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Abstract

Analyzes two symbols in the poem that have received little previous critical attention. Gives a psychological interpretation of these symbols.

Additional Keywords

Chrétien de Troyes; Chrétien de Troyes—Characters—Yvain; Chrétien de Troyes. Yvain—Symbolism

The Psychological Symbolism of the Magic Fountain and the Giant Herdsman in Yvain

M.L. Carter

Although the focal adventure in Chretien de Troyes' *Le Chevalier au Lion* (Yvain)[1] begins with a magic fountain, to which the knights-errant are directed by a giant herdsman of frightful aspect, the rain-making fountain has received less critical attention than might be expected. The giant herdsman has received almost none, except in studies of Celtic sources, particularly an article by Claude Luttrell that compares Chretien's herdsman to other grotesque beast-masters in folklore[2]. Why has this anomalous figure been so neglected? Do readers of Yvain consider the giant herdsman genuinely unimportant, or do they find him an embarrassment because he cannot be made to fit into their interpretations of the romance? Is it accidental that the giant is associated with the magic fountain? I suggest that this association throws light upon the fountain's symbolic function. Before Yvain can approach the fountain, he must first encounter a living embodiment of the kind of adventure he will suffer there. Both the beast-imagery surrounding the giant herdsman and the storm roused by tampering with the magic spring symbolize (at least on one level) psychological phenomena within the hearts of Yvain and Laudine—untamed passions that threaten the artificial structure of courtly society as well as the deeper commitment to the welfare of his fellow-men that Yvain finally achieves. That the magic spring is found by traveling through the forest of Broceliande in Charles Williams' Arthurian poetry. The forest, a place of "quiet and timeless fecundity," is "what you find when you step out of our ordinary mode of consciousness...the unlimited, the formless origin of forms"[3]. Williams' vision of Broceliande as a preconscious realm, the realm of the instinctual "raw material" of the emotional and spiritual life, may have been inspired by, among other things, Chretien's giving both the fountain and the herdsman an instinctual, emotional significance.

The most elaborate treatment of the fountain is Maxwell S. Luria's. His identification of the fountain adventure as "a symbolic baptism followed by a beatific vision of salvation"[4] suffers from one prominent weakness: The medieval authors who interpret the fountain in just this way, notably Alexander of Neckham and Huon de Mery, do not precede but follow Chretien and in fact derive the incident from him. These two authors moralize Chretien's fountain tale in much the same way that medieval authorities moralized Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. A secondary objection to Luria's reading involves Laudine. Yvain's reconciliation with Laudine, says Luria, "signalizes and caps" Yvain's "recovery of spiritual status." (Luria, p.581) Her "devotion" (Ibid., p.567) is portrayed as a sort of reward and crown of Yvain's growth to full Christian stature. But Laudine, the cold, capricious courtly mistress who re-admits Yvain to her love only when forced by a trick and displays, at the romance's conclusion, resentment rather than devotion, is not very convincing as a reward for Christian virtue. Moreover, Luria takes very little notice of the giant herdsman. Despite many attractive features in this critic's theological reading, it seems that an alternative interpretation of the herdsman and the fountain could save more of the appearances, as C.S. Lewis would say.

A more recent study of the fountain, which does once allude to the herdsman as an analogue to the control that Yvain needs to learn, is "The Fountain and Its Function in Yvain," by Margaret Burrell. Burrell focuses on Yvain's attainment of maturity and responsibility through confronting the forces unleashed by the fountain. In her reading, however, these forces represent the destructive power of nature (though she does mention "the power of love,"[5] suggesting that "nature" includes some aspects of human nature). My reading differs from Burrell's mainly in that I see the storm and its allied phenomena as representing psychological rather than natural forces.

