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ETERNAL CHALICE:

THE GRAIL IN LITERATURE AND LEGEND

COURSE GUIDE

Professor Monica Brzezinski Potkay
THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY

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Course Syllabus

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About Your Professor

Monica Brzezinski Potkay

Monica Brzezinski Potkay is an associate professor of English at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, where she teaches Old and Middle English literature, the Bible and literature, and cultural studies. Her research interests include English and French literature, the influence of theological controversy and religious culture, the influence of classical texts, and the representation of gender and sexuality in literature.

Professor Potkay is coauthor (with Regula Meyer Evitt) of *Minding the Body: Women and Literature in the Middle Ages, 800-1500* (Twayne, 1997). Her published essays include "The Violence of Courtly Exegesis in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" in *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, edited by Christine Rose and Elizabeth Robertson (Palgrave, 2001); "Cleanness on the Question of Images" in *Viator* (26, 1995, pp. 181–193); and "The New Dark Ages of Camille Paglia" in *AEstel* (1, 1993). She is coauthor of the lectures in Professor Adam Potkay's *The Bible as the Root of Western Literature: Stories, Poems, and Parables* (The Modern Scholar series, Recorded Books, 2003).

Introduction

The goal of this course is to provide an overview of the many different ways writers of fiction and nonfiction have imagined, and reimagined, the object known as the Grail. We'll look at how the Grail was invented as a powerful literary symbol in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries by a group of medieval romancers who celebrated the Grail as a symbol of perfection. At times, this perfection was social, and the Grail functioned as a symbol of the perfect knight or of the ideal chivalric society. Most often, however, the Grail's perfection was unmistakably religious, so that it was indeed the Holy Grail, a symbol of God's perfect love, grace, wisdom, and joy. After being ignored for centuries, the Grail was rediscovered in the nineteenth century by both poets and scholars, who radically reinvented what the Grail stood for.

Poets updated the Grail, recasting the ideals it symbolized in order to make it meaningful for modern secular society. At the same time as these poets were looking forward, scholars of the Grail were looking backward, seeking the sources of the Grail legend that lay behind the medieval texts. They claimed to have located these origins among Celtic gods and goddesses, in the initiation rituals of oriental pagan mystery cults, or in wisdom traditions known to occult groups since the dawn of time. These scholarly theories of esoteric origins gave new life to the Grail legend in the twentieth century, when they became widely known through the work of popular poets, novelists, and filmmakers. Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Grail fascinates many who search for the perfect spiritual wisdom it promises.

Course Objectives

- Provide an overview of the development of the Grail legend from the Middle Ages to the present.
- Understand the literary conventions, religious beliefs, and historical and cultural forces that contributed to the development of the Grail story.
- Survey the varying ideals that different authors and cultures over hundreds of years associated with the Grail.
- Suggest that under the myriad of meanings attached to the Grail lies what may be termed a Grail tradition: The Grail always possesses a secret that is difficult to penetrate but which, when revealed, promises the key to perfect understanding of self, the world, and the spiritual realm.

Lecture 1:
Chrétien de Troyes's *Story of the Grail,* or *Perceval* [1180–1190]:
Part I: Who Invented the Grail?

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Chrétien de Troyes's *Story of the Grail,* also called *Perceval* (see p. 10 for translations).

Introduction

The first author to write about the Grail is Chrétien de Troyes, who introduced the Grail in the context of a romance about how the fool Perceval matures into both a knight of the Arthurian court and a devout Christian. The Grail can be understood in Chrétien only in the context of Perceval's chivalric growth.

I. Sometime between 1180 and 1190, Chrétien de Troyes first wrote about the Grail in his *Story of the Grail,* also known as *Perceval*; the story is ostensibly unfinished.

A. Little is known about Chrétien aside from his name and dates.

B. In spite of relative anonymity, Chrétien had a substantial influence on the history of Arthurian literature.

1. Arthur had already become popular throughout Europe by way of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (about 1135), which focuses on Arthur as a political and military figure.

2. Chrétien shifts the chief genre of Arthurian literature away from history and toward romance: a genre that deals with the adventures of a single knight as he develops the skills and virtues necessary to become a preeminent member of the Arthurian court. In his romances, Chrétien invents the notion of Camelot as an ideal court as well as the two most popular stories associated with it: the adultery of Lancelot and Guinevere, and the search by Arthur's knights for the Grail.

II. The Grail's significance in *Perceval* depends on how it fits into the larger story of Perceval's development from rustic fool to successful knight. That development is implicit in the first scene of the romance, when Perceval first meets knights and decides he will become a member of Arthur's court, because knights are more beautiful than God.

A. The first scene shows that Perceval is a fool who knows nothing about the following:

1. Knights and their weapons.

2. God and other spiritual beings.

3. How to interpret what he sees or hears. His view of the world is superficial: He believes that whatever is beautiful is good or holy, and he tends to take advice literally.

B. But the first scene shows that Perceval has one virtue, a curiosity so strong that it impels him to ask questions about what he doesn't know. Perceval's curiosity and eagerness to learn help him develop into the following:

1. An esteemed knight in Arthur's court.
2. A Christian who knows his duty to God and neighbor.
3. A skilled interpreter who understands that beauty doesn't guarantee moral goodness or spiritual worth.
   a. He understands that God's beautiful divine nature was hidden under the mortal flesh of Jesus and is hidden under the Eucharistic host.
   b. He understands that a glittering knightly exterior can conceal vices, especially pride.
      i. Gawain, Perceval's foil, exemplifies the outwardly handsome but inwardly vicious knight.
      ii. Perceval understands that he, as a knight, is not God, but should love and serve God.

Summary

Readers first encountered the Grail in Chrétien's *Story of the Grail,* which has as its alternative title *Perceval*. Either title makes sense for this romance, because the Grail makes sense only in the context of Perceval's life: He develops from rustic, ignorant fool into an esteemed member of Arthur's court, and more importantly into a mature Christian who knows that his purpose in life is to love and serve God and his neighbor. Similarly, Perceval's chivalric and spiritual development take on greater meaning through the symbol of the Grail.

What Is a Grail?

Most people now speak of *the* Grail, as if there were only one. Certainly as Grail romances developed, they spoke about a single grail that was holy, usually because it was one of the vessels Jesus had used to institute the Eucharist at the Last Supper. It could be a cup, chalice, dish, or platter.

But when Chrétien de Troyes introduced the mysterious vessel to the world in his *The Story of the Grail*, he speaks about it only as "*a* grail"; it seems to be an example of a particular sort of thing. Exactly what sort of thing is hard to determine, since Chrétien does not give us much information about the grail; it's as if he's trying to be deliberately mysterious about its nature. He never uses a synonym—cup, chalice, dish, or even vessel—to name it. After its first appearance, he always refers to it simply as "the grail" or with the pronoun "it." All Chrétien says is that the grail is carried in two hands by a beautiful maiden, and that it is made of pure gold ornamented with precious stones. The only marvelous thing is that it—or the maiden who carries it—shines brilliantly, for after the maiden entered the dining hall of the Fisher King, the room was brightly illuminated. Later we learn from Perceval's hermit uncle that the grail contains a single Eucharistic host, but not a salmon, pike, or lamprey. This odd detail suggests that whatever the grail is, it must be something appropriate for serving fish or eel. It appears to be a domestic utensil that a casual observer would have trouble seeing inside—something resembling a modern casserole dish in size and shape.

Writers who came after Chrétien were evidently puzzled by what a grail was, for they seem compelled to define it. They had reason to be puzzled: "graal," the term Chrétien uses in his Old French, is an unusual word. Jean Frappier in *Chrétien de Troyes: The Man and His Work* notes that the word does occur in a few romances predating *Perceval* and in wills and household documents to name a type of domestic item, but its use is rare.

We can conclude that Chrétien invented *the* Grail as a special object, but he did not invent the word itself or the vessel that word referred to. Many scholars of the Grail accept the description of a grail offered by Helinand of Froidmont (ca. 1160–1229), who was a poet and courtier before becoming a Cistercian monk. In his *Chronicon*, a "universal history" that relates important events from creation through 1204, Helinand tells us that in the year 720:

> ". . . a certain marvelous vision was revealed by an angel to a certain hermit in Britain concerning S. Joseph, the decurion who deposed from the cross the Body of Our Lord, as well as concerning the paten or dish in which Our Lord supped with His Disciples, whereof the history was written out by the said hermit and is called 'Of the Graal' (*de Gradali).*
>
> "Now, a platter, broad and somewhat deep, is called in French *gradalis* or *gradale,* wherein costly meats with their sauce are wont to be set before rich folk by degrees (*gratatim*) one morsel after another in divers orders, and in the vulgar speech it is called *graalz*, for that it is grateful and acceptable to him that eateth therein, as well for that which containeth the victual, for that haply it is of silver or other precious material, as for the contents thereof, to wit, the manifold courses of costly meats.
>
> "I have not been able to find this history written in Latin, but it is in the possession of certain noblemen written in French only, nor, as they say, can it easily be found complete. This, however, I have not hitherto been able to obtain from any person so as to read it with attention. As soon as I can do so, I will translate into Latin such passages as are more useful and more likely to be true" [trans. Sebastian Evans, introduction to *High History of the Holy Grail* (*Perlesvaux*), 1898].

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. The genre of romance developed as a means of instructing knights on the ideals of chivalry and on their social responsibilities. Why might a knight need such instruction? What sort of lessons could romances teach? What can't a book teach a knight?
2. Perceval grows up surrounded by nature, represented partly by his mother. Why does nature tend to be associated with women? Is the comparison with nature complimentary or derogatory to women?
3. Perceval's uncle, the hermit, instructs him on his duties as a knight and as a Christian. Why might these two sets of duties conflict? Can that conflict be reconciled?

Suggested Reading

Chrétien de Troyes. *The Story of the Grail (Perceval)*. Trans. William W. Kibler. *Arthurian Romances*. New York: Penguin, 1991. [This is the prose translation of Chrétien used in this lecture.]

———. *Perceval.* Trans. D.D.R. Owen. *Arthurian Romances.* Everyman Classics. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1987.

———. *Perceval, or The Story of the Grail*. Trans. Ruth Harwood Cline. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983.

Other Books of Interest

Barber, Richard. *King Arthur: Hero and Legend.* Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 1994. [Overview from earliest sources to modern interpretations.]

Coe, Jon B., and Simon Young, eds. *The Celtic Sources for the Arthurian Legend*. Felinfach, Wales: Llanarch Publishing, 1995. [Early Celtic texts in Latin, Welsh, and Irish, as well as translations.]

Geoffrey of Monmouth. *The History of the Kings of Britain.* Trans. Lewis Thorpe. New York: Penguin, 1977.

Krueger, Roberta L., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romances.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Lawman. *Brut*. Trans. Rosamund Allen. New York: St. Martin's, 1992. [First version of the Arthur legend in English.]

Malamud, Bernard. *The Natural.* New York: Harcourt, 1952. [The Perceval story transmuted to the world of baseball; later made into a film starring Robert Redford.]

Wilhelm, James J., ed. *The Romance of Arthur: An Anthology of Medieval Texts in Translation.* New York: Garland Publishing, 1994.

Lecture 2:
Chrétien de Troyes's *Story of the Grail,* or *Perceval*:
Part II: Whom Does the Grail Serve?

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are Richard Barber's *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief,* Jean Frappier's *Chrétien de Troyes: The Man and His Work,* and Dhira B. Mahoney's *The Grail: A Casebook.*

Introduction

The symbol of the Grail takes its significance in the *Story of the Grail* from its role in Perceval's chivalric development. Perceval's encounter with the mysterious Grail at the castle of the Fisher King teaches him what true chivalry is: a life of service to others. The mysterious Grail teaches important lessons, but ironically, all of those lessons are obvious: A knight should love God and his neighbor.

