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## **LES PEAUX ENTRE TROPHÉES ET RELIQUES**

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# ON BOTH SIDES OF HUMAN NATURE

## A LEXICOGRAPHICAL AND TYPOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE MEDIEVAL WILD MAN

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## Abstract

The wild man is a recurring figure in texts and images of the late Middle Ages and well-known to historiography. Strong, brutal and hairy, in many sources the wild man represents a counter-model to civilized man, possessed of an animalistic and dangerous otherness. However, the lexicographical and typological approach adopted in this article, based on the qualifying terms *homo silvaticus*, *homo silvestris*, *homo agrestis* or *pilosi*, reveals a progressive enrichment in the range of physical and behavioural characteristics attributed to medieval wild men, highlighting the elusive dimension of this wild humanity. The original fallen, degraded savage -standing in contrast to the virtuous Christian- gradually sheds his bestial characteristics and enters into the new Adamic or allegorical visions associated with humanism.

## Keywords

wildness, hairiness, animality

The contemporary conception of wildness is essentially based on its opposition to the domestic. The adjective “wild” thus refers first of all to non-domesticated animals, and, by extension, to areas that have not been significantly transformed by humans, those which appear to be the least artificial<sup>[1]</sup>. When the adjective is associated with man, it refers to an individual or society close to a primitive state, prior to advanced forms of civilization<sup>[2]</sup>, and thus applies to human societies that do not control agriculture and that live from hunting<sup>[3]</sup>. The wild man therefore appears as an incomplete, unfinished being, representing a kind of diminished humanity in an anthropological and evolutionary perspective. This modern idea of wildness is largely the result of the opposition between Nature and Culture as it emerged in normative discourse from the 17<sup>th</sup> century under the influence of universal mechanism<sup>[4]</sup>.

Inherited from Antiquity, the horizontal representation of the world based on the domestic-wild dichotomy was not unknown in the Middle Ages<sup>[5]</sup>. However, clerics preferred a vertical conception of the world, or of nature, bringing together all of Creation from the inanimate to the angelic, along an axis connecting the earth to

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1. Fabrice GUIZARD-DUCHAMP, *Les terres du sauvage dans le monde franc (IV<sup>e</sup> - IX<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, Rennes, PUR, 2009, p. 17. This paper is the English version of a previous one in French: Florent POUVREAU, “De part et d’autre de la nature humaine : approche lexicographique et typologique de l’homme sauvage médiéval”, in *L’homme sauvage dans les lettres et les arts*, Cristina NOACCO & Sophie DUHEM (dir.), Rennes, PUR, 2019, pp. 213-235.

2. « Sauvage », *Trésor de la langue française Informatisé* [on line], URL : <http://www.atilf.fr> (consulted on 16/02/2019).

3. « Sauvage », *Littré* [on line], URL: <http://www.littre.org/definition/sauvage> (consulted on 16/02/2019).

4. On the affirmation of naturalism, see in particular Philippe DESCOLA, *Par-delà nature et culture*, Paris, Gallimard, 2005, pp. 241-279.

5. Inherited from Antiquity, it appears more often for animal species, for example, than the pure / impure dichotomy of the Old Testament. However, until the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, the wild quality of a space or creature was somewhat different from that of today: a space is not wild in itself, but its wild quality is given by the creatures that inhabit it: Fabrice Guizard-Duchamp thus prefers the expression “spaces of the wild” to “wild spaces”; Fabrice GUIZARD-DUCHAMP, “Les espaces du sauvage dans le monde franc : réalités et représentations”, Proceedings of the congresses of the Société des historiens médiévistes de l’enseignement supérieur public, 2006, 37, n°1, pp. 117-129, (p. 18). Moreover, the Middle Ages ignored the concept of Culture in the modern sense of the term. On this subject, see in particular Vincent JOLIVET, « Nature adamique et nature déchue, une culture qui ne dit pas son nom », in Gil BARTHOLEYNS, Pierre-Olivier DITTMAR, Thomas GOLSENNE *et al.*, *Adam et l’astragale. Essais d’Anthropologie et d’histoire sur les limites de l’humain*, Paris, Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, 2009, pp. 137-152.

