Six gay fantastic creatures, one of which is illustrated above, ornament a medieval mirror case at The Cloisters. This charming small object of the second half of the thirteenth century is a silver enameled roundel set in a frame showing traces of gilding. Along its outside border runs a wreath of ivy leaves sculptured in full round, to which the half men half lions cling at regular intervals. Holding onto the stem of the vine, they twist their torsos so that one can see their faces, with their mouths half open as if they were shouting or laughing happily. Their hair is carefully trimmed and they are all bareheaded except for one wearing a cap. Clothed in tight-fitting surcoats, they would look like mischievous varlets were it not for their feline hindquarters and their long lions’ tails that swing playfully curling into graceful loops. The little figures may illustrate some fabliau or proverb as easily understandable to the mirror’s owner as the topical references of the Mother Goose rhymes were to those who recited them at the time they were written. Or they may have some symbolic meaning like the men on the Wheels of Fortune, so popular in the thirteenth century as a warning of the uncertainty of human life. All six figures, however, though different in some ways look equally happy. Both their cheerfulness and their hybrid form remind one of the drôleries, the humorous marginal drawings often found in French or English manuscripts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The half men half lions of the drôleries often act as musicians, or they may even fight real lions. The symbolic interpretation of the lion ranges all the way from the might of Christ to the power of evil, and cannot be a clue to the meaning of our creatures.

The Cloisters mirror case bears the little-known arms of one of the most outstanding feudal lords of the thirteenth century: a Lusignan.
In quality of workmanship it is among the very finest surviving objects of the period that were made for secular use.

It is most difficult to find comparisons in contemporaneous metalwork for the silver decoration of the Cloisters mirror. But one sees similar vine motifs in stone and wood sculpture of the second half of the thirteenth century on a portal of the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, and on choir stalls at Freiburg and at Xanten, as well as in some Rhenish churches where the French style had a strong influence. It is also on some portals and choir stalls that one finds the animals of the drôleries, such as the alert monkey on the handrail of the choir stall at Xanten. The elegance of the varlets’ bodies and their snug-fitting surcoats are very much like those of the riders on some bronze aquamaniles of the late thirteenth century, especially that in the Walker Collection in London attributed by Erich Meyer to the Hildesheim school.

On the enameled roundel, against a background of translucent green enamel with reserved silver-gilt engraved scrolls of young shoots or tendrils—a motif used often in thirteenth-century enamels—a square area is divided into four smaller squares. Each of the latter shows in champlevé enamel a coat of arms: alternately the three gold lions on a red field (in heraldic terms, gules three lions passant or) which are the royal arms of England, and four red lions rampant on a field of horizontal bars of white and translucent

*The Lusignan mirror valve (enlarged). Diameter 3 3/4 inches*  
The Cloisters Collection. Purchase, 1950
blue (barry argent and azure four lions rampant gules), the arms of one of the Lusignans of Poitou in France. The inner surface of the roundel contains a metal mirror. Close to the rim are two projecting lugs made to fit into grooves on the lost valve, or half, of the case. This bayonet joint would, with a slight turn, fasten the two parts securely together; but once the case was opened the two halves might become separated forever. The ancient Greeks and Romans used similar box mirrors, either hinged or provided with bayonet joints. Both types were also used in the Middle Ages; the bayonet joint was usual for ivory mirror cases of the fourteenth century.

Mirrors in medieval times were treasured possessions. The twelfth and thirteenth centuries were years of wars and crusades, but they were also the age of chivalry, of troubadours, of courts of love, of knightly homage to ladies. This was particularly true in France south of the Loire River, where the Lusignans had their lands; indeed the first troubadour, around 1100, was William of Aquitaine, the Count of Poitiers himself.

With the growing taste for luxury, acquired in the Near East, the fair ladies became more conscious of their appearance, and constantly carried small mirrors, either in their pockets or attached to their belts, so as “to see whether there was an increase or decrease of their beauty.” The little mirrors, jewels rather than mere utensils, were often included in bridal trousseaux and were given as presents to both men and women.

