

Wodewoses: the (In)humanity of Medieval Wild Men.

The wild man that roamed the forests of medieval European culture inhabited not only a literal but also a metaphorical wilderness. Although commonly read as an Other, the antithesis of humanity with its savagery and uncontrolled passions,ⁱ close examination of how it was represented in textual and visual culture reveals its place to be a porous one on the borders of humanity. Exploration of the uses of the Middle English word for wild man, 'wodewose,' and of the visual images that can be linked to the word locates a being that is sometimes purely animal yet which on other occasions takes on markedly human characteristics. This liminality calls into question any fixity of medieval and early modern conceptualisations of humanity not only by making delineations of human and inhuman dependent on textual representation, but also by at times combining animal and human attributes in one being.

In Book 8, chapter 16 of his *City of God* St Augustine discusses the humanity, or otherwise, of various humanoid races. He states that as long as a being is rational, mortal, and descends from Adam, physical shape is not a factor to be considered in deciding whether it is human or not. Races as diverse as dog-headed people or Cynocephali or dog-headed people, pigmies, and Cyclops – all reported in classical and medieval travel texts – can be thought of as human according to Augustine, although he does caution against excessive credulity. If Cyclops, pigmies and Cynocephali were considered to be at least potentially human by the medieval mind, then surely wodewoses,ⁱⁱ commonly portrayed as hairier than average, but otherwise physically humanoid might share this possibility.

Rationality is the key aspect of Augustine's definition as it applies to wodewoses, as they were commonly thought to have none and to be, as a result, nonhuman. Hayden White argues that the wodewose represented 'a projection of repressed desires and anxieties,' and 'almost always presents the image of the man released from social control' (White 7). Timothy Husband makes a similar argument, asserting that 'the wild man served to counterpoise the accepted standards of conduct of society in general,' and was the 'dialectical antithesis of humanity' (Husband 5). It is their lack of rational control that rendered them inhuman, as Dorothy Yamamoto shows in her analysis of an episode from the Middle English prose *Alexander*. Alexander and his knights encounter a wild man who, when presented with a young girl, cannot control his lust. It is this, rather than his wilderness home, lack of speech and so on that prove his inhumanity;ⁱⁱⁱ mortality was a given, a soul could not be tested for easily, so rationality was the obvious starting point for a line to be drawn in this case. White, Husband and others suggest that as social and economic conditions changed and life became increasingly urbanised, the forest dwelling wild man went from being reviled to idealised and was 'brought into the fold of human society'.^{iv} This, while partially true, is an oversimplified trajectory as the border between human and wodewose permeable through the Middle Ages .

Visual representations generally give a limited amount of information about the animality, or otherwise, of wodewoses, but offer an overview of some of their essential characteristics. They demonstrate a basically human shape, which appears with a more or less fierce expression, at times they are holding clubs, and are covered in hair, leaves, or a combination of the two. A number of extant misericordes, such as in Carlisle Cathedral, depict a wodewose fighting with beasts; a dragon at Carlisle, but elsewhere lions. Conflicts with dragons place wodewoses in roles that have something in common with the knights who populated medieval romance, such as Lancelot, Guy of Warwick, and Bevis of Hampton, all of whom are dragon-slayers.^v

Furthermore, dragons conventionally symbolised demons, or even Satan himself; a multitude of saints, including Margaret of Antioch, Pope Silvester, and St George, vanquished them. Images of wodewoses locked in combat with serpentine embodiments of evil, like these knights and saints, suggest that they are representative of good in such struggles, and thus hint at a degree of humanity, possibly even a soul^{vi} Visual representations, however, are not the focus of this paper, and at this point such ideas remain in the realm of speculation.

The earliest extant usage of wodewose is dated to c.1100 and appears as part of a Latin-Old English glossary on the vocabulary of Archbishop Aelfric. It has ‘unfaele men, wuduwasan, unfaele wihtu’ as the Old English counterpart of ‘Satiri, uel fauni, uel sahni, uel fauni ficarii.’^{vii} This clearly invokes classical mythology of satyrs and fauns; these were seen as synonymous with wild men by Isidore of Seville (Bernheimer 97-8), whose work was influential in Anglo-Saxon England.^{viii} Satyrs and fauns were not strictly human, having goat’s legs, but the words that surround ‘wuduwasan’ in this glossary strongly suggest that it was, or at least had significantly human qualities. ‘Unfaele’ meant wicked, corrupt, unfortunate, unnatural or monstrous,^{ix} but even the latter two do not completely erase the humanity of the ‘men’ and ‘withu’ the word is coupled with. The way that the Latin for satyrs and fauns is glossed here suggests that in the Anglo-Saxon vocabulary there was no word for a nonhuman forest creature with a semi-human shape, and that a subsection of humanity had to be used instead. From the earliest usage then, it can be seen that the ground between human and nonhuman is treacherous underfoot for wodewoses.