heaven<sup>[6]</sup>. Within this “chain of being”, very clear limits mark the opposition between categories, such as that between man and the animal world, but also that within the animal world itself, between domestic animals and wild animals. The interstitial nature of the wild man suggests that in medieval conceptions he naturally occupies a liminal position within this chain, between man and beast. Although this is often the case, the diversity of the beings gathered in the Middle Ages under the name “wild man”, as well as the evolution of the uses of these figures in texts and images, nevertheless force us to consider this position more closely. The lexicographical and typological approach adopted here demonstrates this diversity, while at the same time proposing elements that could be used for comparison within an anthropological perspective. The attention paid to chronology also reveals how the hairy man of the woods, one of the most popular wild figures from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, successively became the incarnation of a sub- and then a super-humanity.

## The wild man: a composite ‘set’ of figures

As early as the 1970s, with regard to the madness of Yvain, Jacques Le Goff pointed out the difficulty of grasping the complexity and limits of the figure of the wild man in the Middle Ages: ‘it is not easy to define precisely the whole that we can call “wild man” and, within this whole, to locate our mad knight<sup>[7]</sup>. This difficulty needs to be faced. By attempting to define which creatures are grouped under the syntagmatic expression “wild man”, we can then question the coherence of this set of figures by proposing a typology of the behavioural, physical and environmental characteristics associated with wild men.

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6. Fabrice GUIZARD-DUCHAMP, «Les espaces du sauvage», 2006, p. 120.

7. Jacques LE GOFF et Pierre VIDAL-NAQUET, «Levi-Strauss en Brocéliande. Esquisse pour une analyse d'un roman courtois» (1974), new ed. in Jacques LE GOFF, *Un autre Moyen Âge*, Paris, Callimard, 1999, pp. 581-614, (p. 595).

Three Latin terms correspond to the notion of “wild man”: *homo silvaticus*, *homo silvestris* and *homo agrestis*<sup>[8]</sup>. In biblical exegesis and didactic texts (bestiaries, encyclopaedias), these names bring together two distinct categories of beings: the canonical monsters of the East and the ancient pagan divinities (table 1).

PERIOD	FIGURE	CREATURE, CHARACTER	SOURCES
4 <sup>th</sup> -15 <sup>th</sup> centuries	Creatures and peoples on the world's margins	Cynocephali, pygmies, etc.	Biblical exegesis, encyclopedias, iconography
		Pilosi, satyrs, incubi, demons	
		Hairy giant, six-handed men, old horned men, etc.	Literature, iconography
4 <sup>th</sup> -15 <sup>th</sup> centuries	Demons and spirits	Pilosi, satyres, incubes, fées	Biblical exegesis, Canon Law
11 <sup>th</sup> -15 <sup>th</sup> centuries	Wild hero	Merlin, Yvain, Tristan, Elyas, Orson, etc.	Literature, iconography
12 <sup>th</sup> -15 <sup>th</sup> centuries	Man of the woods	Hairy wild man	Lyrical poetry, iconography
14 <sup>th</sup> -15 <sup>th</sup> centuries	Hairy hermit	Onophrius, Mary Magdalene, Mary of Egypt, etc.	Iconography, hagiography, preaching

Table 1. Use of the terms *homo silvaticus*, *homo silvestris*, *homo agrestis* and “homme sauvage”

8. For example, Jean Corbechon translates *homo silvestris* by “wild man” in the second half of the fourteenth century; Barthélémy l'Anglais, *Livre des propriétés des choses*, book XVIII, chap. 82 (*Pelus*), Lyon, Guillaume le Roy, 1485-1486. The expression *Homo agrestis* used by Thomas of Cantimpré is also translated by “wild man” by Jacob van Maerlant at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century; JACOB VAN MAERLANT, *Het boek der natuur*, Peter BURGER (ed.), Amsterdam, E. Querido, 1995, p. 17.

The monstrous peoples of ancient geography were first taken up by Christian culture which regularly refers to them as “wild men”. Among ancient authors, this syntagmatic expression was already used for some strange peoples of the East<sup>[9]</sup>. For medieval clerics, many weird creatures from the margins of the world, from Cyclops to *Cynocephali*, were also considered as “wild men” and labelled as such<sup>[10]</sup>.