Of the many silver and gold enameled objects
made for secular use in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries hardly any remain. From inventories, though, we learn of the sometimes fantastic richness of the pieces that have perished. Many of the lists mention mirrors somewhat similar to ours. In 1295, for example, the inventory of the Apostolic See records “a mirror enclosed in silver gilt, worked with vines and leaves, with thirteen enamels and eighteen amethysts.” The inventory of Louis d’Anjou in 1364-1365 includes several: “a mirror whose flat round covers are of gold and these close one upon the other by three lugs, and the said covers are very finely enameled on the outside”; another “of two pieces which close on hinges and are decorated on the outside and along the sides in gilded silver. And along the outside border each is chiseled to represent leaves, like on a vine.” Vines and leaves are often mentioned as decoration. More than one inventory lists objects that had earlier belonged to other owners.

It was in the thirteenth century that it became fashionable to display wherever possible an owner’s or donor’s coat of arms. Small metal shields or plaques enameled with armorial bearings were attached to various objects made for both ecclesiastical and secular use. Arms were used in the champlevé enamel decoration of Limoges pyxes, gemellions, candlesticks, caskets, and tombstones, made entirely of copper gilt. (The same sorts of objects, including life-size effigies, were occasionally made of silver, and smaller ones of gold. Few of these, however, have survived, for the precious metals were melted down when cash needs became pressing and intrinsic values more real than aesthetic ones.)

The dating of the mirror valve is based primarily on the identification of the coats of arms displayed on it. The general use of coats of arms in Western Europe in the twelfth century probably derived from the knights’ use of various individual colors and figures on their shields and banners. It was so much easier to distinguish friend from foe in a melee if one could look for familiar colors and emblems. Simple color combinations probably preceded the use of so-called “speaking” figures, and at first there seem to have been no rules for their choice. Once the arms were chosen, however, it was only reasonable to continue using the same ones. During the course of the century the arms became hereditary, serving almost as synonyms of the family names, and the right to display specific ones was restricted to definite groups of people related by blood or other ties. It became customary for the sons of noble families when they reached majority to assume as their personal arms those of the head of the family modified by a change of colors, “tinctures,” or by the addition of new figures, “charges.” These were called “differenced” arms, and cadet branches, stemming from younger sons, often kept them as their family arms. Occasionally the newly knighted young man was granted the right to assume the arms of the lord

Detail from the Lusignan mirror valve
who had knighted him, and the arms of mothers or those acquired by marriage could also be displayed as one’s own in certain cases. Women used the arms of their own and their husbands’ families. Personal seals generally displayed the owner’s coat of arms on one side, and on the other some conventional design—often a mounted knight brandishing a sword, or for a woman a standing female figure.

The history of the Lusignan family, pieced together from sources sometimes contradictory and sometimes interwoven with legend, has the elements of a medieval romance. It is said that the family may have descended from a sister of Charlemagne and that it received its fief from Charles the Bald. The earliest known ancestor was Hugh the Hunter, in the ninth century. The oldest sons were invariably baptized Hugh; they are now distinguished by their sequence numbers and by their various sobriquets. Hugh II, known as “the Dear” or “the Well-beloved,” built the castle of Lusignan, some ten or twelve miles from Poitiers. At present nothing remains of it but part of the foundations, for it was destroyed in the sixteenth century. But we know what it looked like, from the illumination on the calendar page for March in the Très Riches Heures, made around 1413-1416 for Jean Duke of Berry, who then owned the castle. Hugh III the White was followed by Hugh IV the Brown whose sobriquet Le Brun became the surname for all his descendants. Hugh VI, commonly known as Hugh the Devil though characterized as “prudent and belligerent” by the Count of Angoulême, whom he often helped by advice, took part in the First Crusade and was killed in the Holy Land in 1110. His son first displayed the arms of the Lusignans: barry argent and azure. His grandson Hugh VIII took part in the Second Crusade, and it is said that he married a certain “Sarazzane” or “Saracen” (his wife’s real name was Bourgogne de Rançon). It was apparently the exploits of his sons that supplied the details woven into a legend according to which the first Lusignan married a water fairy named Mélusine. Mélusine built, in a miraculously short
time, the Lusignan and other castles. On certain
days she reverted to her fairy form of half woman
half snake, and her husband’s curiosity prevent-
ed her from becoming a mortal. A play of words
was invented to support this legend: Mélusine,
Mère Lusine, Mère Lusignan. The legend was
written down late in the fourteenth century, long
after the direct line of the Lusignans was extinct,
for Marie de France, a sister of King Charles
V and of the Duke of Berry. In the written legend
historical facts, in wrong chronological sequence,
are mixed with borrowed Eastern and Poitevin
lore. Nevertheless, the appeal of the legend was
such that Mélusine was adopted as ancestress and
protectress by all the families related or claiming
to be related to the Lusignans. And when her
spirit haunted the castle, even after the fief had
been taken over by the French crown, it ap-
peared in the shape of the half woman half snake
that Mélusine was supposed to be, with a tail still
striped white and blue, the armorial colors of the
Lusignans. It could be that the barry argent and
azure (white and blue) were suggested by, or
themselves suggested, the colors of rippling wa-
ter. Among the families emblazoning the same
basic arms are the dukes of Luxembourg and the
dukes of La Rochefoucauld. While their descent
from the Lusignans is refuted at present, and the
Luxembourgs’ barry argent and azure is but a
differencing of their original arms, they both
took over the Mélusine legend, and in a 1718
document the descent of the La Rochefoucaulds
from a certain “Foucault, son of an Amauri de
Lusignan, Sire de la Roche,” is explained.

