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Yvain, Knight of the Lion Literary Analysis

Yvain the Knight of the Lion is a medieval story that was passed all over Europe. This version is written by Chretien de Troyes. It tells the story of a knight named Yvain. Over the course of the story, Yvain marries a beautiful woman named Laudine, but leaves and does not return to her in time. He is rejected by her, and he goes out to find himself and come up with a way to win back Laudine. While he is out on one of his adventures, he finds a lion, and it becomes a loyal companion. By the end of the story, Yvain becomes a true knight, displaying true chivalric values such as nobility, courtesy, and bravery.

Yvain gains nobility throughout his journey and adventures, but he does not start out that way. At the beginning of the story, Yvain goes out as an errant knight, but he is merely seeking glory and a name for himself. Yvain quickly leaves his castle to avenge his cousin, but we can see from how Chretien describes it, that he desperately wants to make a name for himself. He plans to, “boast about nothing, and no one/ Would know what he meant to do,/ If he could help it, until/ It was done for honor or for shame, And then he could let it be known” (721-2). Even from the beginning of his quest, he has plans to let the good things he does be known. He starts to learn nobility when he encounters a snake and a lion fighting in a forest: “But whatever happened, he’d made up/ His mind to help the lion” (3371-2). In medieval culture, lions were considered kingly, noble, brave, or even virtuous, so when Yvain makes up his mind to protect the lion, it symbolizes the beginning of his movement towards nobility and virtue. He displays thoroughly developed nobility when he comes across the Castle of Infinite Misfortune. There are many people being kept captive there. Yvain has to battle two demons to escape from the castle, but when he defeats the lions, instead of leaving immediately, he says to the king, “give me, please,/ The girls you’re holding captive!/ The agreement so stipulates, and its time,/ As you know, they must be freed”(5708-11). After fighting demons, Yvain would naturally want to get out of the castle, but he stays to convince the king to free them. While Yvain does not start out noble, he learns to become noble throughout the story.

In addition to nobility, Yvain grows in courtesy over the course of the story. One example of him lacking in courtesy is when he first meets Laudine: “And I promise/ You this: my lord Yvain/ Was mightily afraid, entering/ That room, and finding the lady,/ who spoke not a single word./ And that

made him more afraid,/ Half overcome with fear” (1949-55). While Yvain was taught basic courtesy as a knight before the story even starts, he has not learned the importance of it nor how to show it consistently. In this unfamiliar situation, he does not know the courteous or correct things to say. This is contrasted by a situation near the end of the story, where the king of the Castle of Infinite Misfortune offers his daughters hand in marriage to Yvain. Yvain not only refuses, showing his loyalty toward Laudine, but he also refuses politely, saying,

“Lord! My legal
Obligations, and all my affairs,
Are unknown to you. I dare not explain.
But understand this: what I
Refuse would never be declined
By anyone who could follow his heart
And accept so lovely and noble
A girl, receive her freely,
As I wold do, were I free
To take this one or any other.
But I can’t. Believe me, I can’t.
Allow me to leave you in peace!”

(5720-31). This example shows Yvain’s clear progression in the chivalric value of courtesy. While the story starts with Yvain lacking in courtesy, he learns it by the end of the story.

In addition to nobility and courtesy, Yvain also develops in bravery. On the surface Yvain appears consistently brave even in the beginning of the story, but in reality, he is only brave when he feels safe. For example, he comes off as brave when he is fighting in tournaments with Gawain, since fighting often ends in death or serious injury, but the whole time, he has a magic ring that Laudine had given him which protects him from all harm. Bravery is when someone overcomes some kind of real fear of danger or harm. Yvain has hardly anything to be afraid of while he has the ring, so he is not being brave. Much later in the story, a girl approaches Yvain, needing his help. She gives a very vague description of what she needs Yvain for, but even so, he agrees to it, saying, “No more will I say no,/ But follow you sweet friend!/ Gladly, wherever you please./ And if she for whom you’ve sought me/ Truly needs me, have/ No fear. Anything I’m able/ To do for her, I’ll do” (5097-103). Yvain’s fully

developed bravery is obvious in this example. He does not know what he will need to do, but he agrees to it nonetheless. From these examples we can see how Yvain develops in the virtue of bravery.

Clearly, *Yvain the Knight of the Lion* shows Yvain becoming a true knight over the course of the story. The beginning and end of the book contrast with each other because of his transition to a true knight from a mere courtier. While the story is exciting because of its adventures and action, these core themes of developing knightly virtues deepen the text and make it a true masterpiece.