Early on, Christian authors also sought to Christianize ancient culture by humanizing or demonizing pagan deities. In this perspective, creatures such as fauns, satyrs or *incubi* are regularly considered by Christian authors as “wild men”<sup>[11]</sup>, sometimes demonic<sup>[12]</sup>, but most often mortals. Saint Jerome thus indicates that the satyr that

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9. Herodotus thus locates the wild men and women west of Libya, without, however, describing their physical appearance. Megasthenes reports that there are wild men in India, including a specimen dying of hunger in captivity. Another group, described as wild by the same author, lack a mouth and feed by smelling fruits, flowers and roasted meat. Pliny also locates in India wild *Choromandi* with a hairy body, yellow eyes, the fangs of a dog and who, being unable to speak, communicates with loud screams; Richard BERNHEIMER, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages. A Study in Art, Sentiment and Demonology* (1952), new ed. New York, Octagon Books, 1970, pp. 86-87. Strabo, in his Geography, also indicates, in taking up Megasthenus in the part of his Geography which he devotes to India (Book XV, Chapter 57), that a variety of “wild men” have inverted feet and starve once captured. The occurrences of the expression in ancient writers are also studied by Oleh MAZUR, *The Wild Man in the Spanish Renaissance & Golden Age Theater. A comparative study including the indio the bárbaro and their counterparts in European lores*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1966, p. 25 & seq.

10. “Les satyres selon l'opinion d'aucuns sont des hommes sauvages [homines silvestres] dont ils sont plusieurs à habiter par les déserts si comme dit Isidore en ce chapitre. Car il en est d'aucuns qui sont appelés sinophales qui ont tête de chien, et aboient comme un chien. Les autres sont appelés cyclopes qui ont un œil au milieu du front” (“Satyrs in the opinion of some are wild men [homines silvestres], many of whom live in deserts, as Isidore says in this chapter. There are some who are called sinophales who have the head of a dog, and bark like a dog. The others are called cyclopes who have an eye in the middle of the forehead”); BARTHELEMY L'ANGLAIS, *Livre des propriétés des choses*, book XVIII, chap. 46, Jean CORBECHON (transl.), Lyon, Guillaume le Roy, 1485-1486. Thomas de Cantimpré uses the expression *homo silvestris* or *homo agrestis* interchangeably for strange peoples of the East. He thus describes wild men hairy like pigs or with six hands; THOMAS OF CANTIMPRÉ, *Liber de natura rerum*, Helmut BOESE (ed.), Berlin-New York, de Gruyter, 1973, lib. III, cap. 5, 21, p. 160.

11. The *Liber monstrorum* thus mentions satyrs and *incubi*, called wild men, for whom the upper part is very similar to the human body, while the lower part is similar to that of wild animals and fauna; *Liber monstrorum*, Andy ORCHARD (ed.), *Pride and Prodigies. Studies in the Monsters of the Bewolf-Manuscript*, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 1995, p. 282. A century later, Raban Maur, taking up Isidore de Seville, also indicates that some consider fauna to be wild men: *Dicunt quidam esse siluvestres homines quos nonnulli faunos ficarios vocant*; RABAN MAUR, *De rerum naturis (De universo)*, Jacques-Paul MIGNE (ed.), *Patrologia Latina 111*, 1864, col. 9-614, note 197.

12. About the *pilosi* of the Old Testament (Isaiah, 13:21), dancing in the ruins of Babylon among the wild beasts of the desert, Saint Jerome indicates that these creatures, which can be called *incubi*, satyrs, wild men or *ficarii* must be considered demons; Saint Jerome, *Commentaires de Jérôme sur le prophète Isaïe*, Roger GYRSON (ed.), 5 vols, Herder, Fribourg, 1993-1999, t. II, Books V-VII, 1994, p. 560.

Antoine meets in the desert of Egypt is a mortal man<sup>[13]</sup>. This use continued until the end of the Middle Ages and is found in French sources, as shown, for example, by an extract from the *Secrets of Natural History*, a geographical compilation from the 14<sup>th</sup> century<sup>[14]</sup>.

