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Shapeshifting in Marie de France's "Bisclavret" and the Folktale "The Snotty Goat"

Shapeshifting has been used by many authors as a tool throughout history and across cultures to act as symbols of a variety of topics; however, an interesting use of shapeshifting is that it can represent evil. Shapeshifting can be utilized to show how evil manifests in an individual, which can either be an innate evil or an evil that is imposed on an individual from an outside force. Marie de France's *lais* "Bisclavret" and the Russian folktale "The Snotty Goat" explores these two ways that evil manifests. In "Bisclavret" evil is imposed on the individual while evil is innate in the individual in "The Snotty Goat." Marie's "Bisclavret" and the folktale "The Snotty Goat" use shapeshifting as a way to represent the two types of evil that manifests in an individual, where the type of manifestation results from the ability of the individual to have a choice in when he transforms.

The choice of animal that the individual turns into initially introduces evil into the narrative through the connotations it has historically been associated with. "Bisclavret" and "The Snotty Goat" use the werewolf and the goat respectively for the animals that the man shifts into. In religious history, specifically Christianity, the werewolf and the goat are associated with evil. Charlotte Otten writes in her work *A Lycanthropy Reader* that the "werewolves of the ecclesiastical courts and the Scriptures were manifestations of the Devil's power in human lives" and she equates werewolves to "Satan and his cohorts who wish to destroy the faith" of Christian

parishioners (255, 253). The werewolf developed its negative connotations from works of scriptures, and having a man shift into a werewolf brings evil into the story. In the introduction of her *lais*, Marie seems to agree with the evil associated with the werewolf as she writes that “a werewolf is a savage beast; / in his blood-rage, he makes a feast / of men, devours them, does great harms, / and in vast forests lives and roams” (de France 9-12). Likewise, the goat is, in the sphere of Christian religion, historically associated with evil. In his article “Domestic Animals and Bible Symbolism,” John Klotz explains that “The goat is often used in a figurative and symbolic sense in the Scriptures ... In Matthew 25:31-46 goats stand for the unbelievers, who must be separated out on the Day of Judgment from among the believers.” The parallel between the goat and unbelievers casts the goat as evil because the Christian faith condemns unbelievers to hell. The connotations of evil associated with both werewolves and goats allows for shapeshifting to be used as a way to represent the two types of manifestations of evil portrayed in “Bisclavret” and in “The Snotty Goat”.

Marie de France’s werewolf, Bisclavret, represents the evil that is imposed upon an individual. As mentioned above, Marie introduces the *lais* with a comment on werewolves whom she equates to a “savage beast”, but she “leave[s] all that” behind as she talks about the werewolf Bisclavret, who is noble and beloved. Marie introduces Bisclavret by describing how he is “a good knight, handsome, known to be / all that makes for nobility” (de France 17-18). Since the story starts with the negative description of the savage werewolf, Bisclavret would be expected to follow along that archetype; however, he proves to be the opposite by being “all that makes for nobility” as well as being “prized ... by his liege lord; by all his neighbors was adored” (18-20). Bisclavret’s good nature when he is a human remains even after he turns into a beast.

When he transforms into a werewolf, the king's hunting dogs attack him, but Bisclavret approaches the king and begs for clemency. Recognizing the consciousness and sapience of a man inside the beast, the king orders his men to stop the dogs, telling them that the werewolf has a "man's mind; it begs the king / for mercy" (154-155). Bisclavret moves even further away from the expected as he is beloved by people who cherish his "noble bearing and [his] charm," and during his time with the king he "never wanted to do harm" (179-180). Bisclavret deviates from the savagery that Marie claims werewolves have as he begs for mercy in his beastly form, which points to the fact that his turning into a beast is not because he himself is evil, but because there are outside forces of evil that have been enacted upon him. Otten writes that "the werewolves of medieval narratives were victims of domestic plotting," which can be seen in the tale of "Bisclavret" (225). The blood-lust and want to cause harm that Marie declares manifest in werewolves are absent in Bisclavret because he is not the evil or savage one in the story.

