



Uses of the supernatural in the Middle Welsh *Chwedyl Iarllles y Ffynnawn*  
Usos de lo sobrenatural en el relato galés medieval *Chwedyl Iarllles y Ffynnawn*  
Usos do sobrenatural no conto em galês médio *Chwedyl Iarllles y Ffynnawn*

Isabelle VALADE<sup>1</sup>  
Luciana CORDO RUSSO<sup>2</sup>  
Lee RAYE<sup>3</sup>

**Abstract:** This paper examines supernatural episodes in the story of the *Knight of the Lion*. The story has closely related versions in French (*Yvain, ou le Chevalier au Lion*) and in Welsh (*Owein: Chwedyl Iarllles y Ffynnawn*), which allow for analysis and comparison. Even without assuming which author wrote first, we can still study how each text was adapted differently for audiences in Wales and France. This essay finds eleven episodes across both texts (eight in *Yvain* and nine in *Owein*). We categorise the supernatural in these episodes as *mirabilia*, *magicus* or *miraculosus*, after Le Goff, Kieckhefer and Sweeney. Our final analysis shows that *miraculosus* dominates in the French version, presumably due to a Christianising urge of Chrétien de Troyes which emphasises the agency of God in the text. This is not the case in the Welsh version where *mirabilis* episodes dominate, and the supernatural elements are kept separate from the religious aspects of the text. This analysis suggests that Welsh audiences were more comfortable with secular episodes of the supernatural than French audiences.

**Keywords:** *Owein* – Chrétien de Troyes – Arthurian – Supernatural – Medieval Welsh.

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<sup>1</sup> Postgraduate Researcher in WELSH at Cardiff University (United Kingdom). *E-mail:* [ValadeCI@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:ValadeCI@cardiff.ac.uk)

<sup>2</sup> Becaria postdoctoral at IMHICIHU, CONICET, and Jefe de Trabajos Prácticos at the *Escuela de Humanidades*, Universidad Nacional de San Martín (Argentina). *E-mail:* [lucordorusso@yahoo.com.ar](mailto:lucordorusso@yahoo.com.ar)

<sup>3</sup> Postdoctoral Researcher with the Antiquaries of London and Tutor at the Academy for Distance Learning (United Kingdom). *E-mail:* [RayeL@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:RayeL@cardiff.ac.uk)



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**Resumen:** Este trabajo analiza los episodios sobrenaturales en la historia del *Caballero del León*, cuyas versiones en francés (*Yvain, ou le Chevalier au Lion*) y en galés (*Owein: Chwedyl Iarllles y Ffynnawn*) son muy cercanas y permiten, así, su comparación. Incluso sin asumir una postura respecto de qué autor compuso primero, es posible estudiar el modo en el que cada texto fue adaptado de forma diferente para sus respectivos públicos. Se han encontrado once episodios a lo largo de ambos textos (ocho en *Yvain* y nueve en *Owein*) cuyo elemento o aspecto sobrenatural ha sido categorizado como *mirabilia*, *magicus* o *miraculosus* en función de los trabajos de Le Goff, Kieckhefer y Sweeney. Nuestro estudio muestra que lo *miraculosus* domina en la versión francesa, probablemente debido al matiz cristiano que le impone Chrétien de Troyes y que enfatiza la agencia divina en el relato. En cambio, en la versión galesa predominan los episodios *mirabilis*, y los elementos sobrenaturales se mantienen separados de los aspectos religiosos del texto. Este análisis sugiere que el público galés estaría más cómodo que el francés con episodios sobrenaturales de carácter secular.

**Palabras-clave:** *Owein* – Chrétien de Troyes – Literatura artúrica – Sobrenatural – Galés medieval.

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## Introduction

‘Dioer’, heb y Kynon, ‘hyn gwr wyt a gwell ymdidanwr no mi, a mwy a weleist o *betheu odidawc*; tal di y ymdidan y Gei!’  
‘Dechreu di’, heb yr Owein, o’r hynn *odidockaf* a wpych.’ (26-29)

[‘God knows,’ said Cynon, ‘You’re a better storyteller than me, and you have seen more of *stranger things*. You tell the story to Cai’  
‘Begin,’ said Owein, ‘with the *strangest* you know.’] (116)<sup>4</sup>

*Chwedyl Iarllles y Ffynnawn*, also known as *Owein*, is an anonymous Arthurian tale written in Middle Welsh. It is attested in three closely related medieval manuscripts from the second half of the fourteenth century but was probably written in a south-east Welsh context a century or more before<sup>5</sup>. The *chwedyl* tells the story of Owein, a

<sup>4</sup> All quotations are taken from THOMSON, Robert Leith. *Owein*. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1968, and references are to line numbers. Translations are from DAVIES, Sioned Mair. *The Mabinogion*. Oxford: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, with indication to page number.

<sup>5</sup> Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch, NLW Peniarth 4 (c. 1350); Llyfr Coch Hergest, Bodleian Library Jesus College 111 (c. 1382); Bodleian Library Jesus College 20 (c. 1375 – c. 1425, fragmentary). See



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knight of Arthur's court. It begins by describing how he achieves the adventure of the rain-making fountain as a young man, and then goes on to relate how he is dishonoured and rebuilds his reputation with the help of his lion.

The tale's setting is chivalric and it can be compared to the two other Welsh Arthurian romances (*Geraint* and *Peredur*). This is a setting which is conducive to the appearance of supernatural events, characters and marvels<sup>6</sup>: The characters within the text react to these elements by expressing astonishment, surprise, and wonder –but never fear. The supernatural within *Owein* therefore provides an interesting model by which we can study medieval Welsh attitudes towards the supernatural.

This paper explores different aspects of the supernatural in *Owein* by analysing a series of episodes (see table 1) and comparing them, when possible, with how they are represented in the Old French *Yvain, ou Le chevalier au lion* (hereafter *Yvain*). This latter text is one of Chrétien de Troyes' *romans*, written around 1177-81 CE. It is useful for our purposes because it tells the same story, with most of the same episodes in the same order, but was intended for a different audience, therefore providing valuable insight about concepts of the supernatural expressed in these texts<sup>7</sup>.

