slowly but surely he builds up to show the total strength and resilience that the lion has inside of him, until the situation arises where his intervention must be interpreted as nothing less than divine intervention itself. With showing the lion initially dangling in the dragon's

<https://assignbuster.com/the-lion-the-christ-and-the-portrayal-how-chretien-de-troyes-reflects-and-criticizes-medieval-christianity/>

mouth, Chrétien shatters his audiences' expectations of a powerful, warrior-like animal to symbolize Jesus Christ; instead, his depiction shows the humility and heart for service that Christ displayed throughout his life and death. From there, however, Chrétien builds up and eventually reveals the lion's supernatural power in order to display the power of the Christian God. Through all of this, Chrétien de Troyes challenges his audiences' expectations and theological views, but then affirms the message of the gospel as he knows it, and he does not fail to express his religious passion.

Works Cited

Badke, David. "Medieval Bestiary." Medieval Bestiary, bestiary. ca/.

Accessed 18 Apr. 2017.

Burns, E. Jane., and Peggy McCracken. From beasts to souls: gender and embodiment in medieval Europe. Notre Dame (Ind.), University of Notre Dame Press, 2013: 68. Print.

Dickens, Andrea J. Unus Spiritus Cum Deo: Six Medieval Cistercian Christologies. University of Virginia, Ann Arbor, 2005: iii-v. Web. Harris, Julian. "The Role of the Lion in Chrétien de Troyes' Yvain." Pmla, vol. 64, no. 5, 1949: 148, 1159-60. Web.

Nelson. Holy Bible. New King James Version. 1982. Print.

Salisbury, Joyce E. The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages. Routledge, 2010: 86. Print.

Schlager, Neil., et al. "Knights and the Traditions of Chivalry." *The Crusades Reference Library*. vol. 1: Almanac, UXL, 2005: 141. Web.