I. Perceval is ready for a test of his chivalry because he has already acquired a certain status as a knight, since he has acquired the literal tools of knighthood—weapons—as well as the metaphoric tool of courtly speech he was taught by the *vavasour* (lower nobleman) Gornemant of Gohort. The Grail is a challenge for Perceval, and for us, because it is so mysterious, in itself and in its setting at the castle of the Fisher King.

A. Chrétien's Grail scene invites us to ask, What is a grail? Chrétien's "grail" (*graal* in Old French) appears to be an unusual name for a common household utensil, a low, broad serving dish that is large enough to serve a fish. Chrétien's idea of the Grail is confirmed by the definition offered by Helinand of Froidmont, who defines "grail" as "a wide and somewhat deep dish."

B. More importantly, Chrétien's Grail scene invites Perceval and us to ask, Whom does the Grail serve? This question is finally answered in the text by Perceval's hermit-uncle, who tells us that the Grail serves a single eucharistic host to the Fisher King's father.

II. The hermit's explanation does not solve all the mysteries of the Grail. Chrétien leaves them for us to interpret, since he has been teaching us, along with Perceval, how to interpret symbols and words. The Grail is a challenge not of our chivalric but of our interpretive skills. From the clues Chrétien leaves us, we can conclude the following:

A. While the Grail is a beautiful object, its real significance lies, like that of knightly weapons, in how it is used: as a vessel. Its beautiful exterior is much less important than the fact that it is a container.

B. The Grail, which is both beautiful and useful, is a metaphor for the knight. His beautiful armor should not blind him to the fact that he has a use—to serve king, God, and neighbor.

C. The Grail, both beautiful and useful, is a symbol for Chrétien's book itself. Like the Grail, Chrétien's romance is a well-crafted, beautiful work of art. More important, like the Grail, it has a use, for like the Grail, it is a container, a container for meaning. The beautiful romance Chrétien has written contains a moral for us: Like Perceval, we need to learn to love, and we need to develop our skills in interpreting both what we see and what we hear. Most importantly, we need to seek meaning in what we read: Like Perceval, we need to learn by asking questions.

III. Paradoxically, while the Grail itself is mysterious, the lessons it teaches are obvious. There is no real mystery to the Grail.

Summary

Perceval encounters the Grail at a critical moment of his chivalric development: He has gained the tools he needs to be a knight, both the literal tools consisting of weapons and armor, and the metaphoric "tool" of courtly speech. But while Perceval has developed on the exterior, his interior is still undeveloped: He is spiritually immature. The Grail is the means of Perceval's education: It teaches him that he, like the Grail, is a vessel. Like the Grail, he may be beautiful, but he also has the obligation to serve. Chrétien communicates these ideas symbolically in the Grail scene in the *Story of the Grail* in order to make this crucial scene a moment of learning not just for Perceval, but for the reader, too. Like Perceval, we need to discover our spiritual nature and that we exist to serve.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Chrétien's *Perceval* breaks off in mid-sentence, and most modern critics consider it incomplete. How do you imagine Chrétien might have completed the work?
2. The lessons that Perceval learns from his hermit-uncle are all very obvious ones: He ought to love God and his neighbor. Why might Chrétien have taught this very simple lesson through the mysterious symbol of the Grail? Might there be other lessons communicated less clearly in the work?
3. Perceval does not ask about the Grail the first time he sees it because he is afraid of talking too much and looking foolish. How can we determine what are good rules for when and when not to talk?
4. Polite speech in the Middle Ages was often termed "courtly" because it was the way in which people spoke at a nobleman's court. Why would attendance at court demand a certain style of speech?

Suggested Reading

Barber, Richard. *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004. [History of the Grail from Chrétien to the present day.]

Frappier, Jean. *Chrétien de Troyes: The Man and His Work.* Trans. Raymond J. Cormier. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1982.

Mahoney, Dhira B., ed. *The Grail: A Casebook.* New York: Garland Publishing, 2000. [A collection of critical essays on the Grail from Chrétien through John Boorman's *Excalibur*.]

Other Books of Interest

Barber, Richard. *The Knight and Chivalry.* Rochester, NY: Boydell, 2000.

Goering, Joseph. *The Virgin and the Grail: Origins of a Legend.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. [Proposes that Spanish wall paintings of female saints, especially the Virgin Mary, inspired the Grail legends.]

Keen, Maurice. *Chivalry.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

The Legend of the Grail. Trans. Nigel Bryant. Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2004. [Selections from the four medieval continuations of Chrétien.]

Lecture 3:
The Prose Trilogy Based on Robert de Boron's Grail Poems: *Joseph of Arimathea, Merlin,* and *Perceval* [1200–1210]: Why Is the Grail Holy?

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are Robert de Baron's *Merlin and the Grail: The Trilogy of Grail Romances Attributed to Robert de Baron* and the Gospel of Nicodemus in M.R. James's *The New Testament Apocrypha.*

Introduction

For Robert de Boron and the writer who adapted his poems into prose, the Grail is holy because it is a relic: It is the vessel Jesus used to celebrate the Last Supper, and it contains Jesus' blood. So connected with the establishment of the Eucharist, it symbolizes the Real Presence of the body and blood of Jesus that medieval Christians believed were present in the bread and wine used in the celebration of the Mass.

I. The legend of the Holy Grail was invented by the Burgundian Robert de Boron in two interlinked poems, *The History of the Grail,* also known as *Joseph of Arimathea,* and *Merlin*. Robert's poems were converted to prose by an anonymous redactor, who contributed a third romance, sometimes called the *Didot-Perceval,* to create a trilogy that treats the Grail in purely religious terms; for simplicity's sake, this prose trilogy is usually spoken of as written by Robert de Boron.

A. For Robert, the Holy Grail is the vessel with which Jesus established the Eucharist at the Last Supper and that Joseph of Arimathea then used to catch blood flowing from the crucified Jesus' wounds.

B. The trilogy attributed to Robert tells the story of how the Grail, containing Jesus' blood, in time found its way to Arthur's kingdom, where it would be seen by Perceval.

1. The risen Jesus himself, to reward Joseph for his love, entrusts him with the Grail. Joseph establishes a table for the Grail, which brings joy and delight to all who worthily sit at the table. The delight that the Grail bestows punningly gives the vessel its name, for "to delight" in Old French is *agreer*.

   a. The joy of the Grail is that which Adam and Eve lost in Paradise, but that Christians will again enjoy in heaven.

   b. The idea of this divine joy is based on the theology of the Gospel of John, which stresses that the crucifixion manifests divine love and that salvation brings divine joy.

2. Joseph entrusts the Grail to his brother-in-law, Bron or Hebron, who becomes known as the Rich Fisher King because he, on Jesus' command, catches a big fish that he places on the Grail table.

3. Bron is succeeded as guardian of the Grail by his son Alain li Gros, who takes it "to the valley of Avaron," probably a garbled version of Avalon, somewhere in the British Isles.
4. Alain becomes Perceval's father. In the Perceval section of the trilogy, Perceval manages to ask the Grail questions, "What is the grail for, and who is served with it?" and himself becomes the guardian of the Grail and the holy blood it contains.

II. Robert's tale of the Grail is meant to be received as actual history.

A. Secular political history: The history of the Grail is entwined with those of the Roman Emperor Vespasian and King Arthur; the latter is retold at some length.

B. Biblical history: The story is presented as a digression in the New Testament.

III. But this tale is not better known because it is a secret history.

A. The story was known only to Merlin, who as the son of a devil has total knowledge of the past and through divine favor has knowledge of the future; he is presented as a Christian prophet. Merlin dictates the history of Joseph and the Grail, his own adventures with the British kings Uther Pendragon and Arthur, and the quest of Perceval to his secretary, Blaise, who records them all in a book that is the ultimate source of Robert's trilogy.

B. Robert creates the sense that his readers are in on a secret reserved for a chosen few, that they themselves are, through reading his book, in a sense members of the Grail table.

C. Ironically, nothing in the book is a secret. Aside from the identification of the Grail as the vessel of the Last Supper and its migration to Britain, nothing in the trilogy is original: It draws heavily on the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus for the Joseph section, on Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* for Merlin, and on Chrétien's *Story of the Grail* for Perceval. Neither is the theology a secret, but simply mainstream medieval Christianity, which emphasized the celebration of the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist.

D. Nonetheless, the reader comes to feel that his everyday world and his usual religious duties are imbued with a mystical quality; what might be viewed as onerous religious duties become part of a divine secret and are the means of acquiring supreme joy.

Summary

The Burgundian poet Robert de Boron created the Grail as most modern readers have come to know it, as the Holy Grail that Jesus used at the Last Supper and which Joseph of Arimathea used to catch his blood at the crucifixion. Robert also created the idea that Joseph's family brought the Grail to Britain, an idea that inspired later versions of the legend. Robert also achieves a full synthesis of the history of the Grail with the histories of Arthur's kingdom, including the story of Merlin, and with biblical history. The result is a vision of world history focused on the Grail. This historical vision

is Christian in its essence, for it is designed to make the reader feel a part of this history, too. In the present moment, each reader should recognize his or her place in the cosmic providential scheme: readers should live their lives on Earth in such a way that in heaven they will gain the joy that the Grail promises.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Robert de Boron is the first writer to identify the Grail as a vessel Jesus used at the Last Supper. What cultural forces might have led him to this identification?
2. Joseph of Arimathea is a fairly minor figure in the New Testament. Why might Robert have chosen him for his history of the Grail?
3. In this Grail trilogy, Merlin is the son of a devil who gives him magic powers but whose baptism allows him to use these powers for good. What does this suggest about medieval attitudes toward the devil?

Suggested Reading

James, M.R., ed. *The New Testament Apocrypha.* Berkeley, CA: Apocryphile Press, 2004. [Includes the Gospel of Nicodemus, one of Robert de Boron's sources.]

Robert de Boron. *Merlin and the Grail: The Trilogy of Prose Romances Attributed to Robert de Boron*. Trans. Nigel Bryant. Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2001.

Other Books of Interest

Cruz, Joan Carroll. *Relics.* Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 1984. [Illustrations and histories of many relics, including some claimed to be the Grail.]

Geary, Patrick J. *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978.

Goodrich, Peter, ed. *The Romance of Merlin: An Anthology.* New York: Garland, 1990.

Lecture 4:
The Lancelot-Grail Version of *The Quest of the Holy Grail* [1215–1225]: Why Must One Quest for the Grail?

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are P.M. Mantarasso's *The Quest of the Holy Grail* and Sir Thomas Malory's "The Tale of the Sankgreal."

Introduction

Though Chrétien had implied that Perceval must go on a quest to understand the Grail, he never describes an actual quest that the knight undertakes. The first work to detail such a search is *The Quest for the Holy Grail,* part of a larger Arthurian cycle that focuses on the adventures of Lancelot as the most important knight of Camelot. The *Quest,* however, is not a literal description of knightly travels but an allegory of how Christians travel the road of life searching for salvation. In this allegory, the Grail represents the means by which medieval Christians could obtain foretastes of salvation: the sacrament of the Eucharist and the Bible.

I. The author and composition of *The Quest for the Holy Grail.*

A. *The Quest for the Holy Grail* was composed as part of a trilogy of Old French prose narratives called the Vulgate Cycle or the Lancelot-Grail Cycle:

1. The Lancelot Proper was ultimately based on the *Lancelot* romance by Chrétien de Troyes; it tells the story of Lancelot's rise at Arthur's court and his adulterous love affair with Guinevere.
2. *The Quest for the Holy Grail* relates how Lancelot and other knights—Perceval, Lancelot's cousin Bors, and especially Lancelot's son Galahad—embark on a successful search for the Grail.
3. *The Death of Arthur* recounts how Lancelot's adulterous love for Guinevere leads to the downfall of Camelot.