These early mentions of the term “wild man” show the importance of the ancient heritage. The clerics of the Middle Ages thus forged the concept of wild man around that of barbarian, while they integrated into this group of creatures the ancient deities that they most often transformed into mortal monsters. This conception is found in literature from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, especially with ancient novels. In the different versions of the *Roman d’Alexandre*, “wild man” is used to describe certain strange characters living in the far reaches of India, characterized by monstrosity, geographical distance and sometimes a lack of civilization: giants, hairy or not<sup>[15]</sup>, horned old men<sup>[16]</sup>, or six-handed men<sup>[17]</sup>.

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13. SAINT JÉRÔME, *Vita S. Pauli primi heremitae*, Jacques-Paul MIGNE (ed.), *Patrologia Latina* 23, 1845, col. 17-28, (col. 23).

14. *Adonc l’homme sauvage lui respondist « suis homme mortel qui demeure et habite en ses desers et suis un dou troupepe des faunes et sartires et incubes que la gent payenne qui est moult deceue et avuglee par diverses erreurs et a accoustume de adourer parydolatrie ancienne. [...] »* (“And so the wild man answered him ‘I am a mortal man who remains and dwells in these deserts and I am from the flock of fauns, satyrs and *incubi* that the pagan peoples who are blinded by various errors usually worship by ancient idolatry’.”); Paris, BnF, ms. fr. 1377, fol. 24.

15. “Surrounding that plain was a dense forest of fruit trees which provided sustenance for the woodland men that inhabited that forest. The men there had huge bodies like giants and were dressed in fur clothes”; LEON ARCIPRESTE, *The history of Alexander’s battles: Historia de Preliis, the J1 version*, Roger TELFRYN PRITCHARD (transl.), Toronto, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1992, p. 101 (§ 103). “*Et qunt ce vint vers le vespre, si vin uns homs sauvages de grant corsage et ert velus comme pors*” (“And when it was vespers time, there came a wild man of great stature and hairy as a pig.”); *Die altfranzösische Prosa-Alexanderroman nach der Berliner Bilderhandschrift*, Alfons HILKA (ed.), Halle, Niemeyer, 1920, p. 202.

16. “*ilz vinrent devant eulx .IIII. grans hommes moult anciens, qui estoient vellus à la maniere d’ours et avoient une corne ainsi que de cerf ou front et si estoient aussi noir que meure, et leurs yeulx luisans comme escarboucles. [...] Quant Alixandre ot but et mengié, il commanda que on lui amenast ces hommes sauvages qu’il avoient pris, comme fait fu*” (“They saw in front of them three tall, very old men, who were hairy like a bear and had a stag horn on their foreheads, and they were as black as Moors and their eyes gleamed like carbuncles. [...] When Alexander drank and ate, he commanded that they brought him the wild men they had taken, and so was done.”); JEAN WAUQUELIN, *Les faicts et les conquestes d’Alexandre le grand*, Sandrine HERICHE (ed.), Genève, Droz, 2000, pp. 405-406.

17. “*Après vindrent grans porcs qui avoient grans dens d’un code de lonc, et estoient avec eaus hommes et femes sauvages dont cascuns avoit .vi. Mains*” (“After came big pigs with big teeth as long as an elbow, and there were with them wild men and women who had six hands each”); *Die altfranzösische Prosa-Alexanderroman*, op. cit., p. 166.

A new use of the expression then appeared from the 11th century, in Arthurian literature and *chansons de geste*, then in prose novels in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. In several texts, the hero who periodically becomes wild following an ordeal is now described as a “wild man” or ‘resembling a “wild man”’<sup>[18]</sup>. Woodland wandering, often caused by a romantic setback, more rarely a quest or flight from danger<sup>[19]</sup> is usually combined with an episode of madness. This figure of the wild madman, built from Celtic folklore<sup>[20]</sup> and the biblical model of Nebuchadnezzar<sup>[21]</sup>, is no longer distinguished by a monstrous body, but above all by behaviour that radically breaks with that of the courteous man. The wild hero tears off his clothes and wanders naked (Yvain), or covered with leaves or skins (Elyas)<sup>[22]</sup>, eats raw meat (Fergus)<sup>[23]</sup>, and sometimes loses the capacity to speak (Yvain, Tristan)<sup>[24]</sup>.