The Lusignans had close ties to the Near East.
Of the three sons of Hugh VIII who accompa-
nied Richard the Lionhearted to the Holy Land
when he took the cross with Philip Augustus of
France, two remained there. By a marriage to
the heiress of the throne of Jerusalem, followed
by the purchase of Cyprus from the Knights
Templars, they became kings of Jerusalem and
Cyprus. They differenced the Lusignan arms
with a crowned lion rampant gules.

The French Lusignans were proud of their
royal cadet branch in the East. On the counter-
seal of Hugh VIII’s wife the same lion rampant
is to be seen in 1198. Beginning with Hugh VIII
the French Lusignans displayed on their seals
not the usual knight on horseback brandishing a
sword, but a horseman riding to a hunt, with a
horn slung over his shoulder and his right hand
resting on a dog standing on the croup of his
mount—possibly in remembrance of the hunting
guepard, or cheetah, carried in this manner in
the Near East and of the splendid and luxurious
hunts for which the kingdom of Cyprus was
famous.

Hugh IX, the older brother of the Near East-
ern kings, whom some sources call their nephew,
moved in France the heiress of the Count of La
Marche and added his lands and title to the al-
ready vast possessions of the Lusignans.

Although the family changed their allegiance

Seals of Hugh XI and his wife Yolande
From Dom Lobineau, Histoire de Bretagne

Hughes le Brun Comte d’Angouleme.

Yolande de Bretagne Dame de Penthievre, Comtesse d’Angouleme 1247
from England to France and back again according to their feelings and their chances of profit, they belonged to the Anglo-Norman states and remained for the most part faithful to the cause of the Plantagenets. But when John Lackland of England eloped with the beautiful Isabella of Angoulême, who was betrothed to either Hugh IX or Hugh X, the Lusignans went over to Philip Augustus.

Isabella of Angoulême remained in England as queen till the death of King John and then as regent for their minor son Henry III. But she was not well liked there. Many unpleasant deeds were ascribed to her; she was considered a sorceress. The people called her “hateful and malignant,” “wicked,” “adulteress”—even “Jezebel.” After her son’s coronation Isabella returned to Angoulême and married Hugh X the Benign. At the same time she held as hostage her own daughter Joan of England, who had lived in Poitou as ward of Hugh IX since his reconciliation with the English king, and had been promised in marriage to Hugh IX. By this marriage Hugh X Le Brun, Count of La Marche, became also “by his wife’s right” Count of Angoulême.

