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Formal Analysis

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*The Tomb Effigy of Jean d’Aullye*

The Tomb Effigy of Jean d’Aullye is a life-size effigy of a man named Jean d’Aullye lying on his back, dressed in knights garb. It is located in the Met’s Cloisters Museum in New York City and according to the Cloisters’ note, it was created in 1248 in La Clarte-Dieu in the Loire Valley. The effigy has multiple parts: a pillow under d’Aullye’s head, a sword at his hip, a shield with a crest over his left leg, and an animal that resembles a miniature lion curled at his feet. Supporting all of this is a stone slab. The form and content of the effigy, as well as the style in which it was created, allow an understanding of who Jean d’Aullye was.

The effigy has a particularly appropriate setting: the Cloister’s “Gothic Chapel”. The Chapel is a narrow, sunken stone room with high vaulted ceilings. One reaches it by proceeding down a flight of steps towards the back of the museum. It is set somewhat aside from the rest of the Cloisters, with its large galleries of art and artifacts, by its location, access, and style. Artificial lighting is dim here—most of the atmosphere results from the light filtering in through the six brightly-colored stained glass windows. Along with the vaulted ceilings, the stained glass creates a sacred, chapel-like atmosphere. The other effigies and statues from royal French and German tombs create a heavy catacomb-like design and impression. The change in atmosphere and the extreme differentiation of this room from the rest of the museum cultivates a sense of sacredness. The room is at once tomb-like and chapel-like, reflecting the solemnity of both consecration and death. It is appropriate to approach The Tomb Effigy of Jean d’Aullye in this attitude carefully cultivated by its setting since the setting reflects two of the effigy’s most evident and purposeful features: piety and death.

Jean d’Aullye

body is laid in a simple, peaceful repose. The most noticeable aspect of his arrangement is that his hands are folded over his heart as if in prayer. His knights garb may also identify a religious aspect to his vocation: if a knight, d’Aullye was a Crusader. The expression on face is peaceful though solemn and his eyes are wide open. This positioning suggests that Jean d’Aullye was a good man who died a good death, and his piety as indicated by his religious gesture is meant to be the foremost indication of that.

Death is also clearly a topic of this effigy but only to the extent that a tomb effigy is, by definition, about death. What is most interesting about the effigy is not what it says about Jean d’Aullye’s death, but what it shows us about his life and about how he was remembered (or wanted to be remembered). As the description that accompanied the effigy in the Cloisters notes, this is not an accurate depiction of Jean d’Aullye as he appeared in death; rather, it is a depiction of him as a young man. This is an idealized effigy. But idealizations of a person are still incredibly important because they tell us something about that person’s own values, or what he was valued as.

The effigy suggests that Jean d’Aullye was a very important person. We can tell this by two things: the care and level of detail that has gone into the effigy, and by the tenderness with which many of the details seem to have been rendered. First, the specificity of details shows that the quality of the effigy was important, therefore Jean d’Aullye was important. A high level of detail is apparent in the carvings all over the effigy, for instance, in the distinct links of his chainmail or in the little nails on the toes of the lion. The most astonishing level of detail appears in the tunic that overlays the chainmail: little crosshatches can be perceived, which indicates the coarse texture of the material. His importance is also supported by the Met’s decision to place the effigy on a stone slab in the most prominent position—center of the room towards the back, beneath the stained glass windows— in the chapel.

The very content of these details tells us even more, suggesting that Jean d’Aullye was venerated, or at least, deeply cared for. The curls of Jean d’Aullye’s hair are not just finely detailed but also carefully coiffed. His knight’s garment is the same way. It is painstakingly realistic, which shows that the artist expended much time and effort on the effigy. It is also very carefully arrayed, making it seem like whoever buried d’Aullye first tucked his hair behind his ears, parted it perfectly down the middle, and carefully folded his robes around his body.

Lastly, we notice also that d’Aullye is dressed in the garb of a knight. Chain mail covers his arms, legs, and feet, and over this is a hardy-looking robe. There are some etchings on the shield, though only thing that remains distinct is the outline of a rose. Similar wear and pockmark effects elsewhere on the effigy, particularly on the face and fingers, suggests that the illegibility of the shield is probably just a product of time, not of intent. These well-made and well-detailed accessories indicate that d’Aullye was a man of material means and his depiction as a knight immortalizes and idealizes him as a man identified with chivalry, piety, valor, and wealth.