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18. Following a battle causing the death of his brothers, Merlin withdrew into the forest as a “wild man” (Fit silvester homo quasi silvis silvis deditus esset); GEOFFROY DE MONMOUTH, *Vita Merlini*, Philippe WALTER (ed.), *Le divin maudit, Merlin, Lailoken, Suibhne. Textes et études*, Grenoble, Ellug, 1999, pp. 56-172, (p. 62). Yvain, believing he was losing Laudine’s love, left the court and went mad. From then on, he began to “wander in the woods, like a madman and a wild man”; CHRETIEN DE TROYES, *Yvain ou le Chevalier au lion*, Philippe WALTER (ed.), in Daniel POIRION (dir.), *Œuvres complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. «Bibliothèque de la Pléiade», n° 408, 1994, p. 337-503, (p. 408).

19. A synthetic table of the ‘wilding’ modalities in medieval literature is proposed by Florent POUVREAU, *Du poil et de la bête. Iconographie du corps sauvage à la fin du Moyen Âge*, Paris, CTHS, 2014, p. 281.

20. On the figure of the madman in Irish literature see Padraig O’ RIAIN, “A Study of the Irish Legend of the Wild Man”, *Eigse*, 14, 1972, pp. 176-206. On the Celtic origins of the legend of Merlin see in particular Philippe WALTER, “Sous le signe du sauvage”, in *id.* (dir.), *Le divin maudit. Merlin, Lailoken, Suibhne : textes et études*, Grenoble, Ellug, 1999, pp. 5-48.

21. David WELLS, “The medieval Nebuchadnezzar: The exegetical Tradition of Daniel IV and its Significance for the Yvain Romances and for German Vernacular Literature”, *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 16, 1982, pp. 380-432.

22. The author of *La Chanson du Chevalier au cygne* says about Elyas: “vestu estoit de fueilles, desous velus estoit: / homme fol et sauvage a merveille sanloit” (c. 850-851) (“He was dressed in leaves and hairy underneath / he looked just like a wild and mad man” ; *La Chanson du Chevalier au cygne et de Godefroid de Bouillon*, Célestin HIPPEAU (ed.), Paris, Auguste Aubry, 1874-18778, 2 vols., t.I, p. 34.

23. Fergus eats raw but is not described as a wild man (c. 3655-3663); GUILLAUME LE CLERC, *The Romance of Fergus*, Wilson FRESOLN (ed.), Philadelphia, Allen, 1983, p. 139. On the diet of the wild man, see in particular Irene FABRY, «Le festin de l’homme sauvage dans la Suite Vulgate du Merlin et le Roman de Silence : Attrait de la nourriture et mise en scène paradoxale de Merlin», *Questes*, 12, 2007, pp. 49-64.

24. The loss of speech use is a characteristic feature of Yvain’s madness, while Tristan’s madness sees him scream and howl as he walks through the Morois forest; *Le roman de Tristan en prose. Tome 1 : Des aventures de Lancelot à la fin de la « Folie Tristan »*, Marie-Luce CHÉNERIE et Philippe MÉNARD (transl.), Paris, Champion, 1990, p. 153.

In parallel to this new association of the wild man with madness, the *topos* of the *Conort del Salvatge* appears in lyrical poetry, of which there are about thirty occurrences between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>[25]</sup>. This motif also shows a wild man with strange behaviour: exposed to the harshness of the climate, the wild man does not complain about the bad weather but instead has fun with it and laughs. The paradoxical attitude of the character is used here from a moral perspective. The savage rejoices because he knows that after the rain the good weather will come: he thus embodies the virtues of patience and perseverance in the face of the adversity of love<sup>[26]</sup>. This man of the woods then became the object of an abundant iconography from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and the increasingly widespread motif of the wild hairy man was used, in a courteous and Arthurian context, to represent an animated creature, driven by his instinct towards young virgins that the knights delivered<sup>[27]</sup>.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the repertoire of beings referred to as wild men in medieval texts thus continued to expand. At the same time, the range of behavioural and bodily characteristics also increased significantly. Among the latter, however, characteristics pertaining to the animal world occupied a prominent place from the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Tab. 2).

