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**THE BROTHERHOOD BETWEEN SAINTS AND WOLVES IN  
“THE BOOK OF SAINTS AND FRIENDLY BEASTS”  
BY ABBIE FARWELL BROWN**

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***Abstract***

*This paper aims to examine the miraculous encounters between various saints and wolves which were described in the medieval legends retold by Abbie Farwell Brown in “The Book of Saints and Friendly Beasts” (1900). The article analyzes the texts brought into discussion starting from the presentation of two medieval symbols: the saint and the wolf. The paper will show that the frightening wolf that appears in the writings is a necessary disruptive element meant to reveal the purity of the holy man and to trigger the manifestation of the divine love and order in the material universe. By taming the wild, ferocious wolf, the saint restores the harmony of Paradise to the natural world.*

***Keywords:*** *saint; wolf; miraculous; beast; legend*

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***1. Introduction***

The present article proposes an analysis of the special connections that are established between certain saints and wolves, as they are presented in the medieval legends retold by the American writer Abbie Farwell Brown (1871 –1927) at the beginning of the last century in her first writing dedicated to children, "The Book of Saints and Friendly Beasts".

Published in 1900, the book describes the unusual encounters between God's people and various animals, as well as the close relationships that develop between the two poles. Of all the miraculous encounters reported, those in which wolves appear as protagonists possess a special charm. But before exploring the core of the legends, we should clarify what sanctity represents and what the wolf symbolizes in the mentality of the Middle Ages.

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## 2. Sanctity and its portrayal in medieval legends

The Christian tradition has always perceived holiness as a quality that the Heavenly Father chooses to impart to man. This quality presupposes an active participation in God's loving life, a deep penetration into the luminous and secret depth of the divine. Thus, holiness represents a hidden, ineffable attribute, and hagiographical literature has the difficult task of revealing it.

Medieval legends describing the lives of saints aim to make holiness visible while protecting its transcendent, mysterious nature. That is why they usually resort to a miraculous<sup>2</sup> imaginary space, where the extraordinary event is merely a sign pointing to the invisible, exceptional quality of sainthood. By their enticing and meaningful nature, these legends break the laws of materiality in order to reveal the spiritual dimension of the world.

In hagiographical literature, the supernatural invades the natural order, revealing itself in the concrete universe. This process, however, involves a defamiliarization, an alienation from the ordinary world, a distortion of the known reality that serves a deeper purpose. This deformation is often caused by the appearance of a monster, which, by its disruptive nature, has the role of triggering the manifestation of the divine. In the context of our analysis, the monster in question is, of course, the wolf, which becomes an indicator of the saint's extraordinary power and compassion.

## 3. The wolf in the Christian imaginary of the Middle Ages

Over time, in the visions of different peoples, the wolf has been invested with complex attributes, being perceived as a celestial light or as a devouring force, as a mythical ancestor, as a psychopomp, as the incarnation of a god, etc. The he-wolf was often a symbol of the warrior hero or of the sorcerer, while the she-wolf represented, in countless cultures, the protective motherhood, fecundity or debauchery. (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1982, 582-584).

The medieval Christian imaginary mainly highlighted the aggressive, cruel side of this animal, which was often described in the biblical tradition. If it was considered that the Good Shepherd takes great care of his flock, the wolf, by its violent, destructive nature, constituted a threat to it (John, 10:12). In many cases, the wolf was presented as a greedy animal that hides from people during the day, making its presence felt at night, in the absence of light. (Zephaniah 3:3) The Gospels associated the wolf with the false prophets and the pagans, while some monastic chronicles of the Middle Ages presented this animal as a beast that caused fear among the monks, thus threatening the Christian life. (Rao, Riccardo, 2019) Even Dante, in his "Inferno", depicted the she-wolf as a vicious animal that tempts man with worldly goods, leading him away from the right path. (Dante, 1306, 5)