Isabella, who had had the upper hand of the King of England, ruled her Poitevin husband as well. Proud and passionate, she never gave up her title of Queen of England; she refused to consider the Queen of France her superior. On Hugh X’s will, whereby he divided his property among their nine children, his wife’s seal reads: “Isabella Sacred Queen of England, Lady of Ireland.” As long as she lived she called herself Queen of England and of Ireland, Duchess of Normandy, Countess of Anjou and of Angoulême. Her son Henry III of England loved her dearly, and tried to make amends to her for the “wrongs” she had suffered from her former subjects. He also called the sons of his stepfather “dear brothers”; he invited the four younger ones—Guy, Geoffrey, William, and Amaury—and one of the sisters, Alice, to his court, where he showered favors upon them. He appointed Amaury Bishop of Winchester in spite of strong clerical opposition. He himself knighted his half brothers and, while there is no record of it, he may earlier have knighted the oldest stepbrother, Hugh, who remained in France.

In the thirteenth century the Lusignans, together with the dukes of Brittany, were the greatest feudal lords in western France. Hugh X and Hugh XI had the right to mint their own money.

In 1230 it was planned that the heir of Hugh X should marry the sister of Louis IX, while the king’s younger brother promised to marry Hugh’s daughter. Nevertheless, in 1236 or 1238, the future Hugh XI married Yolande of Brittany. He was approximately seventeen years old and possibly already a knight. His seal of 1246, the earliest known, bears the Lusignan arms differenced with the six lions rampant. Since the number of charges was not always strictly observed and was often adapted to the shape and size of the shield, the arms on the Cloisters mirror valve are most probably the same as those used by Hugh XI on this seal. The reduction of the number of charges to four, to fit the shape of a square field, finds its parallel in a painting of 1317 by Simone Martini. Here, on the armorial lozenges on the miter and cope of Saint Louis of Toulouse, great-nephew of Saint Louis of France, are shown alternately the barry argent and gules of his mother (Hungary) and the fleurs-de-lis of his Angevin father (ancient France: azure semé of fleurs-de-lis or). On the lozenges appear only four fleurs-de-lis of the regular semé which is represented in full on the morse of his cope.

The Lusignan arms differenced with six lions rampant have been used on the seals of two of the family besides Hugh XI and Yolande: in 1283 by Guy, Hugh XII’s brother (who used a different charge in 1285), and in 1301 by another Guy, the brother of Hugh XIII. The differenced arms appear on the tomb of Yolande, who died in 1272, along with the full Lusignan arms. In this case it is possible that they represent a third Guy, the brother of Hugh XI. Hugh XIII died in 1302. When the glorious line of the Lusignans of Poitou, Counts of La Marche and of Angoulême, thus came to an end, the family lands, somewhat shrunken by then but still considerable, were taken over in 1314 by the French crown, despite the claims of Hugh XIII’s sister Marie and of the cadet branches. The crown had won its struggle with the rebellious and independent barons.

The identification of the arms establishes an approximate date for the mirror sometime in the second half of the thirteenth century or possibly the early years of the fourteenth (1246-1302).
One cannot be certain for whom exactly the mirror was made—it did not necessarily have to be a woman. The most complete book on the seals of Poitou, by François Eygun, gives the above-mentioned seals with the six lions rampant. But if one takes into consideration the combination of Lusignan with English royal arms, one is inclined to single out those who could have used that combination. Hugh XI and his brother Guy could have combined their arms with those of England—either for their mother or for their sponsor Henry III. Yolande and her son Guy might have used the arms of Hugh XI.

There are a number of copper-gilt objects decorated with Lusignan arms in champlevé enamels, in several instances in combination with the royal arms of England. The armorial diaper pattern on the mirror valve closely resembles those found on the tombstone slabs of Hugh XI’s wife Yolande of Brittany who died in 1272 and was buried at Villeneuve-les-Nantes, and of his brother William de Valence, Count of Pembroke, who was killed by the French in the battle near Bayonne in 1296 and buried at Westminster Abbey. On Yolande’s tomb the lozenges are emblazoned with the arms of France (she descended from Charles the Fat), of Brittany (her family arms), of Lusignan (her husband’s arms), and of England. On William’s tomb the lozenges display the arms of De Valence—Lusignan arms differenced with an orle of merlettes gules—and the royal arms of England. The same arms, quartered, are found on a copper enameled shield in the Galleria Parmeggiani, Reggio Emilia, Italy. The shield was probably made for a tombstone, either to identify the deceased or indicate his alliance to the Lusignan family, or in token of the grief and respect of some relative or mourner.