B. Later, this trilogy acquired two "prequels."

1. *The History of the Holy Grail,* in which Joseph of Arimathea and his son Josephes bring the Grail to Britain.
2. *The History of Merlin,* detailing Merlin's early adventures with King Arthur.

C. Because the original trilogy is interconnected by many cross-references, it is assumed that they were written by a single writer, or at least planned by a single "architect." Because of the Cycle's concern with explicitly religious values, especially sexual purity, some critics assume that its author was a monk of the Cistercian order, the order whose most prominent member was St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Cistercians, who were known as "the white monks" because of the color of their religious habits, frequently occur as characters in the *Quest*.

II. The *Quest* tells the story of how the Grail suddenly appears one day at Arthur's court in the form of a mysteriously veiled vessel that feeds each knight with whatever food he desires. Lancelot and the other knights vow to "[look] openly upon the mystery of the grail" to see its true substance plainly. The story details the marvelous adventures of the knights as they set out to look for the Grail. After each knightly battle, a helpful hermit or Cistercian monk appears to explain what the battle means.

III. The plot therefore emerges as an allegory, a narrative whose literal level systematically and consistently represents a metaphoric level of meaning.

A. Several characters are described as wearing "the armor of Our Lord"; this phrase alludes to the Letter to the Ephesians 6:11–17, in which St. Paul directs the reader to "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil," and then allegorizes a list of pieces of armor and weapons as the virtues a Christian requires to fight against evil. The knights in the *Quest,* with their armor and weapons, thus represent Christians active in the battle of good against evil.

B. This battle of virtue against vice is represented by the battles the knights fight; the road along which the battles occur represents the road of life, "the way of Jesus Christ, the way of compassion, in which the knights of Our Lord travel by night and by day, in the darkness of the body and in the soul's light."

C. As the path of the knights' journey leads to the Grail, it must represent the goal of the Christian life: salvation in heaven. Here salvation is thought of as the Beatific Vision, the moment after death when the soul sees God and God sees the soul. The Grail represents the Beatific Vision because it is mainly something to be seen: The knights had vowed not to find the Grail but "to see it plain," to "[look] openly upon the mystery" of the Grail. Galahad, who represents a Christian so perfect in his virtues that he is a perfect "image of Christ," is the only knight to be fully successful in his quest to see inside the Grail; upon looking into it, he dies and his soul is borne to heaven by angels.

IV. The Grail, however, appears to Arthur's knights several times along the road, which suggests that glimpses of heaven can be available in life. These glimpses of the Grail take two forms:

A. *Sacramental:* The Grail is identified as "the platter in which Jesus Christ partook of the paschal lamb with His disciples" at the Last Supper. Thus, as in Robert de Boron's Grail trilogy, the Grail is Eucharistic. The *Quest*'s knights have visions of the Grail designed to teach the doctrine of transubstantiation: Because Eucharistic bread and wine are the actual Body of Christ, in them the believer can literally see God. The knights, when they see the Grail, do so in the context of the Mass, and see a host that is transformed first into a White Hart, which is explained as a metaphor of Jesus' Incarnation, then of the Child Jesus, then of the wounded Jesus of the Passion.

B. *Biblical:* The Grail is primarily something to be seen, but what a reader literally sees is the words of the *Quest.* The majority of the symbols, characters, and actions of the story are drawn from Scripture, from both the Old Testament and the New. The helpful hermits and monks in the narrative clarify the biblical sources of the knights' adventures, their meanings, and most importantly the reading strategies that should be used in biblical exegesis. Thus one of the *Quest*'s goals is to teach its reader how to interpret, and not just the fictional story at hand, but the Bible itself—for in the words of Scripture, one could also see God.

V. The French *Quest for the Holy Grail* was one of the sources of Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* (1485), the source of Arthurian mythology for most English speakers. Malory, in adapting the *Quest,* eliminated much of the religious allegorizing but retained most of the plot. It is through Malory therefore that most readers today know the outlines of the literal story of how Perceval, Lancelot, and Galahad accomplished the quest of the Holy Grail.

Summary

The Quest for the Holy Grail, building on symbols and themes associated with the Grail by Robert de Boron, continues to create the version of the legend known to most modern readers. The author of the *Quest* expands the number of knights who seek the Grail. Perceval no longer quests alone but is joined by the rest of Arthur's knights. Most of the knights, however, fail in the quest. Only Perceval, Bors, and Lancelot have some success, and only Galahad, the Good Knight, fully succeeds in understanding the secret of the Grail, which is a mystical understanding of the nature of God Himself. When Thomas Malory retold the quest in his *Le Morte D'Arthur,* he removed much of the religious doctrine of the original, but retained the basic plot. From Malory, most modern readers get their sense of the Grail quest: that it is a quest in which only the worthy succeed; that the worthy are repeatedly tested along the way, and that these tests are most often trials of understanding in which the quester comes to know himself, the world, and the otherworld.

Arthurian Legend in England

Medieval England saw the development of two different Arthurian traditions. One tradition was based on French-language versions of the Arthurian story. Chrétien de Troyes is the most famous of the French romancers, but there were many others. The French tradition tended to focus not on Arthur himself but on his knights, particularly Lancelot and Tristan, lover of the married Isolde. Indeed, the most notable thing Arthur does in the French tradition is die: the last work in the Vulgate Cycle that contains *The Quest of the Holy Grail* is *The Death of King Arthur*. If the French wanted to read about a king, they had romances about their own legendary emperor, Charlemagne. And the notion of kingship was not necessarily popular in medieval France; much of what is now the Republic of France was in the twelfth century ruled not by the king but by local noblemen who resisted the encroaching power of monarchy. Chrétien's two patrons were Marie of Champagne, wife of Henry I, the Count of Champagne, and Philip, Count of Flanders; neither patron would have been pleased with the depiction of a powerful Arthur. In England, the nobility read these works in French, since that was their usual language. Several romances were translated into English for the lower classes. The grail story, however, does not seem to have been very popular in English; besides Malory's version of the Vulgate *Quest*, there is extant only an English *Joseph of Arimathea* (ca. 1350) and Henry Lovelich's *History of the Holy Grail* (ca. 1450).

The native English tradition was different from the French, and it did tend to focus on Arthur as he had been created by Geoffrey of Monmouth and anglicized by Lawman, a king valiant in battle and civilized in court life. Most of the English works are not of high literary value or of much interest. The *Alliterative Morte Arthure* (mid-fourteenth century), however, is first-rate. It offers a tragic view of Arthur's career; he begins to rule his kingdom with the best intentions but is carried away by pride; his ambitions cause him to conquer much of Europe, but his recklessness ends up destroying both himself and England. English romances also often celebrate Sir Gawain, Arthur's nephew, who is part of the story as Geoffrey told it. Since Arthur has no son, Gawain is his heir and right-hand man. The best of the Gawain romances is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1375-1400), about the daunting challenge a supernatural Green Knight presents to Arthur's Court, a challenge that Gawain alone takes up.

Out of this complicated Arthurian legacy, Sir Thomas Malory created his cycle *Le Morte D'Arthur* (published in 1485). Malory tells us several times that he is translating French romances—including the Vulgate *Quest*—into

English. But he accomplishes much more than that. He also takes what were free-standing stories and incorporates them into a larger frame. Into this framework he also brings some of the English romance traditions. It is true that Malory's prose is sometimes leaden, but he weaves together a number of varied sources to create a single story, *the* great story of Arthur, his kingdom, and his knights, from the very beginning, with the conception of Arthur through Merlin's magic, to the very end, with Arthur and his son Mordred fatally wounding each other. Malory fell out of favor after the English Renaissance but was rediscovered by the Victorians. It is through Malory and those who reinterpreted him, including Tennyson in *Idylls of the King* and T.H. White in *The Once and Future King,* that most English speakers know the stories of Arthur and of the Grail.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. The adulterous Lancelot is the central figure in the Vulgate Cycle of Arthurian romances; why might our author, probably a Cistercian monk, choose such a protagonist?
2. In the Vulgate *Quest*, Lancelot is superceded by his son, Galahad, who possesses spiritual perfection. Is Galahad's perfection inspiring or off-putting? Would you have created a different hero for this quest?
3. The Vulgate *Quest* is meant to be read as a religious allegory; would a reader misinterpret the work if he failed to see that it was an allegory? Are other sorts of interpretations possible?
4. The *Quest* is written for laymen, not monks, but it presumes a substantial knowledge of the Bible on the part of its readers. Do you think the medieval laity had much knowledge of the Bible? From where did they acquire their knowledge?

Suggested Reading

Malory, Sir Thomas. "The Tale of the Sankgreal." *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory* [aka *Le Morte D'Arthur*]. Ed. Eugène Vinaver, rev. P.J.C. Field. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

The Quest of the Holy Grail. Trans. P.M. Matarasso. New York: Penguin, 1969.

Other Books of Interest

The Cistercian World: Monastic Writings of the Twelfth Century. Trans. P.M. Matarasso. New York: Penguin, 1993.

The Death of King Arthur. Trans. James Cable. New York: Penguin, 1971.

The Lancelot-Grail Reader. Ed. Norris J. Lacy. New York: Garland, 2000. [Selections from all five romances of the Vulgate Cycle.]

Lancelot of the Lake. Trans. Corin Corley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989. [A later version of this romance became part of the Vulgate Cycle.]

Leclercq, Jean. *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture.* New York: Fordham University Press, 1982.

Rubin, Miri. *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. [Beliefs and rituals about the Eucharist in the Middle Ages; includes material on the Grail.]

Lecture 5:
Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* [1200–1210]: Does the Grail Come from the Middle or Far East?

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, trans. A.T. Hatto, *Parzival and Titurel*, trans. Cyril Edwards, and *Willehalm.*

Introduction

Perhaps the most unusual version of the Grail legend is the German poem *Parzival* by the knight Wolfram von Eschenbach. Wolfram is obviously drawing on Chrétien's *Perceval,* since the two heroes experience similar adventures. Wolfram, however, changes the very nature of the Grail: Here the Grail is not a vessel of any sort, but a stone of marvelous qualities and of heavenly origin. It gathers around itself a community of elect knights and ladies drawn from all over the world. The Grail Brotherhood lives in perfect loyalty and exemplifies Wolfram's idea of the perfect chivalric society. While all in Wolfram's Brotherhood must be baptized, the ideals of his Grail community are not so much Christian as knightly.

I. What little is known of Wolfram von Eschenbach comes from what he says in his poetry. He was a poor Bavarian knight whose patron was the powerful Hermann the Generous, Landgrave of Thuringia. More interesting than his biography, however, is that all of Wolfram's poetry shows a concern with European contacts, through the Crusades, with superior Islamic culture. Wolfram's major work, besides *Parzival* and several fragments called *Titurel* that deal with some of Parzival's relatives, is *Willehalm,* a translation of a French epic poem about a Count of Provençe who protects his lands from invading Muslims.

II. Much of the plot of *Parzival* resembles that of Chrétien's *Perceval*; both protagonists develop, through similar series of adventures, from unskilled country bumpkins into exemplars of chivalry. These adventures bring Parzival, like Chrétien's knight, to the Grail. Parzival views the Grail procession in what is called the Terre de Salvaesche (Savage Land), at the mysterious castle named Munsalvaesche (Wild Mountain), of a wounded fisherman-king named Anfortas, whom Parzival later discovers to be his maternal uncle. Though he sees the Grail, he fails to ask the question that could heal the Grail King of his painful wound.

III. Wolfram's Grail, however, is not the usual vessel.

A. It is a stone of no large size; it is carried in the Grail procession by Anfortas's virginal sister, Repanse de Schoye, who is Parzival's aunt.