Thus, in the Middle Ages, the wolf was perceived as a hideous, greedy and wicked beast, which endangered not only the lives of the living things, but also the established order. This menacing creature was a symbol

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<sup>2</sup> The term *miraculous* comes from the Latin *mirabilia* and refers to a feeling of wonder mixed with admiration, fascination or fear (Poirion, 1982, 4) in front of an unusual event which, going beyond the everyday experience, makes us envision another world. The emergence of the supernatural in the everyday reality reveals something mysterious and exciting, enriching our experience, changing our way of looking at life and causing ambivalent emotions. In the realm of the miraculous, the characters have supernatural powers and obey laws that defy the ordinary logic. They do not have a clearly defined personality, but correspond to some social roles (the king, the prince, etc.) or to some typologies (the benefactor, the evil being, etc.) The positive characters have exceptional qualities, being endowed with the attributes of heaven, while the terrifying characters represent hell. The animals are personified, and the landscapes are typical: the castle, the mysterious forest, the dangerous mountain, the road full of obstacles, the clearing, the cave, etc.

of havoc and wilderness, of chaos. Therefore, the medieval man dreamt of returning the world to that heavenly harmony blessed by God that had existed at the beginning of Creation, he wanted to regain the dominion over the animal kingdom that he had held in the time of Adam.

However, the reinstating of the divine order on earth implied a return to man's pre-Fall innocence. This was possible only in the case of the saint, who, through his purity and compassion, had the power to restore Paradise on earth and to reassert the authority of the human being over the other living things of the created world. The saint's supernatural power over wild beasts and his unusual ability to communicate with animals were a sign of his love, piety and special connection with the Heavenly Father.

#### ***4. The relationships between saints and wolves in "The Book of Saints and Friendly Beasts"***

One of the saints who were said to have restored the paradisiacal harmony between mankind and the animal kingdom was the spectacular Francis of Assisi, and Brown could not leave out from her book a famous legend of the Middle Ages, that of the meeting between the beggar saint of God and the most terrifying wolf ever imagined.

The legend of "Saint Francis of Assisi" presents us with an extremely wild and hungry wolf, who steals not only sheep and cows, but also human beings for dinner. Its greed has terrified the inhabitants of the small town of Gubbio, who have become so frightened, that they no longer dare to go out of town for fear of being "gobbled up". (Brown, 1900, 66)

Determined to help the terrified people, Francis goes in search of the fierce animal and immediately tames it. He reprimands the wolf for its actions and promises that its life will be spared if it desists from its aggressive behavior. The animal agrees to make peace with the humankind and follows the saint to the market-place of the town, where crowds of people have gathered to see how their cruel enemy is going to be punished. However, Francis, with his well-known benevolence, tells the inhabitants that the wolf will not harm them anymore if they undertake to give it its daily food. Thus, the saint plays the role of a mediator between the humankind and the animal kingdom, between God and the created world.

The people accept to feed the animal and the tamed beast stays in Gubbio for two years without harming anyone, before dying of old age. As the story goes, the death of the creature saddens the inhabitants, because the existence of the tamed wolf has represented an extraordinary proof of the power of the saint, of the presence of God in the midst of the town.

In the story, the wolf symbolizes the forces of darkness that need to be vanquished for the divine order to be reestablished on earth. The folk tale emphasizes the contrast between the terrible savagery of the creature and the extraordinary love of the saint, which crosses all boundaries. The basic idea of the story is that Francis succeeds in reconciling the wild beast with the very community it has terrorized. By refusing to condemn the wolf and by granting it forgiveness, he gives it a chance to correct its violent nature, thus treating the animal with respect and consideration. This attitude should not surprise us if we take into account the fact that the saint considers all beings and non-beings his brothers and sisters.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> According to the legend, Francis saw the face of God in every creature and created thing, and this special approach made him constantly experience the joy of brotherhood with everything that exists. That is why the people, the animals and even the plants that he met on his journeys also felt in him the presence of the divine and recognized themselves as part of this universal kinship: "The sick and sorrowful knew his smile. [...] The wilder beasts beyond the mountains, the fierce wolves and shy foxes [...] knew Saint Francis. [...] The trees, the meadows, the brooks, the flowers all knew the smile of Saint Francis. [...] Upon all alike his face of love beamed tenderly." (Brown, 1900, 64-65)

