Blog Response #8: Chrétien, *Yvain: The Knight of the Lion*

A compelling theme in Chretien’s poem *The Knight of the Lion* pertains to how one can recreate his or her identity. Chretien establishes and develops this theme through the poem’s protagonist, Yvain, who embarks on various quests in which he battles villains and rescues the lives of those who are wrongfully condemned. What is most striking about Yvain’s character is the way he chooses to be remembered for his heroic actions. Rather than disclosing his actual name (Yvain), he refers to himself as “‘the Knight / Of the Lion’” (4613-4614). His decision to identify not only as a knight, but also the lion’s knight speaks volumes about the kind of hero he is. Above all, an exploration of the significance of Yvain naming himself as the “‘the Knight / Of the Lion’” will reveal that the poem is concerned with the question of the importance of names and identities (4613-4614).

The way in which Yvain withholding his name draws our attention to the character trait that distinguishes him as the hero of the poem: his humility. After successfully defeating and killing the giant, rescuing Sir Gawain’s nephews and niece, Yvain is offered gifts for his services. Each time this offer is made, Yvain responds by saying: “‘I owe you at least my name. / If anyone speaks of the Knight / Of the Lion they’re speaking of me. / And that is the name I’ve chosen’” (*Yvain* 4612-4615). The repetition of these lines throughout the poem indicate that Yvain is one who is humble, for he
believes that he should not be rewarded for his actions. Instead, he wants to be known as
“‘the Knight / Of the Lion’” (4613-4614). Here, Yvain attaches his identity to the identity of his closest companion: the lion. In this way, Yvain is acknowledging the role of the lion and how he would not have been able to triumph without the lion’s help. This is most obvious in the poet’s decision to capitalize ‘Lion’ in the passage (4614). For this reason, Yvain’s way of including the lion in his name underlines how the two are inseparable, which suggests that he is not the only hero in the poem.

At the same time, identifying as a knight is also an indication of Yvain’s desire to be known for his position in society. The fact that he does not want to be known simply as Yvain is significant because he only reveals his actual name to the two people he admires: Gawain, and his mistress, Lunette (6759). Since knighthood is a position that one earns, it is ironic that Yvain claims that “‘the Knight / Of the Lion’” is the “‘is the name [he has] chosen’” (4612-4615). Nevertheless, one can question whether he is truly a modest hero because he wants to be remembered for his services to the king. Although he does not accept any gifts in exchange, to Yvain, there is more worth in being named a knight.