Psychological symbolism is not unknown in criticism of Yvain. The Lion, particularly, is often identified as an external embodiment of some personality trait in Yvain. L.T. Topsfield suggests that the Lion exemplifies by contrast Yvain's moral weakness, for it "represents the virtue which Yvain lacks and which he must possess in order to be regenerate"—that is, "moral courage" [6]. Edward C. Schweitzer also treats the Lion as a part of Yvain's psyche, "a symbol of ira as a power of the soul and as ambivalent emotion" [7]. The ambivalence of ira consists of its potential for either good or evil, depending on whether the man tames it or is dominated by it. Yvain's growth to emotional and spiritual maturity requires him to tame and use his own unruly passions, which in themselves are only "raw material." Allegorizing the emotions as animals is, of course, common in ancient and medieval thought. The Ancrene Wisse's characterization of the human heart as a wild beast belongs to a venerable tradition. We are reminded of the classical concept of the vegetable, animal, and rational souls, the animal soul being the seat of the appetites and passions. Greek philosophers frequently compare the control of the passions to the bridling of a horse. Schweitzer quotes a line from Plato's *Republic* (which, though Chretien could not have known it, is strikingly apropos) about how the virtuous man, in managing his own soul, must "watch over the many-headed beast like a good husbandman." (Ibid., p.72)

Could the giant herdsman watching over his bulls represent the dangerous, almost indomitable passions of the human heart? This grotesque creature, "black as a mulberry" (183), is very like a beast himself. He is compared to many different animals; "his head was bigger than that of a horse" and his ears "big and mossy, just like those of an elephant" (183); his other features suggest an owl, cat, wolf, and boar. Calogrenant, though he later boasts of his bravery, is frightened of this lout and the wild bulls, "for there is no beast so fierce and dangerous as a bull" (183). Reading the bulls as untamed emotion is almost irresistible. Calogrenant is ready to face any hazard associated with the ritualized adventures a knight is supposed to undertake, but he does not know how to deal with a part of human nature outside the courtly code.

I see the herdsman as the animal soul exercising control over the unruly emotions (the bulls). The herdsman, in contrast to the knight, is inarticulate; at first he does not speak, "any more than a beast

would have done" (184). The animal or emotional part of man is unself-conscious. When asked to identify himself, he simply says, "I am a man...such as thou seest me to be" (184). He knows nothing of the courtly concept of "adventure" but is occupied with the basic demands of survival. Calogrenant, in contrast, identifies himself by his social status as a knight. Speaking from his artificial, sophisticated background, he doubts that "the command of any man" could control the fierce bulls (184); the courtier sees unregulated emotion solely as a threat. The possible good to be gained from accepting and harnessing the passions is invisible to him.

The encounter at the fountain also suggests the power of emotion. It is noteworthy that the fountain is associated with beasts, for one effect of the storm is that all sorts of animals rush out of the forest. The water that boils even though cold may represent passion working upon a "cold" heart-- in fact, the heart of Laudine. Topsfield calls the fountain "a part of Laudine's being, the static and continuing symbol of her power and her way of life." (Topsfield, p.172) I suggest that the storm she is so anxious to prevent represents a tempest in her own heart, which she wants to keep inviolate, undisturbed by emotion. Passion is ambivalent. Though threatening, it also holds great potential for good, if controlled. Laudine wishes to deny its existence, whereas Yvain learns to work through it and master it.

The storm is particularly dangerous to knights, who never escape the thunder and lightning "without trouble and mischance" (185). Again unbridled passion is being shown as inimical to the courtly way of life. The knight of the fountain (compared, significantly, to an eagle and a lion) strongly objects to being disturbed by the tempest, against which "no man could have been secure, even if he had been in a fortress" (187); passion is irresistible. The joyful birdsong after the storm prefigures, perhaps, the bliss that will be Yvain's (or any man's) when he finally learns to control and use his animal, emotional self. Despite the terrors of Calogrenant's tale, Yvain has a strong desire to see the giant herdsman and make the storm "rain and blow" (189). Is Yvain, perhaps, dissatisfied with the superficial courtly life, unconsciously seeking knowledge of his own elemental self? Though he, too, is afraid of the giant herdsman, he goes on to invoke the storm and thereby discovers the power of love. When he promises to defend Laudine's spring, he is really vowing to defend Laudine herself. Her anxiety over finding a protector suggests that here the spring represents her feminine vulnerability. (Water is, of course, an archetypal symbol of the female-- and we recall that in classical and medieval Christian philosophy the female principle symbolizes the emotional, irrational part of human nature.)