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HUWS, Daniel. *Medieval Welsh Manuscripts*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000, pp. 47, 228. For the date and place of composition, we follow RODWAY, Simon. "The Where, Who, When and Why of Medieval Welsh Prose Texts: Some Methodological Considerations." *Studia Celtica*, 41 (2007): 47–89, but cf. FOSTER, Idris. "Geraint, Owain and Peredur." In *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*. Roger LOOMIS, ed. 1st edn. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, pp. 192–205; THOMSON. *Owein*, pp. ix–x; BREEZE, Andrew. "Peredur Son of Efracg and Windmills". *Studia Celtica*, 24 (2003): 58-64; ROBERTS, Helen. "Court and Cyuoeth: Chrétien de Troyes' *Erec et Enide* and the Middle Welsh Gereint." In *Arthurian Literature XXI*. CERIDWEN LLOYD-MORGAN, ed. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004, pp. 53 -72. The tale was copied into seven other manuscripts in the early modern period with some alterations. See DAVIES, Sioned Mair. "O Gaer Llion i Benybenglog: Testun Llanstephan 58 o "Iarlles y Ffynnon"." In *Cyfoeth y testun: ysgrifau ar lenyddiaeth Gymraeg yr Oesoedd Canol*. Iestyn, DANIEL, and others, eds. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003, pp. 326–34.

<sup>6</sup> The separation of supernatural and natural events in the magical naturalism of the Arthurian world is arguably an anachronistic one rather than one justified within the source material. However, as we shall see, there was a concept of the difference between the natural and supernatural worlds.

<sup>7</sup> FRAPPIER, Jean. *Chrétien de Troyes: L'homme et L'œuvre*. Paris: Hatier Boivin, 1957, pp. 3–6. On dating, cf. Luttrell, who proposes later dates for all the *romans*: See LUTTRELL, Claude. *The Creation of the First Arthurian Romance: A Quest*. London: E. Arnold, 1974, p. 32. The edition and translation of Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain* used is that of UITTI, Karl, ed. Chrétien de Troyes,



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Before we can compare these texts, the problem of their probable relationship needs to be addressed. The relationship between the texts has defied easy interpretation, and has inspired a century-old origin debate popularly but inaccurately called the *Mabinogionfrage*<sup>8</sup>. It is beyond the scope of this work to give a thorough literary review or to substantially contribute to the *Mabinogionfrage*, but the following is a summary of the two most commonly accepted answers to the question:

1. *Yvain* could be based on *Owein*: *Owein* is significantly more different to *Yvain* than any other European retelling of the story<sup>9</sup>, and its folktale characteristics bear witness to its antiquity; therefore, it may pre-date Chrétien's *roman*<sup>10</sup>. The names of the characters in both texts are British<sup>11</sup>, and certain elements of the story appear to draw on what authors call 'Celtic' storytelling conventions and motifs, such as otherworldly figures and magical objects<sup>12</sup>.
2. *Owein* could be based on *Yvain*: Both texts are written rather than oral, and Chrétien's work precedes the earliest manuscript versions of the Welsh text by almost two hundred years<sup>13</sup>. The value of courtesy and the social customs of the court, the tournaments, the vague chronotope, errant knights, and lexical borrowings are, as far as the evidence indicates, introductions based on French influence. Thus there is a growing scholarly consensus that the work of Chrétien was probably, at the least, a source for the Welsh romances (even if it was not the only source)<sup>14</sup>: this is particularly clear when comparing another Welsh tale,

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*Yvain ou Le chevalier au lion*. Trans. Philippe WALTER. In *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Daniel POIRION. Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1994.

<sup>8</sup> ZENKER, Rudolf. *Zur Mabinogionfrage, Eine Antikritik*. Halle: Niemayer, 1912. For summaries of the discussion see BROMWICH, Rachel, "First Transmission to England and France." In *The Arthur of the Welsh: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval Welsh Literature*. Rachel BROMWICH, Alfred Owen Hughes JARMAN, and Brynley F ROBERTS, eds. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991, pp. 271–98; KOCH, John T. "The Celtic Lands." In *Medieval Arthurian Literature: A Guide to Recent Research*, Norris LACY, ed. London and New York: Routledge, 1996, pp. 239–322; LLOYD-MORGAN, Ceridwen. "Migrating Narratives: *Peredur*, *Owain*, and *Geraint*." In *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*. Helen FULTON, ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 2009, pp. 128–41.

<sup>9</sup> There are extant medieval versions of *Yvain* in six languages: Old French, Middle Welsh, Old High German (x2), Old Swedish, West Norse and Middle English. See THOMSON, *Owein*, pp. xxii–xxiii.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xxiv–li.

<sup>11</sup> BROMWICH, "First Transmission to England and France".

<sup>12</sup> LOOMIS, Roger Sherman. *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1927; HUNT, Tony. "The Art of *Iarllles y Ffynnon* and the European "Volksmärchen"." *Studia Celtica*, 8 (1973): 107–20.

<sup>13</sup> ROBERTS, Brynley F. "Oral Tradition and Welsh Literature: A Description and Survey." *Oral Tradition*, 3 (1988): 61–87.

<sup>14</sup> In support of this view we can cite, for instance, THOMSON, Robert Leith. "*Owain: Chwedl Iarllles y Ffynnon*." In *The Arthur of the Welsh: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval Welsh Literature*, pp.



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*Gereint*, which at times follows Chrétien's *Erec* line-for-line<sup>15</sup>, suggesting that *Yvain* could likewise have been the main source for *Owein*.

To an extent, scholarly consensus seems to have shifted from an *Owein*-first theory to an *Yvain*-first theory. This theory implies that the Welsh compiler was the main innovator in the textual relationship, which will inform our readings of the two texts. However, regardless of what sources were available to Chrétien when he was writing *Yvain*, he too made authorial decisions about how the supernatural episodes of the story were configured and therefore we can assume that both stories were tailored for their audiences.