All these copper objects with champlevé enamel were made in Limoges, and it is known that the Plantagenets and their barons were among the greatest patrons of Limoges workshops, which were located within their lands. But it is difficult to find any close similarity between the workmanship of these, which, beautiful as they are, appear somewhat crude by comparison, and the exquisite silverwork of the Cloisters mirror. One feels inclined, instead, to turn to Paris in search of a workshop where the mirror could have been made.

The thirteenth-century Paris silversmiths had their shops on both sides of the Grand Pont, which looked rather like the present Ponte Vecchio in Florence. Parisian masters were famous the world over and many of them worked at foreign courts. In the middle of the century, for example, a certain Guillaume Boucher worked for the Mongol Khan at Karakorum in Asia. At the end of the century other Parisians were employed at the royal court in Naples.

There are two objects of approximately the same date as our mirror, both attributed to Paris workmanship, both of precious metal, and...
both decorated with armorial diapers in champlevé enamel, one in combination with translucent enamel.

The first of these is a heavily gilded silver cover for a hanap or goblet. Inserted between several fields of heraldic diaper in champlevé enamel are bands of delicate floral motifs in gold cloisonné on a ground of translucent green. It is precisely for this latter type of enamel that Paris workshops were famous during the reign of Philip the Fair. The dating of the hanap cover is based on the coats of arms in its decoration: those of France, Navarre, Hainault (or Flanders), Champagne, and Clermont-Nesle. It is believed that the piece was made for Isabella of Hainault and Raoul de Nesle, married in 1297. Raoul de Nesle died in 1302, so the piece must have been made between these two dates. Joan Evans and Camille Enlart believe the hanap was a gift to the couple from the King and Queen of France and that its cover might have been made by Guillaume Julien, who worked from 1256 to 1316 and was the favorite silversmith of Philip the Fair.

A gold hanap with a cover similarly decorated “with translucent green enamels and various arms” is listed in a 1334 inventory of the royal treasure of the House of Anjou in Naples. If one takes into consideration that the expression “gold” was occasionally used for “gilt” in inventories, the same description could apply to both hanap covers. The Anjou piece could have been made by some Parisian silversmith working at the Angevin court.

The second object is the famous gold reliquary with a hinged lid in the Museo Nazionale in Cividale, Italy. It is shaped like an ivy leaf and
decorated with champlevé enamels in various colors; on the bottom an armorial diaper alternates the coats of arms of Princess Tamar of Epirus and of Philip II of Taranto, a member of the cadet branch of the Angevin royal family. The couple was married in 1294 and the princess died in 1307. The box must date within these years. Antonio Santangelo attributes it to a French workshop of about 1300. This again might have been the Naples workshop of a Paris silversmith.

A further Paris connection for the Cividale reliquary can be inferred from the similarity of the vine and flower decoration on its side walls to the vine pattern on the handle of a silver cruet in the National Museum in Copenhagen. The latter, dated around 1330, bears the fleur-de-lis silver mark of Paris.

Though all we actually know of the history of the mirror valve is that it was in the Goldschmidt-Rothschild Collection in Frankfort on the Main in Germany before it came to The Cloisters, and though one cannot be sure exactly who its first owner was, the mention of “a mirror of enameled silver” in a 1362 inventory of Yolande de Bar, who was Yolande of Flanders before her marriage, is especially intriguing. She could have inherited it through marriage if the original owner had been Alice of Lusignan, sister of Hugh XI, who went to the court of Henry III of England and married John of Warren and Surrey. Their son William married Jeanne, daughter of Henry III de Bar. Jeanne’s brother Edouard I de Bar married Marie de Bourgogne. His son Henry IV de Bar married Yolande of Flanders, for whom the inventory of 1362 was made. One is tempted to bring up the fact that the son of Yolande de Bar married Marie de France, for whose entertainment Jean d’Arras wrote the legend of Mélusine in 1387.

But after all, the image once reflected in the mirror was, in Ovid’s words, “but a reflected shadow, having nothing of its own.” The enduring beauty of the object itself is what counts.