After Yvain fails Laudine and succumbs to madness, motifs of animals and tempests continue to be used in tracing his emotional development. His madness is described as "a storm...in his brain" (216). This storm turns him into a mindless creature, a "natural," who lives like a beast, eating raw meat. It is interesting that the damsels who heal him find it difficult to recognize him without his clothes, as if his "storm" of wild passion has stripped him of his human identity. Soon after being healed he rescues the Lion, whose psychological significance has already been mentioned. The Lion's submission demonstrates how Yvain is learning to control his animal self. When Yvain returns to the spring, however, he "almost [loses] his wits a second time" (225), for the fountain is associated with

the passions so difficult to tame. (The giant herdsman, curiously, is no longer mentioned, as if, having performed his symbolic function earlier in the romance, he is not needed now. Perhaps Yvain, having come so far in the control of the "many-headed beast," no longer needs the object-lesson of the bulls.) The fountain, however, is also the place where Yvain finds Lunete and pledges himself to defend her against an unjust accusation. Now the fountain becomes associated with compassion and self-sacrifice, with Yvain's use of his capacity for violence in a righteous cause. Yvain, of course, conjures up the storm one more time. No longer afraid of the tempest of passion, he can control it for his own purpose, to waken the cold heart of Laudine. Laudine's artificial fortifications of courtly custom are indeed shaken, for "the walls totter, and the tower rocks" (265). Yet her pride would rather "endure the winds and the tempests" (268)-- suffer from a frustrated passion-- than take Yvain back, if she had a choice.

To many readers this conclusion seems unsatisfactory, since Yvain has grown so far that Laudine is an inadequate reward for him. We feel that after undergoing so many ordeals to gain awareness of his lower self and bring it under control, Yvain should not simply return to the old, superficial courtly life. Yvain, like Erec and Enide, deals with the conflict between love and social obligation, but also with tension between the artificial courtly society and a more "natural," integrated way of life and love. Topsfield describes the courtly world in Yvain, the world of illusion, as "courageous, yet self-absorbed, parochial, frivolous, quarrelsome, impotent to meet the demands of extra feeling." (Ibid., p.176.) The reality opposed to Arthur's court is a world "based on knowledge of self, the duty to detect and remedy one's human weaknesses." (Ibid.) It is precisely through the dangers of "extra feeling" that Yvain discovers and conquers his own weaknesses and becomes "a man who is whole and integrated in every aspect of his life." (Topsfield, p.205) Why his new self-knowledge seems to effect no significant change in the society to which he returns is puzzling. Perhaps in Yvain Chretien depicts courtly society as beyond help (as, for instance, Calogrenant and the other knights have no inkling of the real significance of the herdsman and the fountain), so that the only satisfactory alternative is the personal, spiritual solution presented in his Conte du Graal.

Notes

1. Chretien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, trans. W.W. Comfort (London: J.M. Dent, 1975). Page numbers are cited parenthetically in the text.
2. Claude Luttrell, "From Traditional Tale to Arthurian Romance: 'Le Chevalier au Lion'," Nottingham Medieval Studies, 22 (1978), 46-7.
3. C.S. Lewis, "Williams and the Authurriad," in *Arthurian Torso*, by Charles Williams and C.S. Lewis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 284-5.
4. Maxwell S. Luria, "The Storm-making Spring and the Meaning of Chretien's Yvain," Studies in Philology, 64 (1967), 581.
5. Margaret Burrell, "The Fountain and Its Function in Yvain," Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association, 52 (1979), 289.
6. L.T. Topsfield, *Chretien de Troyes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 189.
7. Edward C. Schweitzer, "Pattern and Theme in Chretien's Yvain," Traditio, 30 (1974), 145.