Before we begin, it is worth listing and categorising the various supernatural elements that appear in *Owein* and *Yvain*. Table 1 draws on a twelfth-thirteenth century taxonomy of three types of supernatural (but still rational) happenings which is based on the work of Le Goff, Sweeney and Kieckhefer<sup>16</sup>: Things which are *mirabilis* reflect “natural magic” or mysterious wonders; those which are *magicus* are supernatural events usually resulting from the agency of humans, often feared to be empowered

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159–69; BROMWICH, “First Transmission to England and France”; LLOYD-MORGAN, Ceridwen. “French Texts, Welsh Translators.” In *The Medieval Translator* II. Roger ELLIS, ed. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1991, pp. 45–63 and “Migrating Narratives: *Peredur*, *Owain*, and *Geraint*”; POPPE, Erich. “*Ystoria Bown* and the Problem of Relative Distance: Some Methodological Considerations and Speculations.” In *Arthurian Literature XXI*, Ceridwen LLOYD-MORGAN, ed. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004, pp. 73–94; FULTON, Helen. “Literature of the Welsh Gentry: Uses of the Vernacular in Medieval Wales.” In *Vernacularity in England and Wales, c.1300-1550*. Elizabeth SALTER and Helen WICKER, eds. Turnhout: Brepols, 2011, pp. 199–223.

<sup>15</sup> LLOYD-MORGAN. “Migrating Narratives: *Peredur*, *Owain*, and *Geraint*”. In the case of *Peredur*, the tale probably had more than one French text as its source (see: LUTTRELL, Claude. “*Le Conte Del Graal* et d’autres Sources Françaises de l’*Historia Peredur*”. *Neophilologus*, 87.1 (2003): 11–28; LLOYD-MORGAN, Ceridwen. “Y Cyd-Destun Europeaidd”. In *Canbnyll Marchogyon: Cyd-Destunoli Peredur*. Sioned Mair DAVIES and Peter Wynn THOMAS, eds. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000, pp. 113–27) It should be noted that in his 1997 edition of *Gereint*, Robert Thomson, editor also of *Owein*, seems to favour the dependency of the tale on Chrétien's *roman*. He declares: “The differences revealed by an analysis of the texts of F [*Yvain*] and W [*Iarll*], so far from requiring the assumption of a common source to explain them (...) would be adequately explained by the transformation wrought in the process of adapting the outline of F to the native narrative technique of W” (*Ystoria Gereint Uab Erbin*. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1997, p. lxxiv).

<sup>16</sup> LE GOFF, Jacques. *L’imaginaire Médiéval: Essais*. Paris: Gallimard, 1985, p. 22; KIECKHEFER, Richard. “The Specific Rationality of Medieval Magic”. *The American Historical Review*, 99.3 (1994): 813–36; SWEENEY, Michelle. *Magic in Medieval Romance: From Chrétien de Troyes to Geoffrey Chaucer*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000, pp. 24–30.

by demons<sup>17</sup>; and those which are *miraculosus* are divine miracles worked by the Christian deity. The *miraculosus* is perhaps best viewed in opposition to the second category since, as Kieckhefer points out, this was arguably not a branch of magic at all<sup>18</sup>.

These categories clearly delimitate the supernatural in Welsh literature after the Norman invasion just as they do across the rest of Europe. Gerald of Wales draws on the same ideas in his *Topographia Hibernica* (c.1188; II: 19). He describes three types of magic by which humans can change their form: (i) Humans can be changed into wolves by divine miracle (*miracula divina*) which is good. (ii) Following Augustine (*De Civitate Dei*, XVI: 8) humans can also grow dog-heads which appears monstrous (*monstruosis*) but still morally neutral, since dog-headed monsters are still rational and human. Finally, (iii) some humans can appear to change themselves and others through magic (*magicus artibus*). This is evil use of the dark arts (*malis artibus*), and is only ever by illusion (*illusione*), not a true change. Gerald's last category includes marvels (*mira... mirabiliter*), so the terminology is slightly different, but the categories Gerald uses are exactly comparable, except that, as a churchman he condemned *magicus*<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> In the twelfth century, some scholars trying to classify knowledge included *magia* (e.g. Pedro Alfonso, *Disciplina Clericalis*, c. 1106), and some rejected it as the work of demons (e.g. Gundissalinus, Archdeacon of Toledo, *De Divisione Philosophiae*, c. 1140). PETERS, Edward. *The Magician, the Witch, and the Law*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978, pp. 63–67. Peters considers that *magia* reflects morally neutral occult practices like platonic and medicinal teaching, astrology and alchemy as well as banned communication with demons. These were generally accepted, except in periods of religious fervour and moral crisis. Saunders concurs that 'white magic' in particular and natural magic in general was usually condoned throughout the medieval period, although it was seen as dangerous SAUNDERS, Corinne J. *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*. Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010, pp. 117–118.

<sup>18</sup> KIECKHEFER, "The Specific Rationality of Medieval Magic"; BARTLETT, Robert. *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 18–19.

<sup>19</sup> DIMOCK, James Francis, ed. *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera: Topographica Hibernia et Expugnatio Hibernica*. London: Longman, Greed, Reader & Dyer, 1867, vol. v, pp. 104–6.



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Table 1.