B. The Grail has a number of marvelous properties.

1. It provides food and drink to the Grail community, giving each member whatever he or she wishes to eat and drink.

2. It bestows eternal youth on whoever sees it. Thus it keeps alive Titurel, Anfortas's grandfather, but also Anfortas, for whom such sustenance is a torment, because of his unhealed wound caused by a poisoned lance.

C. The Grail's wonderful properties derive from its heavenly origins.

1. Wolfram calls the Grail "*Lapsit exillis.*" It is not clear what this nonsense pseudo-Latin means, but many experts assume that it means something like "stone from heaven," or "what fell from heaven," because we're told that a troop of neutral angels—those who did not choose sides during the war in heaven between Lucifer and God—brought it to Earth.
2. The Grail's power is renewed each Good Friday when a white dove descends to it from heaven, bearing a wafer. The emblem of the Grail, therefore, is the turtledove, worn by those in its service.

IV. Although Wolfram spends considerable time describing the marvels of the Grail, it is not the center of his text. Rather, that center is the Grail Brotherhood that protects it. Parzival's real quest is not to understand the Grail but to join this community. When he does ask the question that heals Anfortas, he becomes the Grail King and Lord.

A. The Grail Brotherhood largely consists of knights who protect the borders of the Terre de Salvaesche from intruders. They must remain virgins, although often one of them is sent to serve as lord of any country lacking a king who requests such aid.

B. Wolfram places the Grail in what he calls a temple, and so he terms the knights who guard it *templeisen.* Although this Middle High German word is often translated as "templars," Wolfram most likely did not intend to indicate the monastic Knights Templar.

C. Women also belong to the Grail community. They, like the men, must remain virgins and may be given away in marriage. Parzival's mother, Herzeloyde, has been in the Grail Company—she is in fact Anfortas's sister—but was given away in marriage.

D. The only member of the Grail community able to marry is its king; he must produce an heir because the Grail Kingship is hereditary. Anfortas cannot do this because he is impotent; the poisoned spear struck him in his genitals.

E. Thus when Parzival asks the question that heals Anfortas, as his closest male relative, he succeeds him to become Grail King. His wife, here named Condwiramurs, becomes Grail Queen, and his son, Loherangrin, also becomes a Knight of the Grail.

V. Not the Grail but the Grail Brotherhood of Knights represents the ideal here: a perfect chivalric civilization, harmoniously held together by the steadfast loyalty brothers should show each other, for all men are brothers, sharing a descent from Adam.

A. Wolfram repeatedly uses the term "paradisal" to describe the Grail.

B. The fall from edenic happiness for Wolfram is not pride, as in the

Bible, but kinstrife: hatred among relatives.

1. Wolfram's digest of biblical events, delivered by the hermit Trevrizent, highlights not Adam and Eve's eating the apple but Cain's murder of Abel, emblematic of kinstrife.
2. Parzival himself is guilty of kinstrife: His first knightly opponent, whom he killed, was his cousin Ither. He absolves himself of this crime when he shows compassion for his suffering uncle Anfortas by asking the Grail question, "Sire, what ails you?"

C. Eden can be regained in the Grail community whose members practice brotherly loyalty. Many of its members are literally kin: Almost everyone Parzival encounters in the text is related to him, however distantly.

D. But all in the Grail company are brothers; indeed, as Parzival's mother announces, "all are my kin through Adam's rib." So the Grail company is drawn from throughout the earth; the only requirement is that its members be baptized. More foreign members of the community include the following:

1. Cundrie, messenger of the Grail, comes from a monstrous race in India whose descent from Adam is traced.
2. Parzival's Moslem half-brother Feirefiz was conceived by his father with the Moorish Queen Belacane. Feirefiz is baptized and marries the Grail Maiden, Repanse de Schoye. They return to India, where their son becomes the legendary Prester John.

VI. Because Wolfram wishes to connect Europe with Asia, Christian culture to Muslim, he claims that his work is a translation of a work by a Muslim scholar.

A. Wolfram claims his work is a translation of a French work by one Kyot the Provençal.

B. Kyot's work in turn is the translation of a book "in a heathenish script" he found in Toledo by one Flegetanis, a Muslim maternally descended from King Solomon, a physician and astronomer who discovered the secrets of the Grail in the stars.

Summary

Much different from any French or English version of the Grail story is the *Parzival* of Wolfram von Eschenbach. Although Wolfram's story is based on and concludes Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval,* the German poet departs in major ways from his source. First, his Grail is not a vessel of any kind but a wonder-working stone brought to Earth from heaven. Secondly, Wolfram emphasizes not the Grail as an object but the Grail Brotherhood that guards it; Parzival's quest is not to understand the Grail, as was Perceval's in Chrétien, but to join the Grail community, an idyllic society of men and women called from around the globe; indeed, Parzival will become the Grail King and Lord. Thirdly, Wolfram—though obviously borrowing from Chrétien's romance—claims that his source is a book that derives ultimately from Muslim lands. Because Wolfram claims an Islamic source, and because his Grail Kingdom includes knights from India, his modern readers often believe that the Grail legend itself must originate from a non-Christian, non-European culture.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Wolfram changes the nature of the Grail from a vessel to a stone. Do you think that he made this change deliberately or that he merely misunderstood what Chrétien meant by the word “graal”?
2. The chief virtue that Wolfram associates with the Grail is loyalty. Why might this virtue be of prime importance to medieval knights?
3. Wolfram is the only medieval author to include women in any group that pursues or guards the Grail. How does the presence of women in the Grail Community change what the Grail represents?
4. Wolfram claims that his story of the Grail is the authentic tale that comes ultimately from the Middle East. Should we believe him? Why might he have pretended a non-European and non-Christian source?

Suggested Reading

Wolfram von Eschenbach. *Parzival*. Trans. A.T. Hatto. New York: Penguin, 1980.

———. *Parzival and Titurel.* Trans. Cyril Edwards. Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2006. [Includes fragments of a romance about tragic love in the Grail family.]

———. *Willehalm.* New York: Penguin Classics, 1984. [Wolfram’s other major work, an epic about the Christian fight against Muslims in Spain.]

Other Books of Interest

Heinrich von dem Türlin. *The Crown: A Tale of Sir Gawein and King Arthur’s Court.* Trans. J.W. Thomas. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1989. [Another medieval German Grail quest, focusing on the adventures of Gawain.]

Madden, Thomas F. *The New Concise History of the Crusades.* Rowman and Littlefield, 2005.

Tolan, John V. *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

Lecture 6:
Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* [1869] and Richard Wagner's Opera *Parsifal* [premiered 1882]: What Can the Grail Mean in the Modern Era?

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are Alfred Lord Tennyson's "The Holy Grail" and Richard Wagner's *Parsifal.*

Introduction

Because the Grail was associated so closely with medieval chivalry and with a theology of the Christian Eucharist that Protestants would later reject, the Grail lost its luster in most of western Europe in the Renaissance. Both the Renaissance and the Enlightenment that followed looked to classical Greece and Rome, not to what they thought of as the "gothic Dark Ages," for literary inspiration. The Romantic literary and cultural movement in England and Germany, however, reacted against the Enlightenment and drew on the Middle Ages as a source for art. Two major examples of a renewed interest in the Grail are by the English poet Tennyson and the German composer and poet Wagner.

I. Why the long gap between the medieval and modern Grails?

A. Most medieval Grail legends were written within a fifty-year span of time, ca. 1180–1230. All of them connect the Grail to aspects of medieval Christian belief, and the most influential associate it with the doctrine of transubstantiation.

B. Renaissance and eighteenth-century writers ignored Arthurian subject matter because they preferred classical to "gothic" literary models.

C. After the Reformation, Protestant writers avoided writing about the Grail because of its ties to Catholic theology.

D. Authors of the nineteenth-century Romantic era, reacting against classicism and aiming to celebrate their national cultures, turned to the Middle Ages for literary models and rediscovered chivalric romances, including those about the Grail. Curiously, Romantic Grail stories reject the vessel as an ideal for modern times.

II. In England, Alfred Lord Tennyson's lifelong (1809–1892) interest in Arthurian legend culminated in *Idylls of the King,* a series of twelve narrative poems lionizing Arthur as an ideal king. Tennyson's Arthur is a heroic Christian committed to just rule of a peaceful kingdom and is an exemplar of Victorian duty and honor.

A. The eighth idyll is *The Holy Grail* (1869), where Perceval, retired to a monastery, tells the story of how the Grail appeared at Camelot; although all the knights vowed to see it clearly, only he, Bors, Lancelot, and Galahad succeeded.

B. Although Tennyson's poetry richly describes the Grail, in essence he rejects it as an ideal for Arthurian or Victorian society.

1. The poem suggests that visions of the Grail are a kind of mass hysteria.

2. Arthur laments that his knights "follow wandering fires, / Lost in the quagmire" when they should be "men / With strength and will to right the wrong'd" (lines 319–320, 308–309). Religious mysticism distracts from the active quest for social justice.

III. In Germany, Richard Wagner's lifelong interest in German mythology as a source for his operas culminated in *Parsifal*.

A. Wagner's chief source is Wolfram's *Parzival*.

1. Wagner greatly simplifies Wolfram's plot to focus on how the hero cures the Fisher King (here called Amfortas) of a painful wound at his stronghold, which Wagner renames Monsalvat.

a. Like Parzival, Parsifal must learn compassion.

b. Wagner's notion of compassion was influenced by Buddhism. Wagner follows Arthur Schopenhauer's idea that Buddhism was the real source of Christian ethics.

2. Like Wolfram, Wagner celebrates not the Grail but the Grail community, here an all-male band of celibate, "pure" knights. The importance of biological maleness is underlined by the identities of those who threaten the Grail community: Amfortas was wounded when seduced by the hyper-feminine Kundry, a heathen sorceress under the control of Klingsor, a self-castrated magician.

B. Wagner's all-male Grail Brotherhood protects not Wolfram's stone but the Grail and spear.

1. The Grail is the cup of the Last Supper.

a. It is characterized as feminine: a crystal chalice full of glowing crimson blood that provides wine and bread.

b. So too is Jesus presented as feminine: wounded, bloody, and impotent to defend himself or save his followers. He calls to Parsifal to save him.

2. The Grail is accompanied by a spear that replaces the Grail in importance.

a. The spear or lance in earlier romances:

i. In Chrétien, Perceval sees a bleeding lance that will destroy Arthur's kingdom.

ii. In later French versions, this lance becomes identified with the spear that pierces Jesus' side in John 19:34 (in Latin *lancea*) and that inspires the legend of Longinus.

b. Wagner identifies his spear with that of John's gospel, but its primary significance is male power.

i. When Amfortas is emasculated, he drops the spear; Klingsor steals it. The Grail Brotherhood, too, is wounded by the loss of this spear.

ii. Parsifal regains the spear, and it, not the Grail, heals Amfortas. The opera ends with the unveiling of the Grail, with the Brotherhood worshipping the spear and hailing Parsifal as their redeemer.

C. *Parsifal* is not a Christian opera; although it alludes to Christian relics and rituals, they are not used in orthodox fashion.

1. Christianity, linked to the Grail, is shown to possess little power. It is displaced by art, particularly Wagner's music, represented by the spear.
2. Wagner termed *Parsifal* a "Bühnenweihfestspiel": "festival work to consecrate a stage." With it he inaugurated his theatre at Bayreuth, turning it into a sacred space.
3. The idea of the opera theatre as a sacred space was in keeping with the atheist Wagner's ideas of art and the artist: Only they may bring salvation and healing to a wounded world.