The next extant occurrences are found in texts from around three hundred years later, in the late stages of the fourteenth century, although given the paucity of writing in English during those intervening years this is not particularly surprising. The significant number of late fourteenth-century works in which the word is present suggests that its usage continued during those centuries, even if written attestations can not now be found. The c.1382 Wycliffite translation of the Bible offers a straightforward use of wodewose in its version of Isaiah 13. 21:

ne shepperdis shul resten there/ but shul resten there bestis: & shul ben fulfild
the houses of hem with dragouns/ & ther shuln dwelle there ostrighes &
wodewosis shuln lepen there & ther shul answern there ghelling foulis in the
houses of it.^x

[No shepherds will live there, beasts will lie there instead. And their houses shall be filled with serpents, and there shall dwell there ostriches and wodewoses shall leap there, and there shall answer there cackling birds in the houses of the city].^{xi} The passage is concerned with the city of Babylon which is to be laid waste by God, and with emphasising how deserted it will be after that destruction. The passage constructs a clear opposition between humanity and inhumanity, and the wodewoses fall into the latter category in this text. Such a reading is reinforced by the terminology of the 1425 version which has “hairy beasts” instead, and by modern translations which list owls, ostriches and goats, animals but no humans.

The approximately contemporary *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (c. 1382), which is probably the most well-known medieval work to refer to wodewoses, includes them in a list of the enemies the hero must fight as he travels through the Welsh wilderness:

Sumwhyle with wormez he werrez, and with wolues als,

Sumwhyle with wodwos, that woned in the knarrez,
Bothe with bullez an berez, and borez otherquyle,
And etaynez, that hym aneledede of the heghe felle.^{xii}

[Sometimes he fights with dragons, and with wolves also, sometimes with wild men, that lived among the crags, Both with bulls and bears, and boars at other times, and giants that pursued him on the high fells].^{xiii} Here they are part of a group of decidedly inhuman creatures. Furthermore, there is a previous mention of human inhabitants of this wilderness; they are unfriendly to Gawain but are nonetheless clearly different from wodewoses. This then, like the c.1382 Wycliffite Bible, sets up an opposition between animals and human, with wodewoses firmly on the side of the former.

The *Northern Homily Cycle* (c. 1390) however, contains a different construction. Homily Fifteen contains the story of a brewer's daughter who, having fallen pregnant without being married, 'talde the folk als wodewise wylde / Wha gate on hir this forsaide chylde.'^{xiv} Although the woman is lying and is beaten for it by the villagers she tried to fool, the very idea that a wodewose could father her child strongly suggests that it was thought of as having an element of humanity. The paucity of detail in this reference makes it impossible to garner any further details, but there is certainly no oppositional construct here, the wodewose may not be fully human, but nor is it entirely animal.

Household inventories, wills and other household lists commonly include descriptions of goods decorated with wodewoses. The majority of such entries offer no description of how it is represented and are thus of little, if any use to the present discussion. For example, among the possessions of Edward III is listed a silver cup with two wodewoses.^{xv} The inventory of the goods belonging to Sir John Fastolf (1378-1459) however, contains a brief yet telling description of the image:

Item, j Clothe for the nether hall, or arras, with a geyaunt in the mydell beryng a legge of a bere in his honed. Item, j Clothe of arras for the dese in the same halle, with j wodewose and j chylde in his armys'.^{xvi}

The two tapestries were hung in the same hall, as the text makes clear, so it is no accident that the juxtaposition of the giant and the wodewose is made in the list of goods. The language suggests that the giant and the wodewose hold their burdens very differently. The only other description of a child being held in this inventory is 'image of oure Lady, and hir childe in his arnes' (Amyot 15). The wodewose, we can reasonably safely conclude, is caring for the child; a clear contrast to the giant who holds the dismembered leg of a bear. This provides, furthermore, a contrast to the savagery of other visual images of wodewoses, including those from much later, such as the misericordes depicting combat with dragons and lions mentioned above. The image suggests that it has an element of humanity in its makeup, particularly when coupled in its terminology with the image of the Virgin and Child. The precise date of the tapestries cannot, of course, be ascertained, but given that Fastolfe died in 1459, they must have been produced in the mid-1400s at the very latest. This makes it one of the earliest records of a wodewose that demonstrates not just a lack of savagery, but active care as part of its character.