Categorisation of Supernatural Episodes in <i>Yvain</i> and <i>Owein</i>			
	Category in <i>Yvain</i>	in <i>Owein</i>	Category in <i>Owein</i>
Ugly peasant herdsman	None	Black giant with one eye and leg	Mirabilis
Herdsman controls bulls with threat of violence	None	Herdsman controls all wild animals	Mirabilis
Magical boiling fountain controlled by God	Miraculosus	Supernatural fountain	Mirabilis
Lunete's invisibility ring	Magicus	Luned's invisibility ring	Magicus
Laudine gives a ring to Yvain which protects the true lover from harm or imprisonment	Magicus	No ring <sup>20</sup>	None
Yvain goes mad and lives in the forest hunting with a bow and arrow and eating raw meat	None	Owein goes mad, grows hair all over his body and lives with the animals	Mirabilis
Yvain needs to have Morgane's ointment rubbed into his head to cure his madness	Magicus	Owein is rubbed down with ointment all over to remove hair and restore energy	Magicus
Lion fighting a wicked and poisonous dragon	Miraculosus	White/black lion fighting a huge serpent	Mirabilis
Lion given power to save Yvain in answer to prayer	Miraculosus	Supernaturally strong lion breaks through wall to rescue Owein	Mirabilis
Adventure of Harpin of the Mountain	Mirabilis	Adventure of the giant	Mirabilis
300 women from The Island of Maidens, forced to embroider silk for two sons of a human mother a/the devil (.ii. <i>fix de dyable</i> ) or goblin ( <i>netun</i> ) <sup>21</sup>	Magicus	Black Oppressor ( <i>Du Trans</i> ) who holds 24 ladies captive after killing their husbands and stealing their wealth	None

<sup>20</sup> Owein does not receive a second ring, although he is said to have one later on in the story, and there is no mention that it has any supernatural quality.

<sup>21</sup> 'Nuiton'; a creature related to the night ('French 'nuit'), 'Netun'. See GODEFROY, Frédéric. *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française et de tous ses dialectes du IX<sup>ème</sup> au XV<sup>ème</sup> siècle*, 10 vols. Paris: Kraus, 1880-1895. Available at <http://www.micmap.org/dicfro/search/dictionnaire-godefroy/>, pp. 491, 546.

Of the eleven episodes, which are supernatural in nature identified in *Yvain* and *Owein*, eight change between the two texts. Of the eight supernatural episodes in *Yvain*, four (50%) represent *magicus*, three (38%) *miraculosus* and one *mirabilis* (13%). There are nine supernatural episodes in *Owein* of which only two (22%) are *magicus* and seven are *mirabilis* (78%). This means that although both texts contain episodes of *magicus* (human magic), only *Yvain* contains episodes of *miraculosus* (miracles) and *Owein* contains many more episodes of *mirabilis* (natural wonders). This clear tendency towards the marvellous may have been motivated by the Welsh compiler's urge to localise the episodes to bring them in line with Welsh storytelling traditions and the recipient's expectations. The influence of *Yvain* may explain the presence of *magicus* in an otherwise predominantly *mirabilis* world.

## I. In the Forest: Herdsman and Madman

One of the most famous pairs of contrasting episodes in *Owein* and *Yvain* is that of the herdsman. In *Yvain* the character is described by use of a rhetorical inversed portrait that compares each of his features with animals and his overall aspect with the medieval other *par excellence*, a Moor (286-311)<sup>22</sup>. In *Owein* his features become superhuman. There he is a giant (“ny bo llei no deuwr o wyr y byt hwn” [no smaller than two men of this world], 108-9)<sup>23</sup>. He has only one foot and one eye in the middle of the forehead (109-110). He wields an iron stick that cannot be raised by two common men (111). The hospitable host declares also that “nyt gwr anhygar efo: gwr hagyr yw ynteu. A choydwr ar y koet hwnnw yw” [he is not an unpleasant man, but he is ugly. And he is the guardian of the forest] (111-4), drawing attention to the fact that appearances can be deceitful: supernatural creatures can have human traits and play important positive roles<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Cp. with the “leidiligan blámann”, “ugly dark fellow” described, as in *Yvain*, with a portrait that compares each of his features with animals: “He had a large iron club on his hands. His head was larger than that of an ass (...) his eyes were black as coal...” (KALINKE, Marianne E. “Ívens Saga.” *Norse Romances Vol. II*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999, pp. 33–103). Likewise in *Iwein*, where the herdsman is depicted in this manner: “Sîn menschlich gebilde / was anders harte wilde. / Er was einem Móre gelich, / michel und als eislich” [His appearance, albeit human, / was otherwise extremely wild. / He was like a Moor, / huge and so terrifying] (EDWARDS, Cyril. *Iwein: Or the Knight with the Lion*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007, ll. 423-426). The *villein* is “Grans et hideus a desmesure” [tall and excessively ugly] but he insists on his own humanity in the dialogue that he maintains with Calogrenant (326-405): “Ques hom es tu ?” the knight demands, to which he replies, “Tes com tu vois. / Je ne sui autres nule fois” [What [kind of] man are you? –I am as you see me. I am never otherwise]. Here, the man's humanity is questioned not for supernatural reasons but for social and historical ones: By voicing knightly disdain for this character, Calogrenant defends chivalry as the possession of his social group alone; a decision which later creates an irony and embarrassment upon his disgraceful return home.

<sup>23</sup> Note also the rather amusing vocative to Cynon, “dyn bychan” [little man], 130, 138).

<sup>24</sup> The technique employed to present how characters perceive certain supernatural events is very similar to what Poope & Reck call evaluative hyperbolic description. For example: “A hoffach uu gan Owein meint y gwr du no chan Gynon” (259-60) [Owein thought the black-haired man was far bigger than Cynon had said], “Mawr y dywawt y gwr y mi y vot ef: mwy o lawer oed ef no hynny” (123-4) [The man had told me he was big, but he was far bigger than that]. Poope & Reck's



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In *Yvain* the menace of this character stems from his subversion of the chivalric frame; he is an ugly *vilain* who speaks to a knight as an equal<sup>25</sup>. The same is not the case in *Owein*. Despite representing a challenge to their worldview, Cynon, Owein and Arthur treat the wild herdsman with a respectful equality, and there is nothing of the demeaning discourse that pervades *Yvain*. Cynon even greets him using the respectful traditional formula “cyuarch gwell”, (127). Perhaps therefore the herdsman was made supernatural because otherwise he no longer appeared threatening at all.