Summary

After centuries of neglect, medieval Grail legends were given new life by nineteenth-century poets and artists inspired by the Romantic Movement. In England, Alfred Lord Tennyson, whose *Idylls of the King* re-created the Arthurian court as a model for Victorian society, dismissed the search for the Grail as a distraction from the duty to serve the public good. In Germany, the composer Richard Wagner's last opera celebrates a community of Grail Knights, but not the Grail or the Christianity it represents. In *Parsifal,* the hero, by practicing Buddhist compassion, does not attain the Grail—here symbolizing a wounded, effeminate human nature—but the spear that often accompanies the Grail in legend. The spear symbolizes male power, especially Wagner's own artistic power that he believed could create in his audience the sort of wholeness conferred in earlier legends by the Grail. Although Wagner, like his sources, associated the Grail with Christianity, by associating it with Buddhism as well, and by labeling it as female and the spear as male, he opens the door to radical reinterpretations of the Grail legend conceived in the twentieth century.

The Grail and the Lance

While Chrétien's Perceval dines at the castle of the Fisher King, a procession enters the room: a boy holds a white lance from whose tip drips blood; two squires carry gold candelabra; a maiden enters with a grail; another maiden carries a silver carving platter. Of the various items in the procession, the grail and the lance are the most important. After Perceval is rebuked for failing to ask questions that would have healed the Fisher King, he vows to learn whom the grail serves and to find the lance and discover why it bleeds.

Theories about the origins of the objects in the grail procession are most convincing when they concern the grail along with the lance, and when they point to a context in Chrétien's own culture. One of the most persuasive theories about the grail and lance, proposed by Mario Roques in 1955, is that they were inspired by a particular artistic representation of the crucifixion that was common in medieval manuscript illumination, stained glass windows, and the carved fronts of cathedrals. This representation shows the crucified Jesus flanked by two women. Standing at his right is "Ecclesia," representing the Christian church; she holds a chalice in which she collects blood spilling from the wound in Jesus' side. This symbol of the personified Church holding a chalice is inspired by Jesus' words over the wine cup at the Last Supper: "This is the chalice, the new testament in my blood, which shall be shed for you" (Luke 22: 20). The picture of Ecclesia with a chalice then is a way of depicting the beginning of Christianity itself, the New Covenant, at the moment Jesus' blood is shed. At Jesus' left hand is the other woman, Synagoga, representing the Jews; she is blindfolded or veiled and carries a broken lance or spear. The broken spear represents that her power is broken: This detail is in token of the teaching of the medieval church that God has transferred his favor from the Jews to the Church.

The Ecclesia-Synagoga origins of grail and lance make sense of much that happens in Chrétien; it fits, for example, into Perceval's experiences on Good Friday, a day that commemorates the crucifixion: A pilgrim explains that the crucifixion, for which he blames the Jews, is the beginning of the New Law. Chrétien's story, like other Grail romances and much of medieval literature generally, is marred by the same anti-Judaism that in real life led to legal restrictions on Jews and often-murderous persecution of them, especially on Good Fridays. Chrétien wrote *Perceval* shortly after the Crusades excited vicious attacks against European Jews.

Chrétien may well have been inspired by the Ecclesia-Synagoga pair to invent his grail and lance, but it would be a mistake to read his romance as

some sort of allegory about the differences between Christianity and Judaism. Great medieval authors did not slavishly copy their sources but used their imaginations to reinvent them. Chrétien's prime concern is with chivalry, not with theology. For him, the grail is a holy thing, a symbol designed to teach both Perceval and his contemporary audience about their duties as Christian knights. The lance, on the other hand, is a gruesome object, the blood that continually drips from its tip emblematizing the killing and maiming that result from knights' use of such weapons. Almost every time a lance is mentioned by Chrétien, it is in a violent context: The lance that first Perceval and then Gawain seek is predicted to destroy all of Arthur's kingdom. Grail and lance represent two different concepts of knighthood, the first serving king and society, the second leading only to bloodshed.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Tennyson's poetry can be intensely Christian, yet he rejects the Grail quest as a fit occupation for the great majority of people. Does this suggest that the practice of Christianity had changed from the twelfth century to Tennyson's time?
2. Wagner, like many of his contemporaries, believed that India and Buddhism were the sources of European culture and of true Christianity. Why might they have felt attracted to such beliefs?
3. Critics disagree about whether *Parsifal* is essentially a Christian or anti-Christian opera. What do you think? Might Wagner have intended his work to be religiously ambiguous?
4. Hitler and many of the Nazis were devoted fans of Wagner's operas, yet Germany in 1939 banned performances of *Parsifal*. What might the Nazis have been attracted to in Wagner? What might they have found disconcerting about *Parsifal?*

Suggested Reading

Tennyson, Alfred Lord. "The Holy Grail." *Idylls of the King.* Ed. J.M. Gray. New York: Penguin, 1986.

Wagner, Richard. *Parsifal.* Opera Guide 24. New York: Riverrun Press, 1999. [Wagner's German libretto with English translation by Andrew Porter, interpretive essays on text and music, and illustrations taken from various productions.]

Other Books of Interest

Beckett, Lucy. *Richard Wagner: Parsifal.* Cambridge Opera Handbooks. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981. [Introduction to the opera with commentary on music, poetry, sources, and staging.]

Girouard, Mark. *The Return to Camelot.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981. [Lavishly illustrated history of Victorian England's fascination with Arthur and his knights.]

Goldman, Albert, and Evert Sprinchorn, eds. *Wagner on Music and Drama*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1988. [Selection of Wagner's writings on music, politics, and philosophy.]

Mancoff, Debra N. *The Return of King Arthur: The Legend through Victorian Eyes.* New York: Henry N. Abrams, 1995. [Beautifully illustrated guide.]

Lecture 7:
Scholarship in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Part I: What Are the Sources of the Grail Legend?

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are Scott C. Littleton and Linda A. Malcor's *From Scythia to Camelot,* Roger Sherman Loomis's *The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol,* "Peredur, Son of Efrawg" and "Branwen, Daughter of Llyr," and Arthur Edward Waite's *The Mother Church of the Holy Spirit: Its Legends and Symbolism.*

Introduction

The nineteenth century saw renewed interest in the Middle Ages, not only among writers and artists, but among scholars, too. Partly driven by nationalism, and partly under the influence of the scientific method, particularly methods associated with the study of evolution, scholars investigated sources of the Grail legend. They constructed theories of origin that located the first grails in pre-Christian Ireland, the Byzantine Empire during the Crusades, or in several medieval groups that either were or were thought to be heretical enemies of mainstream Christianity.

I. Theories of Celtic origin:

A. The Welsh *Peredur* is a romance in the *Mabinogion* that tells a story very much like Chrétien's *Perceval,* except that there is no grail. Peredur is confronted with a lance and a bleeding head on a platter and told to seek revenge.

B. Any number of vessels of plenty belonging to varying gods and goddesses could be the basis for Grail legends. These arguments are best summarized by Roger Sherman Loomis in *The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol* (1963). The following are vessels of plenty from Celtic mythology:

1. The cauldron of Annufn, the Celtic underworld.
2. The cauldron of Bran the Blessed.
3. The treasures of the Tuatha Dé Danann.
4. The cauldron of Ceridwen that gives Taliessin his knowledge.

II. Theories of Byzantine origin: The soldiers of the Fourth Crusade may have seen something in Constantinople that inspired the Grail legend.

A. Because of its Eucharistic associations, the Grail together with the lance may derive from the Byzantine Mass, which features a number of Eucharistic vessels together with a small knife called a lance.

B. Because the Grail is associated with visions of an infant or suffering Jesus, it could be inspired by Byzantine icons, especially those painted on cloth.

III. Theories of origin in a secret cult: Because the appearance of the Grail is always surrounded by secrecy, some writers argue that it may be associated with a "secret" form of medieval religion.

A. Heretical "gnostic" cults, particularly the Cathars.

B. Heresies practiced by the Knights Templar.

C. A.E. Waite's "hidden" church within orthodox Christianity.

IV. Theory of Sarmatian origin: This theory hangs on the fact that a band of Sarmatian cavalry was stationed in Roman Britain under the commander Lucius Artorius Castus, who may have given the Arthurian legend its name.

V. The following are some false assumptions and odd methods behind the quest for origins.

A. Any kind of vessel can be a grail.

B. Application of "scientific method" to the study of literature, methods that arose in comparative linguistics or comparative mythology.

C. Assumption that Grail legends aren't fictive but somehow real, recording actual history or practice.

D. Assumption that no medieval writer was an inventive creator but rather worked with inherited myth or folklore.

Summary

The nineteenth century, with its interest in medieval legend, brought the Grail to the attention not only of artists like Wagner and Tennyson, but also of scholars of literature, folklore, and anthropology. Under the influence of the scientific method, especially methods associated with the study of evolution, these scholars and thinkers were less interested in the Grail romances themselves than in finding the origins of the Grail legend. Nineteenth-century scholars argued that the Grail had its ultimate source in either pre-Christian Celtic mythology, Byzantine Christian ritual, or a secret cult within but unknown to orthodox Christianity. In the twentieth century, other scholars argued for much more unlikely cultures or religions as the origin of the Grail legend. The methods of literary scholars, however, who look for the origins of the Grail, tend not to tell us much about the Grail legends themselves, for they tend to disregard the culture of the medieval authors who wrote them. These theories are interesting in themselves and have definitely influenced twentieth-century retellings of the Grail legend.

The Knights Templar

In 1118, after the First Crusade, nine men led by Hugues de Payns presented themselves to Baldwin II, King of Jerusalem, and offered to protect pilgrims making their way from the coast of Palestine to the Holy City. The king gave them quarters in his palace on what was supposedly the site of King Solomon's Temple. From these humble beginnings rose the powerful Order of the Poor Knights of the Temple of Solomon. The Knights took religious vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and so united the duties of monk and warrior, duties formerly kept apart by the medieval world. The first military-monastic order, the Knights Templar would be followed by other fighting monks like the Knights Hospitaler of St. John and the Teutonic Knights.

The Templars grew in numbers and in prestige when they were championed by St. Bernard of Clairvaux, one of those who had enthusiastically preached the Crusade. Bernard wrote the Templar rule, modeling it on the rule of his own Cistercian order. The Knights' rule insisted on strict discipline, but they nonetheless attracted large numbers of recruits eager to win military glory along with heavenly salvation. Many noblemen donated to the Order both money, which largely went to finance the Crusades, and land throughout Europe on which the Knights built churches and their preceptories, called Temples. The Knights increased their already vast wealth by essentially acting as bankers for many travelers to the Holy Land. They were trusted councilors to kings and given special privileges by popes.

The downfall of the Templars began with the Crusaders' final loss of any land in Palestine in 1291. The Knights returned to Europe, still possessing wealth and privilege but lacking any real function. Shortly after the end of the Templars' role in the Crusades, in 1307, they were brought up on charges of heresy, witchcraft, sodomy, and idolatry. Philip IV "the Fair" of France issued orders for the mass arrest of the Knights and the confiscation of their property. Under torture, the Templars confessed to a perverted initiation ceremony that included spitting on the crucifix, denying Christ, performing homoerotic acts, and worshipping an idol called "Baphomet" (a medieval garbling of "Mohammed"), sometimes in the form of a cat, sometimes as a bearded head. In 1312, Pope Clement V suppressed the order. On March 18, 1314, the Grand Master of the Order, Jacques de Molay, was burnt alive on an island in the Seine River in Paris. The Templars were no more.