Another legend that highlights the extraordinary kinship of the entire cosmos is that of "Saint Blaise and his beasts". According to the folk tale, this Armenian saint has converted the most ferocious creatures into his friends, and the wild animals visit him every day at his cave on Mount Argus to receive a blessing from him and to serve him. In connection with these visits of the creatures to Blaise's forest dwelling, Brown relates an extraordinary episode:

Agricola [...] sent his soldiers into the mountains to get some wild beasts for the games in the arena [...]. But they could not find any beasts at all in the mountains [...]. But by and by they came by accident to the cave where Saint Blaise lived.

And there were the animals, all the fierce beasts whom they feared; lions, tigers, leopards, bears, and wolves, making their morning call upon Saint Blaise and sitting quietly about. In the midst was Blaise himself, praying [...]. Although the creatures were frightened, they did not move nor growl for fear of disturbing their master, but kept quite still, glaring at the soldiers with big yellow eyes. (Brown, 1900, 29-30)

It goes without saying that, shocked and frightened by this supernatural experience, the soldiers do not disturb the saint and do not catch any wild animals. In the legend, the unconditional, all-transforming love of the saint appears as a sign of the manifestation of the kingdom of God on earth. Just like in other miraculous stories, the action of the holy man, who wonderfully transforms ferocious beasts into gentle lambs, arouses in the viewer an astonishment mixed with fear.

However, the miraculous also has another function: that of correcting inappropriate behaviors. And, in connection to Blaise and the wild creatures, Brown narrates another unusual situation, that in which a woman comes to complain to the saint that a wolf has stolen her only piglet. At Blaise's rebuke, the hungry beast returns the piglet intact to the woman and, as a reward, it receives "a dish of fresh milk to cool his throat." (Brown, 1900, 29)

In some folk tales, however, the saint does not get to save the prey from the hungry animal. In "The Miracles of Saint Berach", a huge gray wolf eats the calf of a cow called Bel, who lives in the meadows of a monastery. Seeing the grieving mother, the saint calls the wolf and makes him the son of the heifer in order to replace the slain calf. The wild beast, now tamed, remains with the herd of cows and even ends up guarding it from other ferocious animals.

Another beautiful legend in which a wolf is called upon to replace a killed creature is that of "Saint Herve, the blind singer". Herve, a blind boy, loses his father, Hivarnion, inheriting from him a golden harp and the gift of singing. At the age of seven, Herve is forced to walk from one town to another and to sing in the street in order to support Rivanone, his sick mother. In his wanderings, he is accompanied by Blanco, a white dog who guards him and helps him move.

One day, Blanco is accidentally killed by a huge black wolf. Herve begins to cry over the loss of his dear friend, and the wolf, ashamed of his deed, agrees to take the dog's place to keep the boy company on his travels. As the legend states, "the wolf became as dear to him as Blanco had been. He slept in the barn with the oxen [...]. But he kept sharp watch over his little master, and saw that no one hurt or cheated him. [...] And he was always near, with his sharp teeth and watchful eyes." (Brown, 1900, 43)

Throughout his life, the animal faithfully accompanies the saint, guiding him, protecting him and sharing in his joys and sorrows. After many years, Herve's mother dies, leaving behind Cristina, an adopted girl who loves Herve dearly and who befriends the wolf. The saint, now old, decides to give up traveling, and the wolf is to choose a site for the building of a church. The three characters settle in a clearing near a river, and the legend does not end without mentioning one of the touching and funny habits of this strange and harmonious family, in which the wolf reveals itself to us as a playful companion of the saint:

And while Christine stood there putting the flowers into tall golden vases [...], her Uncle Hervé would come creeping up the steps of the church, his hand on the head of the wolf, who always led him to the place where he heard her voice. Softly, very softly, as if he were doing something naughty, Hervé would pull open the heavy door, just a crack, the better to hear her sing. Then he would put his ear to the opening; while the wolf would thrust his nose in below, and wag his tail eagerly. (Brown, 1900, 45)

In the legend of St. Bridget, a wolf offers to take the place of another wolf killed by a hunter in order to save the hunter's life, thus playing the role of a redeemer of man. According to the legend, the King of Ireland promises a reward to anyone who would kill a wolf, as they are feared by the inhabitants. However, he himself keeps a tamed wolf as a pet. One day, the pet is killed by a hunter's arrow, and the angry king orders that the man should be punished by death. The hunter is locked in a dungeon until the sentence would be carried out.

Wishing to save the man's life, Bridget heads to the castle, not knowing exactly what to do in order to remove him from danger. On the way, an enormous white wolf jumps into the chariot and curls up at the girl's feet, then follows her to the palace. Placing her hand on the huge beast's head, Bridget asks the king to release the hunter in exchange for the tamed creature. Impressed by the majestic animal and by the pleading look of the girl, the monarch grants her request. At the end of the legend, the animal is rewarded for saving the hunter's life with a happy life at the palace, where, we are told, it often enjoys the visits of Bridget.

If, in the legends approached so far, the wolf has been described as a terrifying animal that accepts to be tamed along the way, in "The she-wolf-mother of Saint Ailbe", just like in the famous legend of Romulus and Remus, we are introduced to a she-wolf who nurses a found little boy, thus saving his life. Ailbe, an Irish baby, is abandoned by his parents in the woods and is rescued by a she-wolf. The boy grows up in the den with his foster mother's cubs. After a year or two, a hunter, who is none other than the prince of the place, discovers the child in the forest. Seeing that the boy behaves like a wolf, he takes him to his castle, leaving him to the care of the princess. The boy grows up, becomes a bishop and settles in a palace in the city of Emlý. One day, while walking home, Ailbe hears the familiar howl of the mother wolf who, this time, is being chased through the streets by some hunters. Wishing to save the creature, he immediately wraps it in his velvet cloak, protecting it from the hounds with his scepter and forbidding the men to pursue it.

The legend ends with the unusual image of the bishop sitting every day at the same table with the wolf-mother and his four wolf brothers. Brown does not forget to specify that: "there with her five dear children about her in a happy circle the kind wolf-mother sat and ate the good things which the Bishop's friends had sent him. But the child she loved best [...] was the blue-eyed Saint at the top of the table [...]" (Brown, 1900, 60) This miraculous meal symbolizes the communion between God and the created world, between humankind and the animal kingdom.

In the legend, the she-wolf appears as a prototype of the loving mother, being presented in contrast to Ailbe's human mother, who is depicted as cruel. Thus, by an interesting reversal of roles, the wild creature is endowed with the warmest human traits, while the human being is described as having the characteristics of the beast.

## 5. Conclusions

Relying on a supernatural imaginary space, the legends about saints and wolves provide models of behavior that are based on the opposition between good and evil, between human and animal, between civilization and instinct. On the one hand, the saint embodies the perfection of man, made in the image of the Creator,

who is able to rule over the other creatures and restore the harmony of Eden on earth. On the other hand, the wolf represents, in most cases, the wild, monstrous element that disturbs the natural order of things and needs correction.

The taming of the fierce animal implies not only the desire of the saint to bring the wild creature to the right path, but also the free consent of the animal, which chooses to give up its instinctual drives in order to conform to a society that respects the rules of decent behavior. The medieval legends retold for children in the "Book of Saints and Friendly Beasts" give us the image of an ideal community where humans and wolves live together in paradisiacal happiness and where the supreme law is that of love.

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