The features of the “big black man” with one leg and one eye may have been intended to create resonance with other descriptions of monster-people from medieval Celtic literature. For example, we can compare the herdsman’s description to that of Ysbaddaden Pencawr in *Culhwch ac Olwen*. Ysbaddaden is a giant, and he too has strange eyes; in this case, he has eyes so large that the eyelids need to be opened with a fork. He in turn is reminiscent of the Irish giant Balor in *Cath Maige Tuired* who has one huge dangerous eye which can only be lifted by four men with a handle. The closest analogue to our reference in *Owein* is probably to the late medieval Gaelic Fomorians who are often described on one leg and with one eye<sup>26</sup>. The change in physical appearance could therefore have been prompted by analogue with Celtic literary conventions.

Similarly, while both versions of this character have the ability to control animals, the ability is only depicted as supernatural in *Owein*. In *Owein*, the giant rules over *all* wild animals, including serpents, vipers, and lions (134), all of which, at his command, “adoli idaw ef val y gwnaei gwyr gwardawc y eu harglwyd” (137-8) [pay homage to him like obedient men would to their lord]. The herdsman in *Owein* openly displays his *mirabilis* power to Cynon, instead of merely mentioning it as his counterpart in *Yvain* does. However, the comparison used to describe the herdsman’s abilities in *Owein* is a political one (feudal homage) suggesting that the herdsman’s power is not *over* the natural world, it is part of it. *Yvain*’s herdsman, on the other hand, merely controls a herd of bulls, and even then, he is only able to do so by terrorizing them (339-353). While

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examples used a physical perception verb (usually *gwelet*) rather than an intellectual perception verb (*hoff gan*). Perhaps because the narratorial phrase here is intended to emphasise the hardly-believable strangeness of the *mirabilia*. See POPPE, Erich and Regine RECK. “A French Romance in Wales: *Ystorya Bown O Hamtwn*: Processes of Medieval Translations. Part I.” *Zeitschrift Fur Celtische Philologie*, 55.1 (2006): 122–80, p. 157.

<sup>25</sup> Compare: AUERBACH, Erich. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953, p. 136.

<sup>26</sup> HULL, Eleanor. *A Textbook of Irish Literature*, Dublin: M. H. Gill & Son, Ltd., 1906, p. 12; SIMS-WILLIAMS, Patrick. *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 246–7.



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terrorizing bulls is an impressive feat, it is given a natural explanation: the bulls obey him because they are scared. Le Goff calls it a “*maîtrise technique*” or technical mastery<sup>27</sup>; it is more a skill than a magical ability.

Other episodes in *Owein* also emphasise the Welsh compiler’s willingness to configure supernatural events within the “magical realism”<sup>28</sup> of the Arthurian world. This is especially obvious from a comparison of the wildman episodes in *Yvain* and *Owein*. After being rejected by his love, Yvain is inconsolable. He leaves civilisation and goes to live in the forest. He hunts animals with a stolen bow and arrow and eats raw meat. He eventually obtains the help of a hermit in feeding him bread and water. In the Welsh version, Owein is also driven mad, but his madness has a physical manifestation. He grows hair all over his body and is accepted by the animals in the forest as one of them. Both characters later need a magical intervention in the shape of an ointment to rehabilitate them, but this intervention takes different forms for each<sup>29</sup>: When the time comes for the two to be healed, Owein needs ointment rubbed over his body to remove his hair and restore his vigour. Yvain, on the other hand, needs ointment predominantly on his forehead because the only thing wrong with him is his madness (3003). Once again, the two versions of the story may be echoing different literary conventions. Britain had a stronger tradition of the hairy madman than France: Suibne in Ireland, Lailoken in Scotland, and Myrddin (now Merlin) in Wales<sup>30</sup>.

## II. The Otherworld and the Fountain in *Owein*

In Middle Welsh prose tales, the chronotope usually has a “scene-setting function” that grants coherence to the tale by relating sub-episodes through repetitions and formulae. In *Owein*, the space of the adventure is located in “eithauoed byt a diffeithwch” (35) [remote and uninhabited regions of the world], sometimes in “diffeith vynyded” (235)

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<sup>27</sup> LE GOFF, Jacques and Pierre Vidal-Naquet. “Lévi-Strauss en Brocéliande. Esquisse pour une analyse d'un roman courtois.” In *Textes de et Sur Claude Lévi-Strauss*. Raymond BELLOUR and Catherine CLEMENT, eds. Paris: Gallimard, 1975, pp. 265–319.

<sup>28</sup> FULTON, Helen. “Magic and the Supernatural in Early Welsh Arthurian Narrative: “Culhwch Ac Olwen” and “Breuddwyd Rhonabwy”.” In *Arthurian Literature XXX*. Elizabeth ARCHIBALD, ed. Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2013, 1–26.

<sup>29</sup> SWEENEY. *Magic in Medieval Romance*.

<sup>30</sup> JARMAN, Alfred Owen Hughes. “The Later Cynfeirdd.” In *A Guide to Welsh Literature*, vol. 1. Alfred Owen Hughes JARMAN and Gwilym Rees HUGHES, eds. Swansea: Christopher Davies, 1976, pp. 90–122, pp. 102–3. Differences in literary conventions can also help to explain, for example, the absence of hermits as helpers of the hero in the Middle Welsh prose tales of *Owein*, *Gereint* and *Peredur*.



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[desolate mountains] beyond the influence of the court. The road to the well comprises a series of stages: the knight takes a path that leads him to a *hill*, from where he can see a broad *valley*. In the middle of the *valley* there is a *tree* that has the greenest branches and leaves. Under the *tree* there is a *well* and at one of its sides there is a big *slab* that holds a *silver bowl* suspended from silver chains.<sup>31</sup> The terrible storm released by pouring water on the bowl, followed by the singing birds on the tree, constructs a supernatural space of the 'otherworld'.

In *Yvain*, on the other hand, the domain of Laudine is called Barenton, and the different characters reach this supernatural space by crossing the famous forest of Brocéliande in Brittany. Brocéliande was part of the setting of the “*matière de Bretagne*” and several *romans* locate part of the action there. Of course, the forest was in itself a space loaded with several meanings: it was the home of the wild and uncivilised, but it was also the location of the unknown and the unexpected, of the adventure. The forest was a place where social norms and laws did not apply<sup>32</sup>.