Most modern historians agree that the Templars were innocent of the charges of heresy and witchcraft, fabricated by Philip. The king needed money, and the wealthy Templars were attractive victims because he owed them a considerable sum. But since the Middle Ages numerous writers have

believed that the Templars were magicians, or at least practitioners of occult arts, privy to some tradition of secret Eastern wisdom that they brought to Europe from the Holy Land. Peter Partner's *The Murdered Magicians: The Templars and Their Myth* offers the fascinating history of how the legend of the esoteric Templars developed. According to Partner, writers in the Renaissance came to see the Knights as either black magicians, guilty of the crimes with which they were charged, or innocent victims of political oppression; in both traditions, the Knights are mentioned in the same breath as the Gnostics. These two traditions could come together to create a picture in which the Knights were good magicians who were, along with the Gnostics, partakers in a tradition of wisdom that countered established powers, religious or political, and so made them victims of persecution. Such notions became widespread in the eighteenth century, when Scottish Rite Freemasons adopted the Templars as their progenitors; members of "Scottish" lodges in Germany began to claim that they were founded by Templars who had escaped arrest in 1307 and sailed to Scotland. The conception of a long secret tradition known to groups including Gnostics, Templars, Freemasons, and nineteenth-century political revolutionaries would crystalize in Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall's 1818 *Mystery of Baphomet Revealed.* It was Hammer who first proposed that the Grail was a symbol of Gnostic illumination somehow connected to a pre-Christian pagan religion practiced by the Templars and other counter cultural groups. According to Peter Partner, we largely have Hammer to thank for creating the myth that imagines the Templars as a secret society that knew the mysteries of the Grail.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. The scholars who looked/look for the origins of the Grail are often influenced by scientific theories like evolution. What are the attractions of treating literature like science? Can you treat the study of literature as a science? Why or why not?
2. What do the theories of scholars who look for the meaning of Grail romances in pre-medieval cultures reveal about how those scholars view the Middle Ages? What does our culture think of the Middle Ages? Do we think it was a time of social stagnation or of cultural achievement?

Suggested Reading

Littleton, Scott C., and Linda A. Malcor. *From Scythia to Camelot*. New York: Garland, 1994. [Argues the Sarmatian hypothesis.]

Loomis, Roger Sherman. *The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991. [Good introduction to theories about the Irish and Welsh origins of the Grail legend and to Grail legends about Glastonbury.]

"Peredur, Son of Efrawg" and "Branwen, Daughter of Llyr." *The Mabinogion.* Trans. Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones. New York: Dutton, 1949.

Waite, Arthur Edward. *The Hidden Church of the Holy Grail: Its Legends and Symbolism.* Amsterdam: Fredonia Books, 2002.

Other Books of Interest

Barber, Malcolm. *The Cathars: Dualist Heretics in Languedoc in the High Middle Ages.* New York: Longman, 2000.

———. *The New Knighthood: A History of the Order of the Temple.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Cheyette, Fredric L. *Ermengard of Narbonne and the World of the Troubadours*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001. [Prize-winning history of the region that produced both the Troubadours and the Cathars; discusses the Albigensien Crusade.]

Marino, John B. *The Grail Legend in Modern Literature*. Rochester: D.S. Brewer, 2006. [Details many origin theories and their influence on popular literature and film in the twentieth century.]

Partner, Peter. *The Murdered Magicians: The Templars and Their Myth.* Rochester, VT: Aquarian Press, 1987.

Lecture 8:
Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* [1920]:
Part II: What Are the Sources of the Grail Legend?

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance.*

Introduction

The most influential theory of Grail origins is Jessie Weston's, which she detailed in her book *From Ritual to Romance.* She argues that Grail romances are records, though garbled ones, of an initiation into a secret fertility cult that originated in prehistoric India and was transmitted to medieval Great Britain. Although Wolfram von Eschenbach and Richard Wagner both connected the Grail to India, they wrote fictions. Weston claims her theory is historical and factual. Her book, published by Cambridge University Press in 1920, was enormously influential.

I. Weston's argument:

A. How fertility rituals traveled from India to Great Britain:

1. Indian rituals were designed to "free the waters," to end drought and guarantee the fertility of the land; these rites featured a ceremonial marriage representing the union of male and female forces in nature.
2. This ritual somehow reached the Middle East, where it influenced various mystery cults worshipping dying and resurrecting gods who are the partners of goddesses.
   a. These are the cults of Egyptian Osiris and his wife Isis; Babylonian Tammuz; Phoenician Adonis, beloved of Aphrodite; and the Phrygian Attis, consort of the mother goddess Cybele.
   b. Weston argues that these were essentially nature cults, and that the role of the male fertility god, who represents the life force of nature, is essentially that of the wounded Fisher King of the Grail myths: The aim of the Grail quest is to restore the virility of the Fisher King so as to restore fertility to his lands.
3. Via the Roman Empire, these mystery cults were transmitted to western Europe, particularly through the cult of Mithras, and by sects of Gnostic Christianity, especially the Naassenes (Ophites). In the Middle Ages, these means of transmission would have been reinforced by the Knights Templar.
4. In Great Britain, the cult was forced to operate in secret.

B. The original Grail author was recording a rite he had actually seen.

1. The ritual consisted of being presented with a grail and lance, as well as with a dead body.

2. The rite was probably enacted at a Chapel of St. Austin somewhere in Northumberland until it was forced to operate in secret.

II. Weston's methods:

A. Weston's methods claim to be "scientific" and scholarly.

1. She argues that Grail legends "evolved."
2. Her methods show the influence of *The Golden Bough* (various editions, 1890–1922) by the anthropologist Sir James George Frazer, who argued that all religions evolved from an original cult of nature worship.
   a. The methods of comparative mythology assume that phenomena are related if they resemble each other; both Frazer and Weston argue by citing parallels.
   b. Like Frazer, Weston assumes that most popular practices must preserve ancient folkloric practice.

B. Yet Weston does not hide her occult assumptions.

1. She credits occult practitioners among her sources.
2. She believes that the Grail may still be found on the astral plane.

Summary

By far the most influential work of literary scholarship on the Grail is Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance.* A student of folklore and literature, Weston argued that medieval Grail romances were garbled records of pagan fertility rituals that originated in prehistoric India: The grail and lance are "fertility symbols," representing female and male "life forces." Weston traces the means by which these rituals traveled from India to Great Britain, thereby supporting earlier arguments that linked the Grail to paganism, Gnosticism, and the Knights Templar. Weston's conclusions are now rejected: While her methodology was representative of cutting-edge anthropological scholarship of her day, it was also influenced by her belief in the occult. In *From Ritual to Romance,* Weston bequeathed both her ritual interpretation of the Grail and her school of scientific occultism to scores of poets, scholars, and filmmakers of the twentieth century.

The Golden Bough

It is difficult to imagine what the history of the Grail in twentieth-century literature would look like without the influence of Jessie Weston's *From Ritual Romance,* but Weston's book would have never existed without anthropologist Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. The massive influence of Frazer's work is in proportion to its size: The original version of the work filled twelve volumes, published from 1890 through 1915. In 1922, Frazer published a one-volume abridged version of the work that retained the framework of his argument but reduced the evidence he believed supported it.

The problem that Frazer set out to solve was a very local one: Why was the priest of a shrine on the shore of Lake Nemi in Italy dedicated to the goddess Diana chosen in such a peculiar way? A candidate for the post gained the office only after killing his predecessor and would hold the post until he was killed in turn. The priest held the title "the King of the Wood" because the candidate, a runaway slave, would make his challenge by breaking off a limb of a tree sacred to Diana; Frazer associates this limb with the Golden Bough that safely guarded Aeneas on his voyage through the Underworld in Book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid*.

Frazer's argument depends on two assumptions: First, that the priest/king at Nemi was wedded to the goddess of his shrine and, second, that their marriage, ceremonially enacted, was a magic ritual designed to stimulate the fertility of crops, animals, and human votaries of the goddess. Frazer considers the priest an incarnation of a fertility god or of a vegetation spirit and believes that his murder was part of this rite: The death of the old priest, feeble because of old age, conformed to the death of nature in the winter, while the arrival of a new, youthful, and sexually potent priest would guarantee the arrival of crops in the spring.

Frazer admits that there is no direct evidence for his theory; he instead makes his case through comparative analysis of myths and of folk customs. Frazer assumes, as did many of his contemporaries, that there is "an essential similarity with which, under many superficial differences, the human mind has elaborated its first crude philosophy of life." Since, in Frazer's view, all primitive cultures are essentially the same, he draws evidence from any society that appears to him primitive. Much of *The Golden Bough* rehearses folk customs, gathered from around the globe, that Frazer believes parallel what happened at Nemi. *The Golden Bough* takes its readers on a journey as epic as Aeneas's as we visit fertility rituals among the Russians, Germans, Irish, Native Americans, Japanese, and Africans. The most famous chapters of *The Golden Bough*, however, focus on the exotic cults of dying and rising gods

worshipped in the ancient Middle East: Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis, and Attis. Frazer included Jesus as another of these dying and rising gods; his unspoken but clear implication was that Christianity is simply a variation of a universal fertility myth.

Frazer is considered the father of modern anthropology, although both his methods and his conclusions are rejected by most current anthropologists and historians. Frazer considered himself a scientist bringing rationality to the study of religion, but his *Golden Bough* endures not as science but as a potent myth. His greatest influence was in the fields of literature and psychology, on writers such as D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, Joseph Campbell, and Marion Zimmer Bradley, and through them on much of popular culture.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Weston's book was published originally with the imprimatur of a major university press, but her arguments are now greeted largely with skepticism by academic literary scholars. Why might assessments of the work change so radically?
2. Weston assumes, like many scholars of her day, that religion is primarily about ritual and has little to do with beliefs. Do you agree with her view of religion? Why might she and other researchers have defined religion as being about practice and not doctrine?
3. Weston argues that "grail" fertility rituals migrated virtually unchanged from prehistoric India to twelfth-century England; is it possible for a cultural activity to travel over thousands of years and thousands of miles and retain its original meaning?

Suggested Reading

Weston, Jessie. *From Ritual to Romance.* Mineola, NY: Dover Books, 1997.

Other Books of Interest

Campbell, Joseph. *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology.* New York: Viking, 1968. [A Jungian interpretation of Weston's view of the Grail myths.]

Frazer, George. *The Golden Bough.* New York: Touchstone, 1963.

Johnson, Robert. *He: Understanding Masculine Psychology.* New York: Harper, 1989. [The Grail as a key to male psychology; the inspiration for the film *The Fisher King.]*

Jung, Emma, and Marie-Louise von Franz. *The Grail Legend.* Boston: Sigo Press, 1986. [C.G. Jung's psychological theories applied to the Grail legend.]

Lodge, David. *Small World: An Academic Romance*. New York: Macmillan, 1984. [Academic satire based on the Grail story.]

Reed, Mary, and Eric Mayer. *One for Sorrow.* Scottsdale, AZ: Poisoned Pen Press, 1999. [Murder mystery featuring the Grail.]

Segal, Robert A., ed. *The Myth and Ritual Theory: An Anthology.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. [Scholarly works by the creators of the myth and ritual school and their heirs.]

Lecture 9:
T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* [1922]:
Is the Grail Just an Antiquated Myth?

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land.*

Introduction

Perhaps the most important poem of the twentieth century is T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land.* Typical of the literary movement known as Modernism, the poem makes for difficult reading, offering instead of a clear narrative in a realist style, a pastiche of lines in a number of dead and living languages. The difficulty of the poem represents the difficulty of life after World War I: The "waste land" is modern Europe, and the poem's fragmented quality symbolizes the fragmented psyches of those who had experienced the war. In tension with the contemporary concerns of the poem, however, are its dense allusions to literary works of the past, including versions of the Grail quest. For those Eliot drew from Weston's *From Ritual to Romance,* a work that he recommends as an elucidation of his work.

I. Eliot constructs *The Waste Land* out of fragments, bits and pieces that quote from or allude to some of the greatest works of European literature. This bewildering mish-mash of texts spoken in different languages by different voices makes the poem difficult to understand.

II. Luckily, Eliot provides a key to understanding the poem: In his headnote to the poem, he states that he borrowed symbols and the plan of the poem from Jessie Weston. The following are important borrowings.