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25. Roger BOASE, "The "Penitents of Love" and the Wild Man in the Storm: A Passage by the Knight of La Tour-Landry", *The Modern Language Review*, 84, n°4, 1989, pp. 817-833. The list of occurrences is provided by the author in the appendix, pp. 827-832. To these can be added, for the last two centuries of the Middle Ages, the *Ballade d'ung homme sauvaige* (Paris, BnF, ms. fr. 2366, fol. 4) and some verses from Guillaume de Machaut's *Livre du Voir-dit* (v. 5470-5475); GUILLAUME DE MACHAUT, *Le Livre du Voir-dit*, Paul IMBS (ed. & transl.), Paris, Librairie Générale Française, 1999, p. 448.

26. Richard BERNHEIMER, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

27. Florent POUVREAU, *op. cit.*, pp. 109-120.

	WILD (CARNAL MAN)	CHRISTIAN (SPIRITUAL MAN)
Behaviour	Brutal	Legitimate use of violence
	Instinctive	Self-control
	Feral	Courageous
	Aphasic	Spoken language
	Unpredictable (madness)	Reasonable
Body	Naked	Dressed
	Monstrous	Adamic
	Raw diet	Cooked diet
	Superhuman strength	Limited force
	Hairy	Smooth
Living environment	Far away	Nearby
	Unknown	Known
	Perilous	Safe
	Desert	Populated areas

Table 2. The animalized wild man: a counter-model

## The animalized wild man: below human nature

The conceptions of human nature in the Middle Ages, as well as its relations with the animal world, are extremely complex and sometimes contradictory. We can nonetheless attempt to present the main features.

The boundaries between man and animal can sometimes seem rather vague or porous in medieval cultures. Thus, the place of monsters that can be described as savage in Creation sometimes divides medieval commentators and encyclopaedists<sup>[28]</sup>. The influence of folk culture on scholarly culture is also apparent in the idea of a transgression of the limits by bestiality: in 1464, for example, a shepherd was accused and sentenced to death by the court of

28. *Cynocephali*, for example, were generally regarded as humans. Isidore of Seville, on the contrary, considered them to be more like animals. Some peoples such as the pygmies were also considered by a majority of scientists and commentators as animals and not men, placed on the chain of being between monkeys and men; Maaïke VAN DER LUGT, "L'humanité des montres et leur accès aux sacrements dans la pensée médiévale", *Monstre et imaginaire social*, Anna CAIOZZO and Anne-Emmanuelle DEMARTINI (dir.), Paris, Créaphis, 2008, pp. 135-161.

Holland for having fertilized a cow<sup>[29]</sup>. However, early Christianity, from Paul and the Fathers of the Church, proposes a clear opposition between man and animal, resting on the superiority of reason and the immortality of the human soul. This opposition man/animal then serves as a template with which to address several dualities internal to human nature (Fig. 1)<sup>[30]</sup>.

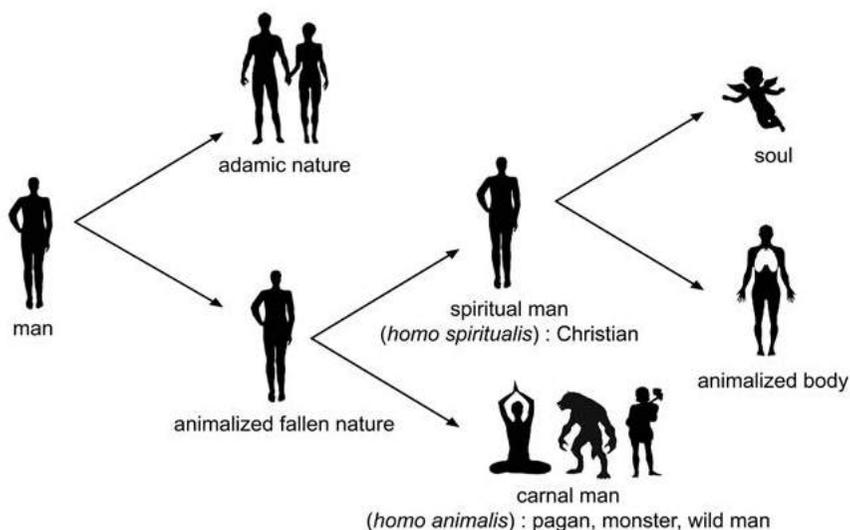


Fig. 1. The man/animal opposition: a dichotomy at work within human nature

Man is thus regarded, as St. Augustine says, as a rational and mortal animal, distinct from both other animals and angels<sup>[31]</sup>. The boundary between man and animal is further strengthened in the central Middle Ages, with growing emphasis on the distinctiveness of nature. Thus the gradualist conception of beings, reinforced by the rediscovery of the natural philosophy of Aristotle in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, takes precedence over the traditional opposition between domestic and wild animals. The evolution of