In both stories, the main character discovers a spring by travelling through a forest following the directions of the herdsman. In *Owein*, the presence of the fountain “*dan y pren*” (147) [under a tree] with its slab and “*kawc aryant... kadwyn aryant*” (149) [silver bowl [and] silver chain] is a matter-of-fact local marvel, whereas in *Yvain* the fountain is placed in a Christian landscape alongside a chapel (391). In both stories the main character draws some water from the fountain, pours it on a slab and triggers a supernatural storm of rain and hail, followed by birds singing on the tree. After the hail, the Black Knight rides toward the clearing to fight with the main character.

It is remarkable how each narrator deals with the supernatural character of the *ffynnonn* (fountain/well). Chrétien plays down the fountain's supernatural qualities by means of the introduction of a series of elements: Calogrenant's excuse (“*Mes trop en i verssai, ce dot*”, (439) [But I poured too much, I fear]); the knight's recrimination, which “assumes the tone of a formal legal indictment” by using legal terms such as *droiture*, *garanç*, *plaindre*

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. the description of the bowl in the *Third Branch of the Mabinogi*: “But he could see in the middle of the floor, as it were, a well with marble-work around it. At the edge of the well there was a golden bowl fastened to four chains, over a marble slab, and the chains reached up to the sky, and he could see no end to them.” (DAVIES. *The Mabinogion*, p. 40).

<sup>32</sup> MORRIS, Rosemary. “Aspects of Time and Place in the French Arthurian Verse Romances.” *French Studies*, 42.3 (1988): 257-77, p. 269; DUBOST, Francis. “Merveilleux et fantastique dans *Le Chevalier au Lion*.” In *Le Chevalier Au Lion de Chrétien de Troyes: Approches D'un Chef-D'œuvre*. Jean DUFOURNET, ed. 1st edn. Paris: Honoré Champion, 1988, pp. 47-76; LE GOFF and VIDAL-NAQUET. “Lévi-Strauss en Brocéliande, pp. 265-319.

(495-502)<sup>33</sup>; and, most importantly, the implication that God is the one bringing an end to the storm (452). By involving God, Chrétien fully Christianises the supernatural element from a potentially dangerous *magicus* or *mirabilis* act to a safe, Christian *miraculosus* one, which is further emphasised by the presence of a chapel (391-392). Moreover, the space of the supernatural is clearly circumscribed to a determinate location, the forest in Brittany. The rain-making quality is further explained by the stones that embellish the slab: Emeralds are rain-stones according to the medieval lapidaries<sup>34</sup>. On the contrary, in *Owein* these elements represent a natural marvel which does not require clarification, and the chapel is completely absent. The question “who controls the well?” remains a mystery: even the Black Knight complains about the consequences of the storm<sup>35</sup>.

Rationalization of dangerous elements is not a strategy unique to Chrétien, and appears to have been widespread amongst romance authors<sup>36</sup>. The Welsh compiler adopts a similar procedure too at times. For example, the ointment that the widowed countess spends on the hero is, in *Yvain*, a gift from Morgan la sage (2949) but, in *Owein*, it is an ointment “gwerth seith ugein punt” (615-6) [one hundred and forty pounds worth]. Although the ointment remains magical, the reason for its potency becomes economics. Another example of this same attitude is in the episode of the Du Traws at the end of *Owein*. Here the “fix de dyable” of *Yvain* is rationalised into *Owein*’s greedy brigand who takes nobles prisoner for financial gain. In other words, the supernatural aspect of the episode is turned into a moral and social problem. The supernatural otherworld in *Owein* agrees, in this respect, with two tendencies available in Welsh tradition. On the one hand, it embodies what Fulton calls “magic naturalism”, the supernatural marvellous that is “unmotivated, unexplained, has no agent but resides naturally in individuals or in the natural world”, as in *Culhwch ac Olwen* and *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*<sup>37</sup>. On the other hand, the otherworld also functions as scenery where characters find themselves in situations that can be judged according to idealised concepts of “right” and “wrong”. Even though it is a world ruled by unnatural laws, characters act according to entirely human laws: the

<sup>33</sup> MADDUX, Donald. “Tenir Terre: Customs in Le Chevalier au Lion.” In *The Arthurian Romances of Chrétien de Troyes: Once and Future Fictions*. 1st edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 54-81, p. 56.

<sup>34</sup> NITZE, William A. “Yvain and the Myth of the Fountain.” *Speculum*, 30.2 (1955): 170–79.

<sup>35</sup> “Ha warchawc’, heb ef [Black Knight], ‘beth a holut ti y mi? Pa drwc a digoneis I ytti pan wnelut titheu y mi ac y’ m kyfoeth a wnaethost hediw?” (184-186) [‘Knight’, he said, ‘what do you want of me? What harm have I done to you, that you should do what you have done to me and to my kingdom today?’].

<sup>36</sup> SWEENEY. *Magic in Medieval Romance*.

<sup>37</sup> FULTON. “Magic and the Supernatural in Early Welsh Arthurian Narrative”, p. 25.



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well, located in the dominions of a widowed lady, needs to be protected. In this way, the tale can explore issues of fellowship, alliance, family ties; more particularly, the text can investigate the negative results of political irresponsibility (Owein's fault) and the positive results of friendship<sup>38</sup>.

### III. The Lion episodes

In *Owein*, the titular hero is attracted by the “discyr vawr” (661) [great cries of distress] of the lion. He kills the serpent as part of his knightly impulse to give aid to those in trouble. Again, a comparison to *Yvain* can illuminate these sequences of events: here, the titular character comes upon a lion and a dragon, “qui le tenoit par la coe, et si le adroit trestoz les rains de flame ardant” (3345-7) [holding it by the tail and breathing sulphurous fire on it]. He decides to intercede but is not sure which beast to help. He eventually chooses the lion because the dragon “est de felenie plains.” (3357) [is full of wickedness]. Owein is motivated to give aid to the weak, Yvain is motivated to destroy evil. This episode is *miraculosus* in Chrétien but *mirabilis* in *Owein*.