A. The waste land, which for Eliot represents the barrenness of European culture after World War I.

B. The figure of the Fisher King: For Eliot, his wounds represent psychic damage, even madness, and the wounded nature of relations between the sexes.

III. If Weston furnishes the symbols that represent the fragmented nature of modern life, she also furnishes the plan to revivify the waste land. The plan focuses on Weston's idea that the task of the Grail hero is to embark on a journey that takes him to the Grail chapel; there he must ask the question that will heal the Fisher King and restore the waste land.

A. In *The Waste Land,* the reader is the Grail quester who must ask the Grail question; here the question is, "You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember nothing?"

B. The reader must also answer the Grail question by either remembering or learning about the literary works quoted in the poem and drawing connections among them.

C. These works all share the same plot, in which a traveler makes a voyage that takes him first down into some underworld of despair and/or death but then up to life and salvation. Among the works Eliot draws on are the following:

1. Exodus: an archetypal trip through a desert to the Promised Land.
2. *The Aeneid,* where Aeneas survives the fall of Troy, travels to the underworld, and emerges with the help of a golden bough to found Rome; here Eliot's allusions also function as a cross-reference to Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and its anthropology of myth.
3. *The Confessions,* St. Augustine of Hippo's spiritual autobiography that follows the plot of the *Aeneid.*
4. *The Divine Comedy,* Dante's rewriting of the *Aeneid* in medieval Christian terms. Dante travels through hell, purgatory, and heaven.

D. The implication is that all these great poems tell essentially the same story, a story that Weston also uses as the plot of her Grail quest.

IV. But is there a grail in *The Waste Land*?

A. Yes!

1. The poem gives us Weston's Chapel Perilous, with suggestions that the drought is over and the waste land will bloom again.
2. This revivification is not just physical but spiritual, as indicated by the number of religious texts, Western and Eastern, that comprise the text of *The Waste Land*.

B. No!

1. There is no grail in the poem, simply a lot of vessels that represent living death and debased sexuality.
2. If the texts, religions, and myths had meaning in the past, they are no longer significant in the modern world. As Frazer's *Golden Bough* teaches, they are simply myths.

C. Maybe? It depends on how you interpret the poem.

1. Any reader's interpretation of the poem is subjective; this subjectivity is entirely in keeping with the assumptions of Modernism.
2. The meaning of the poem is a product of the reader's interpretation; this has always been true of Grail texts as far back as Chrétien's. Grail texts always teach their readers how to interpret the Grail.
3. Here the "grail" to be interpreted is the text of *The Waste Land* itself. As a vessel, like the Grail, it can contain any meaning the author and reader wishes to put into it.

Summary

T.S. Eliot (1888–1965) claimed that Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* provided the plan and many of the symbols of *The Waste Land,* arguably the most important poem of the twentieth century. The most significant of the symbols Eliot draws from Weston is the waste land itself. For Eliot, the waste land is emblematic of the barren nature of modern existence; it represents the devastated urban landscape of Europe after World War I and the ravaged minds of those scarred by the war. For Eliot, modern life and the modern psyche are fragmented: Hence the fragmented texture of the poem itself, constructed from bits and pieces of the great works of the Western literary canon. The poem, like the Fisher King it focuses on, is wounded, but it can be healed, Eliot suggests, if the reader knows the great literary works of the past and sees what they share in common. *The Waste Land* braids these works together to form the shape of a Grail quest as Weston sketched it, a voyage into the otherworld where the quester, in order to understand the Grail, must descend into the depths of hell to confront death. Whether the Grail quest of *The Waste Land* is a success, however, whether it results in the healing of the Fisher King and the revivifying of the waste land, depends on the individual reader. The poem has no obvious closure, no final significance. The poem itself is a grail, a vessel from which different readers can draw different meanings.

Tarot Cards and the Grail

Tarot cards certainly look as if they might conceal some type of secret lore. Individual cards in the deck feature enigmatic pictures of figures with names like the Fool, the Magician, the Hermit, and the Devil. Yet in fact Tarot cards began as ordinary playing cards without any occult significance. They date to Italy in the first half of the fifteenth-century, perhaps as an import from Muslim countries.

The seventy-eight-card Tarot pack is divided into two parts. Fifty-six cards comprise the Minor Arcana, which very much resembles a standard pack of today's playing cards. The Minor Arcana are divided among four suits, which are variously named: the cup, or chalice or goblet; the baton, or wand; the sword; and the coin, or dish or pentacle. Each of the four suits has cards numbered from one to ten, as well as four face cards: page, knight, queen, and king. Besides the Minor Arcana are the Major Arcana, the twenty-two cards with the mysterious pictures that are associated with fortune-telling. One likely theory is that these picture cards, sometimes called "trumps," are derived from Italian parade floats, called *trionfi* (triumphs) that featured complex allegorical imagery.

The use of Tarot cards for mystical purposes was not widespread until the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century, the Tarot became linked to other esoteric systems and groups, including alchemy, the Templars, Cabala, and Mediterranean mystery cults. It was thought that the Tarot pack derived from some exotic land, perhaps Egypt, from where fortune-telling Gypsies were believed to come.

The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was one of the magical societies of the turn of the twentieth century that incorporated Tarot into their belief systems. The individual who did the most to popularize the esoteric use of Tarot cards in English-speaking countries was the Golden Dawn member A.E. Waite. He designed illustrations for a deck of Tarot cards published by the Rider Company in 1910; the deck became known as the Rider-Waite deck and is still popular among those who use the cards for divination. Waite also advanced the notion that there was, as he put it in the title of a book, a *Hidden Church of the Holy Grail* (1909), a secret mystical cut within orthodox Christianity. Waite connected the Tarot to his Grail church: He argued that the four suits of the Tarot conformed to the items in the Grail procession: the Tarot's cups, wands, swords, and pentacles aligned with grail, lance, sword, and dish.

Jessie Weston cited Waite's researches on the cards in her popular *From Ritual to Romance.* Weston went on to assert that since Gypsies come from

Tarot Cards and the Grail

India (as indeed they do), so too must the Tarot, where they must have had some connection with the fertility rituals she posits as the origin of the Grail rite. Reacting to Weston, T.S. Eliot would poke fun at the notion that Tarot cards could foretell the future in his Grail quest, *The Waste Land.* He features "Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante," who has "a wicked pack of cards." She presents the reader with several cards, including "the man with three staves." In his notes, Eliot comments, "I am not familiar with the exact constitution of the Tarot pack of cards, from which I have obviously departed to suit my own convenience. . . . The Man with Three Staves . . . I associate quite arbitrarily with the Fisher King himself." Any interpretation of the Tarot deck will be arbitrary, including those that somehow associate it with the Fisher King or the Grail.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Eliot creates *The Waste Land* as a pastiche of quotations in a variety of dead and living languages. Would these quotations invite typical readers to explore these works or alienate them?
2. *The Waste Land* quotes from/alludes to the Bible considerably; does Eliot seem to believe in these narratives as sacred history, or does he, like Weston, simply adduce them as another myth of the god who dies and rises?
3. Is there hope in *The Waste Land*?

Suggested Reading

Eliot, T.S. *The Waste Land.* Ed. Michael North. Norton Critical Edition. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. [The poem, many of the works it draws on, and critical essays.]

Other Books of Interest

Eliot, T.S. *The Waste Land: Facsimile Edition.* Ed. Valerie Eliot. New York: Harvest/Harcourt, 1974. [Facsimile of the manuscript with revisions by Ezra Pound.]

Powers, Tim. *Last Call.* New York: Perennial, 1992. [Fantasy inspired by Eliot; Powers imagines Las Vegas as the Waste Land and Bugsy Siegel as the Fisher King.]

Powers, Tim. *The Drawing of the Dark.* New York: Del Ray, 1979. [Here Powers blends Eliot's *Waste Land* with Celtic origin theories and moves the whole to sixteenth-century Vienna, where the Grail is a beer keg.]

Rowson, Martin. *The Waste Land.* New York: Picador, 1999. [Graphic novel version of the poem that expands the range of allusions to the visual arts.]

Lecture 10:
Charles Williams's *War in Heaven* [1930]: What if the Grail Is Real?

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Charles Williams's *War in Heaven.*

Introduction

A most unusual novel about the Grail is by Charles Williams, poet, novelist, literary critic, and member, along with C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, of the Inklings literary group. The novel assumes that the Grail is a real object, the chalice that Jesus used, which found its way to England, where it is discovered in a village church. The plot of the novel focuses on a "war in heaven," a psychic battle between the forces of good and evil, for control of the Grail. The Grail is attacked through black magic by a group of Satanists; it is defended by an Anglican priest, a Catholic duke, and a book publisher who together form a trio that recalls medieval Grail knights. The cosmic battle for the Grail culminates in the appearance of the priest-king Prester John, who stunningly announces that even evil may lead to God. For Williams, the Grail is a potent reminder that spiritual reality informs physical existence and a symbol of the wholeness of the metaphysical realm: All oppositions, even what humans think of as good and evil, can be reconciled in God.

I. Life of Charles Williams (1886–1945), a lesser-known friend of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. Like his fellow Inklings, Williams wrote works dealing with the fantastic, but his brand of fantasy has important elements of religious mysticism. A prolific author, he wrote seven novels, seven volumes of poetry, and twelve plays, as well as works of theology, biography, and literary criticism.

A. In 1908, he joined the Oxford University Press, where he ultimately became an important editor.

B. In 1917, he joined the Order of the Golden Dawn, a society of occultists and practicing magicians, in a Christian temple under the leadership of A.E. Waite. Waite believed that Grail romances were the product of a secret esoteric cult within Christianity, a cult of Christian magic.

C. In 1939, Oxford University Press moved to Oxford because of the German bombing of London. There his friend C.S. Lewis invited him to join the Inklings, of which he remained a member till his death in 1945.

II. Williams wrote several works in which the Grail figures:

A. Williams penned an incomplete cycle of Arthurian poems. Portions were published as *Taliessin through Logres* (1938) and *The Region of the Summer Stars* (1944). Extremely difficult if not almost totally obscure, they focus on Galahad's search for the Grail in a mythical

realm where Arthur's kingdom of Logres is part of the Byzantine Empire. The poems develop the idea that the legendary Welsh bard Taliessin was a druid-educated bard at the court of Arthur, an idea first suggested by Tennyson.

B. Williams wrote an incomplete essay on Arthurian literature, *The Figure of Arthur,* posthumously published with commentary by C.S. Lewis as *Arthurian Torso* (1948). *The Figure* makes the Grail the center of the Arthurian story.

C. Williams's most accessible version of the Grail story is his supernatural thriller *War in Heaven* (1930), which treats the Grail less as a myth than as a material object existing in the real world of Williams's time. In the novel, the folklorist Sir Giles Tumulty identifies the Grail, the cup Jesus used at the Last Supper, as a certain chalice kept at the parish church in the town of Fardles.

1. Williams could have been inspired by the appearance of a number of objects in the early twentieth century that were claimed to be the Grail:

   a. Sometime after 1826, a well at Glastonbury, identified with Arthurian Avalon, began to be called the Chalice Well. Grail enthusiast Tudor Pole claimed to discover the Grail, a blue glass bowl, in Glastonbury.

   b. In 1905, a small wooden cup owned by the Powell family at their estate in Nanteos, Wales, began to be called the Grail; it was claimed to have healing properties.

   c. In 1908 was announced the discovery of the so-called "Antioch Chalice," a large silver vessel consisting of a plain cup set inside an elaborate framework. The chalice was exhibited in 1933 as the Holy Grail; it was bought by the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 1950 and can still be seen there.