Throughout the story, the people around Bisclavret are the malicious ones who cause harm, and Bisclavret's werewolf form is a response to the evil that is surrounding and being enacted on him. After finding out about his animal side, his wife betrays his trust and uses the information Bisclavret told her to trap him into becoming a werewolf permanently by taking up another lover to help her steal her husband's clothes, which is in essence his humanity. Additionally, the king appears capable of viciousness as well when, at the advice of his men, he uses torture to force Bisclavret's wife to tell him why the usually docile werewolf has suddenly started attacking her and her lover:

Force her to speak! She'll tell it straight

We've all known marvels, chanced to see

Strange events, here in Brittany.

The King thought this advice was fair;

And he detained the chevalier.

The lady, too, he held; and she

He put to pain and agony. (de France 61)

Bisclavret's wife and the king are prominent examples of the outside forces of evil that affect Bisclavret. The effect of the evil imposed on Bisclavret can be seen when he is forced to respond to his wife's crime with violence in order to dole out justice as retribution for an act of evil.

Bisclavret's need to punish the evildoers continues to prove that the evil in this story comes from sources other than himself. The imposition of malevolence by outside forces on Bisclavret forces him to remain a werewolf, which has as aforementioned been shown to be a sign of evil. The tale of Bisclavret, thus, is representative of the evil that is imposed on an individual.

Where the story of Bisclavret portrays the hidden darkness in the society of the beast, the Russian folktale "The Snotty Goat," represents the evil that lurks inside the beast himself. In the folktale, a young woman is abducted by a goat who wishes to have the woman as his wife. Unlike Bisclavret, when we first meet the goat he is an animal, and he is not noble or charming like Bisclavret. Instead, The Snotty Goat is an unpleasant beast, and the woman, the day after her capture, sees "that the yard [is] enclosed with a picket fence, and that there was a maiden's head on every picket" (200). The previous women had displeased the goat and he murdered them for it, and even though his new wife pleases him by tending to him and wiping his snotty, slobber-covered face, he neither acknowledges her nor rewards her. His disinclination to thank the woman indicates that he wants the woman to clean him because he gets a perverted

satisfaction out of her suffering, proven further when he is in his human form. When the girl goes to her sisters' weddings, the goat shows up in his human form and sings songs that make fun of her relationship with the snotty-nosed goat: "Meanwhile the goat turned into a handsome youth and walked into the yard playing his gusla. He came in and began to sing: "Wife of the goat, wife of the snot-nose! Wife of the goat, wife of the snot-nose!" (201). The goat is malevolent both as an animal and as a human, which shows that he has an innate evilness that is present in whatever form he takes. He is a goat because he is more beast than man in his actions and personality: he beheads his lovers if they are displeasing to him, he forces his current wife to care for him as a goat though he does not have to remain a goat, and he mocks his wife for being with a snotty nosed goat. He has become on the outside what he truly is on the inside: animalistic.

As shown, the selection of the animals that were chosen for the men to turn into and the presence of evil inside or outside of the man shows the two different manifestations of evil in an individual; however, the type of evil that manifests for an individual also has to deal with the individual's ability to choose when he transforms. In the tale of Bisclavret, the wife and her lover steals Bisclavret's clothes, which forces him to remain in his werewolf form. Bisclavret is not able to choose whether or not he turns into a beast, meaning that his being a werewolf, at least permanently, is imposed on him by outside forces. On the other hand, The Snotty Goat is able to choose when he transforms. The fact that he can to turn into a human whenever he pleases shows that he only turns into a goat because he knows it will be displeasurable for his significant other, and he wants them to suffer. Though when he does turn into a human it is only so he can inflict

more pain and suffering on his wife. Choosing to turn into an evil goat shows how the evil in “The Snotty Goat” story manifests inside the individual.

In conclusion, “Bisclavret” and “The Snotty Goat” both represent different ways shapeshifting is used to portray how evil manifests in an individual. Assuming that Marie was aware of “The Snotty Goat” when she was writing her *lais*, “Bisclavret” can act as a response to the folktale. Marie’s *lais* addresses the folktale by taking an opposite approach as it looks at the evil imposed on an individual rather than the evil that is innate. Therefore, readers who have approached “The Snotty Goat” first will be able to see how shapeshifting works in a symbolic way to represent manifestations of evil in individuals through the different aspects displayed in these two works.

Works Cited

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