29. *Ibid*, p. 148, note 46. On the other hand, the belief that women, under the influence of guilty thoughts, can generate monsters or animals persisted throughout the Middle Ages. Breast milk was also supposed to be able to transmit physical qualities and interspecies breastfeeding was thought to generate animal-looking men, as is the case for Ourseu in *Perceforest*; Christine FERLAMPIN-ACHER, *Fées, bestes and Luitons. Croyances et merveilles dans les romans français en prose*, Paris, PUPS, 2002, p. 286.

30. Pierre-Olivier DITTMAR, Thomas GOLSENNE et al., *Adam et l'astragale...*, op. cit., pp. 157-158.

31. SAINT AUGUSTINE, *The City of God*, VIII, 15. Quoted by Vincent JOLIVET, art. cit., p. 138.

the uses of the adjective “wild”, in both Latin and French, confirms this trend: until the end of the Middle Ages, it applied especially to carnivorous animals (*bestiae*) living freely in the wild<sup>[32]</sup>. However, as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century authors began to use it for birds and this practice became frequent from the 14<sup>th</sup> century<sup>[33]</sup>. The wild animal is no longer simply the ferocious beast, but more generally the non-domesticated animal freely evolving in the wild. The man/animal border is thus asserted at the expense of the border between beasts of burden and wild animals. The rediscovery of Aristotle’s natural philosophy finally pushed back the idea of a possible crossing of the boundaries between man and animal. For Aristotle and the medieval authors who refer to him, crossbreeding between humans and domestic animals is indeed impossible<sup>[34]</sup>. These combined elements then contribute to the birth of the modern conception of the animal, designating all animate creatures with the exception of man<sup>[35]</sup>.

It is in the context of this nascent naturalism that the medieval figure of the man of the woods is affirmed. Just as man is perceived as increasingly distinct from the rest of nature, so the wild man is emerging as a privileged figure to define human nature and its virtues, whether Christian or courteous. The animalization of many wild men between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries is thus essentially negative and can have an exemplary value: the wild man embodies an individual otherness, that of vices and weaknesses that virtuous men must avoid.

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32. A search by occurrences in the *Corpus de la littérature médiévale* of Garnier Editions shows that in a quarter of cases it is a “beast” that is designated as wild. The term “beast”, from the Latin *bestia*, is applied to animals “whose mouths and claws are cruel”, enjoying natural freedom and carried away by their instincts, and not to reptiles; ISIDORE DE SÉVILLE, *Etymologies*, Book XII, Jacques ANDRÉ (ed. and transl.), Paris, *Les Belles Lettres*, 1986, p. 86.

33. At the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Châtelain de Coucy spoke of the “sweet voice of the wild nightingale” (“*la douce voiz du louseignol sauvage*”), Alain LEROND (ed.), Paris, *Faculté des Lettres et Sciences de l’Université de Paris*, 1963, *Chanson III*, vers 1, p. 68.

34. Maaïke VAN DER LUGT, *art. cit.*, pp. 147-148.

35. On this theme, see in particular the doctoral thesis of Pierre-Olivier DITTMAR, *Naissance de la bestialité. Une anthropologie du rapport homme-animal dans les années 1300*, PhD thesis, EHESS, Paris, 2010.

## The idealized wild man: towards an Adamic nature

While this negative portrait of the man of the woods persisted until the end of the Middle Ages, other uses of the figure were established from the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, especially through images. The strength and vitality of the character are sometimes placed at the service of an apotropaic use. The wild man thus appears as a figure of protection on pilgrimage signs or murals throughout the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and it is also used in heraldry from the 1330s<sup>[36]</sup>. The wild man is also humanized, or “de-animalized” in the images: his hair is less shaggy from the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, he stands upright and he frequently has the power of speech<sup>[37]</sup>. At the same period, wild women appear for the first time in iconography.