In 1483, around two decades after the death of Sir John Fastolfe and the cataloguing of his household goods, William Caxton published a version of Aesop's fables. It includes not only the most elaborate role a wodewose plays in extant Middle

English literature, but also an accompanying woodcut. The fable 'of the Viator or Palmer and of Satyre' draws on the various traditions surrounding the wodewose in medieval English culture. 'Satyre', the name of the wodewose, harkens back directly to the classical tradition of satyrs and fauns, hairy, humanoid creatures of the forest, as does the woodcut illustration. It also points towards the conventional, animal fierceness of the wodewose, while simultaneously granting it noticeably human attributes. The story warns against hypocrisy, and tells the story of a pilgrim lost in a snow-blanketed forest. The wodewose takes pity on him and leads him to its home, where it gives him hot water to drink. The pilgrim blows on it, is chided for having 'bothe the fyre and the water in thy mouthe', and is ejected from Satyre's residence.

The wodewose is here unequivocally nonhuman; the text pronounces 'a wodewose is a monstre lyke to the man / as hit appiereth by hys fygure.'^{xvii} The story, however, demonstrates that it is human-like in its nature as well as in its appearance. Like the creature carrying the child on Fastolfe's tapestry it displays a clear sense of care for the human it has encountered. Charity or pity was considered one of the chief Christian virtues during the Middle Ages, and for an animal to feel such towards a human suggests that it partakes in some way of that Christianity. Moreover, it is aware of the sin of hypocrisy in a way that the fully human palmer is not. White argues that 'the Wild Man did not *know* that he lived in a state of sin, or even *that* he sinned, or even what a "sin" might be,' and that this ignorance was an indication that wild men were not human but rather neutral like (other) animals (White 22). For Satyre to show not only awareness but rejection of sin demonstrates possession of a rational soul, a trait unique to humanity in medieval thought.

While the story is a fable and thus not designed to be read as an account of real events, animal fables in the Middle Ages represent how the creatures that inhabit them were conceived of at the time, and this text thus offers insight into how wodewoses were conceptualised. Furthermore, as Yamamoto points out, *Mandeville's Travels* contains the story of a hermit who is approached by 'a monstre ... a thing disformed ayen kynde both of man or of best or of ony thing elles,'^{xviii} it knows the story of Christ's Passion and asks him to pray for it, thus likewise demonstrating possession of a rational soul and therefore apparent humanity (Yamamoto 155). Caxton's story was acknowledged as a fable, but the fabulous *Mandeville's Travels* purported to be and was accepted as truthful, so the stories thus confirm the humanity of the wild men in them, despite the fact that both are also said to be monsters.

The duality in Caxton's tale is reinforced by the accompanying woodcut. Many such images were factotums and used to illustrate multiple different stories and represent many different things, such as cities, people and so on. The woodcuts in Caxton's prints of these fables, however, are clearly tailored to the stories and are clearly designed to accompany them rather than being generic scenes for use in many prints. The image of the wodewose and the palmer is no exception to this as they stand outside Satyre's home. The wodewose has much in common with the satyrs for which it was named, having two small horns on its head and cloven hoofs for feet. This makes it different from most extant images of wild men from Western Europe; I know of no others with horns and/ or hoofs.

As discussed above, however, from the very first appearance of the word it was used in reference to this tradition, but with a degree of tension. In the centuries between 1100 and 1483 this association continued. John Trevisa seems to link them in his c.1390 Middle English translation of Bartolomeus' *De Proprietatibus Rerum*: 'therein ben satires, wodewosis, tigers, and other horrible beasts.'^{xix} The line suggests that this is a list of different beasts, not that satyrs and wodewoses were considered

the same thing. The Wycliffite Bible however, translates *faunis ficariis* as wodewose in Jeremiah 50. 39, apparently equating the two. Caxton, it seems, found a way to reconcile any tension between satyrs and wodewoses by naming the latter after the former. The image seems to have more in common with the creatures of the classical Mediterranean tradition than with the wild men of Western European culture, but this slipperiness is symptomatic of the difficulties that surround medieval concepts of wodewoses.

Satyre's home is called a 'pytte', meaning lair or den of an animal, or a cave,^{xx} but the illustration belies this to a degree by having identifiable elements of construction. The home is roofed with leaves, and surrounded by trees, yet appears to have planks for its walls. It is not quite a house, but neither is it a natural cave or dug out hole. Husband notes that wild men occasionally 'fashioned primitive hovels of branches and mud' (Husband 2). Although he notes that in some later images a level of civilisation might be indicated through the use of, for example, worked stone, he does not acknowledge that lower levels of work may likewise indicate human qualities. Just as the wodewose is part human and part animal, so is its home. Further elements of civilisation are found in the plate the palmer eats from and the jug Satyre holds.