Throughout *Yvain*, the lion continues to be treated as a holy fighter of evil, following the animal's bestiary significance<sup>39</sup>. Significantly, during the battle to save Luned in *Yvain*, the lion at first hangs back from the battle (as ordered), but comes forward after a group of ladies begin praying for divine aid in the battle. We are told unequivocally that “de priere aide li font” (4513) [with their prayers the ladies brought him aid] and in the next sentence, told of how the lion helped him. This strongly suggests that the lion *was* their divine aid, therefore strengthening its holy connotations. In *Owein*, there are no praying ladies, and the lion is said to come only because of Owein's “gofut” (749) [distress] and its loyalty.

There are some hints that the lion in *Owein* is supernaturally strong, unlike the lion in *Yvain*. Each time it is dragged away from a fight it manages to escape from its prison, memorably jumping from the top of a castle at one point (751) and tearing through a stone wall at another (776). In *Yvain*, during this latter battle the lion is commanded to watch from the sidelines (it is more intelligent and therefore does not need to be locked away). It watches for a while, before joining in when Yvain starts to lose. Even then, it does not dominate the battle like Owein's lion does. Its main function is to motivate

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<sup>38</sup> In relation to the *Four Branches*, see: BOLLARD, John. “The Structure of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi.” *Transactions of the Honourable Society of the Cymmrodorion*, 1974–1975 (1975): 250–76.

<sup>39</sup> LEWIS, Robert E. *Symbolism in Hartmann's 'Iwein'*. Göppingen: A. Kümmerle, 1975, pp. 23–26, pp. 78–79.



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Yvain to fight harder by becoming injured (a lion-in-distress). At the end of the battle it is so wounded it cannot stand and needs to be borne away on a stretcher (4646-48).

Previous scholars have sought to explain the figure of the lion in different ways. Brodeur has suggested that we should see the lion episode in the tale as a twelfth-century variant of the Androcles legend of the grateful lion<sup>40</sup>. Brown argued that Owein's lion should be seen as related to the animal guides to the otherworld in Welsh and Irish folklore<sup>41</sup>. Duggan feels the lion should be seen as a rebranded form of Yvain's own nobility<sup>42</sup> since Yvain temporarily identifies himself as the anonymous Knight of the Lion after his disastrous dishonouring under his original name. Harris essentially also holds to the same interpretation, but also notes that the lion symbolised Christ the Redeemer; appropriate, since the second half of *Yvain* is a quest for redemption<sup>43</sup>. Hunt, continuing the tradition, states categorically that "no allegorical meaning is to be attached to the lion" but that we should instead see it as having moral significance as the representation of strength and humility<sup>44</sup>. Chotzen compares the lion to other helpful creatures in Celtic literature like the ravens of Owein and steed of Cú Chulainn<sup>45</sup>.

Either an Androcles-style or a bestiary-influenced lion would suit *Yvain* perfectly. However, these interpretations do not apply so well to the Welsh *Owein*. Thomson, the editor of our Welsh text, was unable to decipher the lion and apologetically explains: "Its function in *Owein* is not altogether clear, except that it subsequently provides him with a formidable ally in his fights with various foes."<sup>46</sup> De Caluwe-Dor is the only scholar to have given any considerable attention to the differences between the different versions<sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> BRODEUR, Arthur Gilchrist. "The Grateful Lion". *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* (1924): 485–524.

<sup>41</sup> BROWN, Arthur C L. "The Knight of the Lion." *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* (1905): 673–706.

<sup>42</sup> DUGGAN, Joseph J. "Yvain's Good Name The Unity of Chrétien de Troyes "Chevalier Au Lion"." *Orbis Litterarum*, 24.2 (1969): 112–29.

<sup>43</sup> HARRIS, Julian. "The Role of the Lion in Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain*." *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* (1949): 1143–63.

<sup>44</sup> HUNT, Tony. "The Lion and Yvain." In *The Legend of Arthur in the Middle Ages, Studies Presented to A.H. Diverres*. Peter GROUT and others, eds. Cambridge: D.S Brewer, 1983, pp. 86–98.

<sup>45</sup> CHOTZEN, TM.. "Le Lion d'Owein (*Yvain*) et ses prototypes celtiques." *Neophilologus*, 18.1 (1933): 51–58.

<sup>46</sup> THOMSON. "*Owain: Chwedl Iarllles Y Ffynnon*".

<sup>47</sup> DE CALUWÉ-DOR, Juliette. "Yvain's Lion Again: A Comparative Analysis of Its Personality and Function in the Welsh, French, and English Versions." In *An Arthurian Tapestry: Essays in Memory of Lewis Thorpe*. Kenneth VARTY, ed. Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 1981, pp. 229–38.



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She tries to make the Welsh lion into a psychopomp, an otherworldly messenger figure, whose task in the story is to guide *Owein* back to his otherworldly kingdom. This is in contrast to the lion in *Yvain* whose purpose is to be Yvain's vassal, and teach the knight comradeship and humility. The trouble with this explanation is the range of personalities which the lion in *Owein* exhibits. As she points out, the lion in *Owein* (although not *Yvain*) appears as a perfect servant at first, bowing to the “gwr du, mawr” with all the other animals<sup>48</sup>. However, although the lion's main role is to be an otherworldly messenger, later in the story it seems to be “in disguise as a pet”, or even a straight-forward “dog-like lion”. This is not satisfactory either.

Perhaps attempting to allocate the Welsh lion a single role or symbol is not the most productive line of enquiry. The Arthurian romances are not independently composed modern novels with sophisticated, self-contained and cohesive symbolism, they are part of a wider literary tradition. The portrayal of the lion in *Owein* stems from the influence of the traditional portrayal of lions in Welsh literature. Here, lions are seldom viewed as meek, innocent or intelligent in any way, but as wild and terrible monsters. In poetry lions often furnish metaphors for warriors. An early example is found in *Y Gododdin*, where one of the heroes is fiercer than a savage lion<sup>49</sup>. Another good example of a medieval Welsh big cat is the “Cath Palug”, who according to an early Arthurian poem, personally ate 180 fierce warriors and seems to have even overcome Sir Cai<sup>50</sup>.