The ‘wilding’ *topos* is then regularly associated with eremitism. Wild men and women are thereby presented as reasonable beings, living in harmony with a nature that allows them to survive while escaping the temptations and corruption of life in society. An allegorical use of the wild man and woman thus emerged in the 15<sup>th</sup> century as a figure of virtuous renunciation (Fig. 2)<sup>[38]</sup>.

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36. Florent POUVREAU, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-143. On heraldry see in particular Claudie VAREILLE-DAHAN, *L'homme sauvage dans le décor architectural en France*, PHD thesis, Tours, Université de Tours, 2014, p. 152-288.

37. Florent POUVREAU, *op. cit.*, pp. 132-137.

38. On this last topic see in particular Anna RAPP BURI and Monica STUCKY-SCHÜRER, *Zahm und wild. Basler und Straßburger Bildteppiche des 15. Jahrhunderts*, Mainz, P. von Zabern, 1990. The cushion cover reproduced in this image illustrates this well: the young wild woman indicates in the phylactery that she fled the world and went into exile in the wilderness. The latter is presented in the form of a paradisiacal garden, far from the temptations and corruption of worldly life.



Fig. 2. Wild woman and unicorn, embroidered cushion cover, Strasbourg, 1500-1510. Basel, Historisches Museum, inv. 1926.40.

In these sources, wild men or women maintain a degraded, animalized and wild body, but are distinguished by peaceful, reasonable and virtuous behaviour. The otherness of the wild man and his edifying use thus shifted: the mad and brutal wild man represented the radical otherness of the carnal man opposed to the Christian man, with a degraded body and mind. The virtuous savage, with a degraded body but elevated in spirit, shows on the contrary the resolution of the inner tension of the spiritual man, restoring the supremacy of the spirit over the flesh<sup>[39]</sup>.

A rather famous sermon testifies both to the diversity of the creatures gathered under the name “wild man” and to the affirmation of positive figures among them. In a homily delivered in Strasbourg in 1508, Johann Geiler von Kaysersberg indicated that the term “wild man” covers five distinct categories of beings: pygmies, horned and hooved creatures (satyrs or *pilos*), evil spirits whom he called devils, wild men and women living in Spain, and finally the “solitary”, hermits and saints living in reclusion, like Onophrius or Mary Magdalene<sup>[40]</sup>.

There is less a “wild man” in the Middle Ages than “wild men”, whose diversity has increased over the centuries. We can therefore consider the wild man as a dynamic set of figures, whose characteristics and uses change very significantly over the period. Three phases stand out in this respect: until the Central Middle Ages, the expression was mainly used for monsters or demonic creatures, populating the margins of the world. From the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the figure of the man of the woods, “wilded” or naturally wild, who was no longer deformed but animalized in other ways, became established. Finally, the last two centuries of the Middle Ages consecrated the figure of the hermit, and the allegorical idealization of certain men of the woods.

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39. This association between the wild man and spiritual fulfilment is total in the iconography of some of the hermit saints represented covered in hair, such as Onophrius or Mary Magdalene; Florent POUVREAU, *op. cit.*, pp. 207-266.

40. Roger BARTRA, *Wild Men in the Looking Glass: The Mythic Origins of European Otherness*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1994, p. 150.

Finally, it seems necessary to consider the characteristics of the wild man as a relative repertoire, fairly coherent but open, rather than as a set of unchanging particularities. Thus the wild man, mute, impulsive or carnivorous, is a figure of decay, of degradation from human to animal. He is an infrahuman creature, guided by his senses and devoid of spirit. The peaceful and virtuous wild man with his eremitical way of life is on the contrary a figure of elevation, close to the Adamic model, embodying the total submission of the body to the spirit. He is no longer a man who lacks humanity, but on the contrary a man who has regained his original nature. We can therefore see in this set of ambivalent figures an affirmation of humanism germinating among scholastics: the possibility of man to choose between rising or falling.

### **Référence électronique**

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