The final point to be made here is that Satyre is hairless, and thus, to my knowledge, unique among images of wodewoses. Yamamoto argues that 'hair that flows wild or covers the body, presents an antitype to civilised, disciplined restraint' (Yamamoto 163).^{xxi} What then does nakedness mean in this image? It is tempting, given the other indications of civilisation, to read this as a clear marker that the wodewose is *not* the uncivilised, undisciplined being that hairiness would represent. While this is possible, it cannot be said with any certainty. What can be said with confidence is that by the 1460s hairiness was no longer an indication of inhumanity when related to the wodewose. In Sir Gilbert Hay's *Buik of King Alexander the Conqueror* Alexander and his knights encounter a race of wodewoses, 'thare was routh men and hary all-attoure.'^{xxii} The king treats with them and they act as his guides, at no point, despite their hairiness, are they said to be anything other than humans. If hairiness does not denote an animal hair nakedness may not denote humanity in Caxton's Satyre. This uncertainty is itself telling as it is symptomatic of the status of the wodewose itself.

Some seven to eight decades after Caxton's print, the wodewose again appears in an animal fable, albeit in a much more fleeting role. The Bannatyne manuscript of Robert Henryson's fables, dated to the 1560s includes it in a long list of animals: 'the tame cat, the wodwyss, and the wild wolfyne.'^{xxiii} This brief reference gives no hint of humanity to the wodewose, it is in no way differentiated from the myriad other animals that likewise obey the call of their king, the lion, to attend his court. This complicates Sayer's trajectory of animal to human development, and further demonstrates the uncertainty of the place the wodewose occupied; not only could it slip from animal to human, but it could also slide back again.

Larry D. Benson argues that the wodewose, as 'a symbol of unruly passions' is directly opposed to the figure of the knight in medieval culture.^{xxiv} Yamamoto complicates this relationship with her exploration of knights who inhabit the wilderness at given times, and who occasionally run wild themselves, such as Lancelot (Yamamoto 189-196). She also briefly discusses the 1393 *Bals des Sauvages* where Charles VI of France and his knights appeared, as John Capgrave puts it, 'arayed lich a wodwous,'^{xxv} but does not examine masquerades generally. Wodewoses were common figures in the masquerades of medieval and early modern

England, and such costumes are emblematic of the slippage between humanity and inhumanity that surrounded them. Wodewose in masquerades are taken by Bernheimer to represent escape, for those costumed, from the pressures of ‘formalized living’ (Bernheimer 67). Yamamoto notes that at the *Bals des Sauvages* the king was free of the chain that bound his companions together and that they thus ‘preserved their places within the social hierarchy’ even when disguised (Yamamoto 176). Given that masquerades took place as part of court entertainments at the strictly controlled centre of formal society it is difficult to see how any such events could do other than represent contradictory elements in this way and thus embody the fraught space between wodewose and human. Yamamoto argues that the line between knights and wodewoses is shifting and ‘re-invented as a site of play’ (Yamamoto 167), in the case of masquerades this both symbolic and literal.

In the alliterative poem *Wynnere and Wastoure* we encounter a knight dressed as a wodewose, not as part of a masquerade but rather as part of a parley between two opposing (allegorical) armies:

Upon heghe one the holt ane hathell up stondes,
Wrighte als a wodwyse alle in wrethyn lokkes,
With ane helme one his hede, ane hatte appon lofte.^{xxvi}

[High on the hill a man stand up, dressed as a wodewose with tangled hair, with a helmet on his head and a cap upon it].^{xxvii} He has the wild hairiness associated with barbarity, but also wears the most complex of clothing symbolic of civilisation as it is covered with heraldic symbols. The knight embodies that wodewoses which were common in heraldry throughout Europe and in this context symbolised fierceness and savagery in battle. Like costumes in a masquerade such heraldic devices complicate the boundary between human and animal by suggesting that the latter is an inherent aspect of the former.

The (in)humanity of wodewoses depends on their textual context and representation. Some works, like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* do construct such a dichotomy, but others present much more complex and ambiguous beings whose liminal existence cannot be pinned down with any certainty. Furthermore, their use in heraldry and masquerades suggests inescapable contradictions. A beast to human trajectory drawn chronologically is significantly oversimplified as the status of wodewoses slide back and forward across the boundaries of humanity in medieval and early modern England. This complicates medieval concepts of humanity by rendering their borders shifting and uncertain.