While Yvain's lion bows, answers prayers and even memorably attempts to commit suicide, the lion in *Owein* is not a royal or holy creature but rather a brute, a creature which does not understand language and is supernaturally strong. The lion in *Owein* does seem to show influence from the grateful lion motif in the way it protects and serves the main character and plays around him like a dog, but this influence has been tempered by what appears to be the counter-influence of a native Welsh tradition of lions as wild, fierce beasts. Once more, the supernatural marvel, unexplained and unmotivated, has a major role in the figure of the lion. The influence of this tradition is not seen on the lion in *Yvain* at all, meaning that *Yvain*-first is the only model that fits the lion episodes satisfactorily.

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<sup>48</sup> If we accept this as the same individual lion. See *ibid*.

<sup>49</sup> JARMAN, Alfred Owen Hughes. *Aneirin: Y Gododdin*. Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1988, l. 945. In another part of the *Gododdin* a lion like creature (*llynyn*) is described which has often been taken to depict a lynx, a species of cat which went extinct in Britain in the early medieval period (1012). Details in *Owein* like the lion hunting roe deer rather than red deer, its tail never been described (contra *Yvain*) and the animal being more physical than spiritual may reflect the lynx's influence on the literary Welsh lion.

<sup>50</sup> BROMWICH, Rachel. *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006, p. 485.



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## Conclusion

In *Yvain*, the French courtly culture, and close association between *courtoisie* and *clergie* appears to be reflected in the high percentage of supernatural episodes which can be defined as *miraculosus* [miraculous]. Even when the episodes are merely *magicus* in nature, they are often defined by Christian dogma. The women of the Island of Maidens are being held captive by a son of the devil. Yvain first meets his lion when he comes upon it fighting against a dragon which is breathing sulphurous hellfire. This can be interpreted in line with Sweeney's observation that medieval authors tended to follow an unwritten rule of minimising the use of "black" magic in romance literature, while being comfortable with Christian miracles.<sup>51</sup>

However, Chrétien is also occasionally comfortable with episodes which do not fit into a Christian framework at all, as long as they are still courtly. Yvain accepts two rings from the ladies, one which makes him invisible and one which makes him invincible. He travels through the woods of Brocéliande where strange and supernatural events are commonplace. Sweeney attempts to explain this contradiction by suggesting that magical episodes might have been more acceptable when they were used to explore moral and societal issues of free will, or to represent something about the character<sup>52</sup>. This explanation seems convincing but is perhaps unnecessary. The magic episodes are either by-products of the chivalric frame or they involve antagonists to the hero (as the "netun" in the episode of the Pesme Avanture). The presence of the other magic object in Owein, the invisibility ring, may attest to the influence of *Yvain*, given that *magicus* is usually a branch of the supernatural avoided by Welsh storytellers<sup>53</sup>. Magic objects (the ointment and the ring) could be thus explained by the *Yvain*-first hypothesis.

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<sup>51</sup> SWEENEY. *Magic in Medieval Romance*.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Although magic ("hud") features in the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi*. For instance, in the *Fourth Branch*, otherwise known as *Math*, two characters, Math and his nephew Gwydion perform magical feats: Gwydion conjured up ("hudwys") fine animals richly embellished to trick Pryderi and obtain a famous swine, whereas Math, amongst other things, punishes his nephews by transforming them into animals. In the case of Gwydion, the narrator states that magic is a skill that he possesses ("yd aeth ef yn geluydodeu", "he drew on his skills [or arts]"); for his part, Math delivers magic by way of his "hutlach", "magic wand". In both cases magic, although negative and with clear catastrophic results at the hands of Gwydion, is not related to the devil or to any evil forces, but rather a special expertise of the characters. A wider study of magic in medieval Wales would help cast further light on this paper's findings. Quotations above are from WILLIAMS, Ifor. *Pedeir Keinc Y Mabinogi*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1964, pp. 70, 74.



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The Welsh audience, which we know less about, appears to have rather favoured *mirabilia* in secular narratives. The holy *miraculosus* episodes in *Yvain* lose their Christian and/or rational meaning. The lion fights a snake instead of a dragon, and Du Traws is now just a strong antagonist, not a son of the devil. Other material has been mystified into the *mirabilis*, that is, into natural wonders which cannot be explained. The lion in *Owein* is not a courtly-godly creature, able to help the protagonist through prayer, but a brutish beast which does not understand the rules of chivalric single-combat; able to break through walls because it is supernaturally strong.

This is not because the audience of *Owein* was more rational and less interested in the supernatural. In fact, the opposite is true. There are nine supernatural episodes in *Owein* but only eight in *Yvain*. As well as removing some of Chrétien's miracles, *Owein* also mystifies some of Chrétien's ordinary happenings. The *vilain* in the wood, looked down upon by the knights of *Yvain*, becomes a Fomorian-like giant with only one leg and one eye, who is treated with a great deal of respect in *Owein*. Further, in *Owein* he has a mysterious control over all kinds of animal, whereas in *Yvain* he merely controls a herd of cattle. When the character goes mad later on, he grows hair over his body after the style of Lailoken and Suibne Geillt.

Overall, if we can judge by the popularity of *Owein* and *Yvain*, both the Welsh and French audiences appear to have been comfortable with supernatural episodes in their stories, but they had different expectations about how the material should be handled. The French audience expected the supernatural events to either have an explicit Christian explanation, or at least to fit into the chivalric frame of the text. The Welsh audience expected inexplicable natural wonders, but appear to have been more comfortable keeping this material separate from their Christian faith. This tendency in *Owein* agrees with a general trait of medieval Welsh prose tales<sup>54</sup>. The Welsh compiler's urge towards the non-Christian supernatural is even made explicit at the beginning of the story (and of this study) when Owein instructs Cynon: "Dechreu di... o'r hynn odidockaf a wpych" (28-9) [begin with the strangest [story] you know].

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<sup>54</sup> FULTON. "Magic and the Supernatural in Early Welsh Arthurian Narrative".



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