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ⁱ See, for example, Hayden White, “The Forms of Wildness: Archaeology of an Idea,” *The Wildman Within: An Image in Western Thought from the Renaissance to Romanticism*, ed. Edward Dudley and Maximilian E Novak (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972), 3-38; Timothy Husband, *The Wild Man: Medieval Myth and Symbolism* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1980).

ⁱⁱ It is likely that the Old English plural of wuduwasa was wuduwasen, but I have used wodwyses as the ‘s’ plural ending in used in the extant plural forms of the word. ‘Wodewasen’ is a verb where it appears in Middle English.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dorothy Yamamoto, *The Boundaries of the Human in Middle English Literature*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000), 156.

^{iv} William Sayers, "Middle English *wodewose* 'wilderness being': A Hybrid Etymology?" *ANQ* 17. 3 (2004): 12-19. 16. Sayers suggests the change may also have resulted from increased contact with the peoples of Africa and the Americas. See also Richard Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages: a Study in Art, Sentiment and Demonology* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1952), 122-20; Yamamoto 148.

^v I return to connections between knights and wodewoses below.

^{vi} White argues that wodewoses were objects of 'religious anxiety' as 'the quintessence of human degradation' but that they were not considered spiritually corrupt, merely ignorant of their sin (White 22), a point I return to later. Sayers remarks on wodewoses as a 'nearly hidden motif in ecclesiastical art', although he does not speculate as to its meaning (Sayers 15).

^{vii} Thomas Wright and Richard Paul Wülcker, eds, *Anglo-Saxon and Old English Vocabularies*, 2nd ed. vol. 1 (London: Trubner & Co, 1884), 108. No pre-Conquest uses of the word exists, a fact which, as noted by Sayers, has given rise to some speculation the concept of a hairy humanoid inhabitant of the forests was imported into England from the Continent. This seems very unlikely given not only Sayers' arguments about its etymology, but also that this late eleventh or very early twelfth century glossary is a copy of an older manuscript.

^{viii} For example on Bartolomeus Anglicus whose own work was translated by John Trevisa in later centuries and is referred to below

^{ix} "Unfele." *Middle English Dictionary*.

^x *MS. Bodley 959: Genesis – Baruch 3.20 of the Earliest Version of the Wycliffite Bible*, ed. Conrad Lindberg, vol. 5 (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1959-1994), 116.

^{xi} My translation.

^{xii} *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, rev ed., ed. Norman Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), lines 720-723.

^{xiii} The translation is my own.

^{xiv} *The Northern Homily Cycle, Homily 15: Sexagesmia Sunday*, ed. Anne Thompson (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008), Lines 367-368.

^{xv} "Wodewose." *Middle English Dictionary*.

^{xvi} Thomas Amyot, ed., *Transcript of Two Rolls, Containing and Inventory of Effects Formerly Belonging to Sir John Fastolfe* (London: J. Nichols and Sons, 1826), 29.

^{xvii} Aesop. *Here begynne the book of the subtil historyes and fables of Esope whiche were translated out of Frensshe in to Englysshe by wylham Caxton at westmynstre in the yere of oure Lorde M. CCCC. Xxxij*, ed. William Caxton, 2nd ed. 1484. British Library, *Early English Books Online*. Reel position STC/ 16: 02 http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy2.library.usyd.edu.au/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:11597:113. There is an error in the text of the title: Caxton was not alive in 1433 to translate the work as the date suggests, an L is missing from the original printing.

^{xviii} *Mandeville's Travels*, ed. M. C. Seymour (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 33.

^{xix} John Trevisa, *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus De Proprietatibus Rerum*, ed. M. C. Seymour et al, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 737.

^{xx} "Pit." *Middle English Dictionary*.

^{xxi} See also Husband 7.

^{xxii} Sir Gilbert Hay, *The Buik of King Alexander the Conqueror*, ed. John Cartwright, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1986), 55. Line 27.

^{xxiii} Robert Henryson, *The Poems and Fables of Robert Henryson, Schoolmaster of Dumferline*, ed. H. Harvey Wood (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1938), line 902. The manuscript is available as *The Bannatyne Manuscript. National Library of Scotland Advocates' MS 1.1.6*, Introduction Denton Fox and William A. Ringler (London: Scholar Press, 1980).

^{xxiv} Larry D. Benson, *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1965), 80-81.

^{xxv} John Capgrave, *The Chronicle of England by John Capgrave*, ed. Francis Charles Hingeston (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1858), 257. Capgrave wrote some time after the event in the 1460s.

^{xxvi} *Wynnere and Wastoure and The Parlement of the Three Ages*, ed. Warren Ginsberg (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), lines 93-95.

^{xxvii} The translation is my own.