2. But Williams was more inspired by his belief that the mystical realm was real; Williams's fiction is all based on the idea that the material world was totally infused by the spiritual. There is no barrier between the natural and supernatural realms.

III. In *War in Heaven,* Williams imagines what would happen if the Grail were actually to be discovered in a country parish in England: There would be a "war in heaven," a battle between good and evil waged by human warriors, although on the psychic plane.

A. The Grail is sought by a group of Satanists who view it as a repository of power. They seek alternately to destroy the Grail or to obtain it for their own use in black magic rituals.

1. The chief Satanist is Gregory Persimmons, retired publisher of occult books, who wants the Grail to use in necromantic rituals.

2. Persimmons is alerted to the whereabouts of the Grail by one of his authors, Sir Giles, who is a parody of Jessie Weston.

B. The Grail is guarded, physically and psychically, by a trio of men who are explicitly compared to medieval Grail knights.

1. The Duke of the North Ridings, poet and Catholic nobleman.
2. Kenneth Mornington, one of Gregory Persimmon's employees.
3. Mornington's friend, the Archdeacon Julian Davenant, vicar at Fardles.

IV. The mystical war between the Satanists and these modern Grail knights culminates in a black mass in which Gregory tries to destroy the soul of the Archdeacon.

A. The black mass is put to an end by the appearance of Prester John, who both is and isn't Jesus. Prester John stunningly announces that Gregory will eventually find salvation, "for you have sought me and no other."

B. This surprising revelation points to the main theme of the novel, Williams's eccentric theology that holds that God is the source of evil as well as good.

1. Mornington is revealed to be the Perceval figure in this novel, a "fool" who asks the Grail question; here the question is modeled on the question that Job asked God, where does evil come from?
2. Williams's answer to this question is also based on the theology of Job; God is the source of both good and evil.
3. This somewhat unorthodox theology can be understood as a reply to the arguments of scholars like Weston, who argue that the Grail must be part of a dualist, gnostic vision. Williams reclaims the Grail for a more mainstream Christianity that sees all power as coming from one God.

Summary

In his novel *War in Heaven,* Charles Williams responds directly to Jessie Weston's fertility-ritual interpretation of the Grail; Williams rejects her pagan origins theory and re-Christianizes the Grail, identifying it as the cup of the Last Supper. Williams does not view the Grail as merely legendary or as a remembrance of a musty past. He imagines what would happen if the Grail were found in contemporary England; it would excite a battle of good against evil for controlling the power within the Grail. *War in Heaven* is a most unusual novel because it imagines that psychic battles between Satanists and Christians might actually occur. For Williams, the battle of the forces of darkness and light will never be won by evil, for in his eccentric theology, both good and evil are two different ways of looking at the power of God.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Williams imagines what would happen if the Grail were actually discovered in the contemporary world; what do you think would happen if the Grail were found today?
2. How does Williams's fantasy world compare to those of his friends C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien?
3. Do you find Williams's magical treatment of the Grail off-putting or interesting?

Suggested Reading

Williams, Charles. *War in Heaven.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1982.

Other Books of Interest

Carpenter, Humphrey. *The Inklings: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams and Their Friends.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979. [Group biography of the famous Oxford fantasists.]

Costain, Thomas. *The Silver Chalice*. Chicago: Loyola Press, 2006. [Novel about a silversmith who crafts an outer chalice for the Grail; made into a 1954 movie starring Paul Newman.]

Lewis, C.S. *That Hideous Strength*. New York: Scribner, 2003. [In the final book of the Space Trilogy, Williams's friend and the creator of Narnia gives us a story of the Fisher King and Merlin, though no Grail per se.]

Williams, Charles. *Arthurian Poets*. Ed. David Llewellyn Dodds. Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 1991. [Includes *Taliessin through Logres, The Region of the Summer Stars,* and previously unpublished poetry.]

Williams, Charles, and C.S. Lewis. *Taliessin through Logres; The Region of the Summer Stars; Arthurian Torso.* Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1974. [Includes Williams's two cycles of Arthurian poems, his essay "The Figure of Arthur," and commentary by Lewis. Out of print but available used.]

Lecture 11:
Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* [1982]: Was the Grail Part of a Goddess Religion?

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon.*

Introduction

From almost the very beginning, various authors have connected the Grail to a vision of history: Robert de Boron sets it at the center of both Christian salvation history and Arthurian history; Jessie Weston sees it as key to the history of Indo-European religious history; T.S. Eliot views the Grail in the context of Western literary history. But Marion Zimmer Bradley uses the Grail to imagine a historical world that never really existed, a utopian world where the pagan is indistinguishable from the Christian.

I. The "historical" setting of *The Mists of Avalon*.

A. Bradley sets the novel at a particular moment in history. Citing the work of archaeologist Geoffrey Ashe, Bradley accepts Arthur as a historical figure, a Celtic king who defended Britain against invading Anglo-Saxons (fifth century).

B. But the novel's characters, particularly its main narrator, Morgaine, priestess of the Goddess, look back to an earlier utopian period, obviously unhistorical, when Druids and Christians worshipped together at Avalon.

1. According to Bradley:

a. Jesus studied Druid wisdom at Avalon.

b. After the crucifixion, Joseph of Arimathea returned and established a church at Glastonbury/Avalon. Christians and Druids lived together in tolerance, for "all the Gods are one."

2. Bradley's story is a New Age interpretation of legends and mythography:

a. *The Golden Bough*'s implication that Christianity is another variant on the universal myth of the dying/rising god.

b. Medieval legends about Joseph of Arimathea at Glastonbury that identified it with Avalon.

c. Lewis Spence's argument (1949) that Druidism, which he claimed to be a fertility religion, influenced Celtic Christianity, producing a mystical Grail religion.

d. Geoffrey Ashe's argument that a goddess-worship cult at Glastonbury fueled veneration of the Virgin Mary there.

II. This utopian realm of tolerance is long over in the present of *The Mists of Avalon,* brought to an end when Bishop Patricius—very loosely based on the historical St. Patrick—enforces a new, intolerant school of Christianity. Britain is now divided into two worlds:

A. The Christian world represented by Glastonbury. It is represented as intolerant, ignorant, unlearned, nature-hating, and misogynist. It is patriarchal and largely "male" in its values, espousing war and conquest.

B. "Beside . . . and behind" Glastonbury is Avalon, the Druidic realm of the Great Goddess. This civilization is presented as tolerant, learned, and in-sync with natural forces. It is matriarchal—led by the Lady of the Lake—and largely "female" in its values, emphasizing fertility and nourishment.

Avalon is polytheistic, though its chief deities are the Great Goddess and her consort the Horned One, simultaneously her son, lover, and victim. The Goddess is the following:

1. The Great Mother; here Bradley follows the theory of Margaret Murray that prehistoric peoples worshipped a single mother goddess; her worship was displaced by patriarchal polytheism. Here Goddess worship is displaced by patriarchal Christianity.
2. The Celtic "Triple Goddess" (Maiden, Mother, and Crone) popularized by Robert Graves in *The White Goddess* (1948).
3. Ceridwen, the Sow Goddess, with her cauldron.

III. The plot of *The Mists of Avalon* very loosely parallels the plot of Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur.* Like Malory, Bradley tells the story of the rise and fall of Arthur's kingdom. Here that rise and fall depends on the will of the Goddess, who engineers history to ensure her continued worship. The plot is bookended by two rituals in worship of the Goddess.

A. Two servants of the Goddess—Viviane, Lady of the Lake, Morgaine's aunt, and Taliessen, the Goddess's messenger or "Merlin"—desire to raise up a king who will heal the rift between Christian and pagan Britain: Arthur. But to claim kingship over Avalon, Arthur must participate in the Frazer-inspired Great Rite of the Sacred Marriage, where the king is symbolically wedded to the land.

1. The Great Rite is enacted when Arthur, wearing antlers, represents the King Stag or the Horned One. He unknowingly has sex with Morgaine.
2. Morgaine in the Great Rite represents the Goddess, who in turn represents the land Arthur will rule. The rite guarantees agricultural fertility. Here Morgaine conceives Mordred, who will help bring down Camelot.

B. Arthur rules in peace and stability for many years; the events of his realm are narrated by the women of Arthurian legend: Arthur's mother, Igraine, raised on Avalon; his wife, Gwenhwyfar, a Christian guilt-ridden over her love for Lancelot; and especially Morgaine, who recounts

her love/hate relationship to Arthur. Camelot comes to an end when the truce between Christians and Goddess-worshippers becomes frayed as Christians increasingly seek dominance. Events come to a head in a ritual that gives birth to the legend of the Holy Grail.

1. The new Merlin, Kevin Harper, steals the Holy Regalia of the Goddess, used in her mysteries, from Avalon, and gives them to Christians to use in their rites. The Regalia include a dish and spear, but most importantly, a sword—given to Arthur as Excalibur—and a cup, which is somehow the cauldron of Ceridwen: "wherein all men are nourished and from which all men have all the good things of this world" (p. 770).
2. Morgaine, outraged by this act of desecration, acting as the Goddess herself, seizes the cup and carries it around the church, giving drink to all who are there in a ritual that recognizes the Goddess. Initiates of the Goddess recognize her and her service.
3. But the Christians present believe they see an angel, some holy maiden, even Jesus' mother Mary holding the cup. Patricius says it was the cup Jesus used at the Last Supper and terms it the Holy Grail.
4. Arthur's knights, as in the *Quest of the Holy Grail,* swear to seek the Grail for a year and a day. Morgaine is pleased that the Christian court of Camelot is disrupted: The Grail quest is the beginning of the end.

IV. But the downfall of Camelot is also the fall of Avalon: After the death of Arthur, Glastonbury and Avalon, historical and fantasy Britain, drift further apart, and it is harder and harder to pass from one to the other. Still, elements of Avalon exist in the real world for those who can see them.

A. Morgaine visits Glastonbury and sees that the nuns there worship the Great Mother under the aspects of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Brigid.

B. The memory of the Grail persists in the world; through it anyone may attain entry to Avalon.

C. Avalon is a state of mind, and *The Mists of Avalon* claims that the imagination is the pathway to it, that belief indeed creates reality. Thus in her novel, Bradley has created an Avalon that, if it never existed in history, is real to those who believe in it.

Summary

Jessie Weston argued that the Grail was a symbol of female life forces at the center of an Indo-European pagan fertility cult but disconnected it from its usual medieval context, Arthurian legend. In her best-selling fantasy, *The Mists of Avalon,* Marion Zimmer Bradley reconnected the Grail to the saga of King Arthur even while, inspired like Weston by *The Golden Bough,* recasting it as part of the regalia of a pre-Christian Celtic fertility goddess. Bradley retells Malory's epic story of the rise and fall of Arthur's Camelot as a history of the clash of matriarchal paganism and patriarchal Christianity. This history is narrated largely by Arthur's sister Morgaine—who in Arthurian legend usually appears as Morgan la Fey—priestess of the Goddess. Morgaine works throughout the novel to ensure that the Goddess and her cult will retain power in the face of encroaching Christian power. Although Morgaine ostensibly fails—the Goddess's shrine at Avalon fades into the mists as Christians come to dominate Great Britain—the Goddess lives on, concealed under various Christian rituals, and especially in the legend of the Grail.

Glastonbury as the Isle of Avalon

Glastonbury is now a site popularly thought to be both Avalon, a name for the Celtic other—or underworld—and the location of the Holy Grail. The tradition that the city was Avalon, an enchanted realm where King Arthur went to be healed of deadly wounds, was well established in the Middle Ages.

Several early medieval saints' lives show Arthur interacting with holy men connected with the history of Glastonbury. Around 1130, Caradoc of Llancarfan's *Life of Gildas* makes Gildas—the British writer who is the font of Arthurian legend—a contemporary of Arthur, described as a tyrant who besieges Glastonbury because an abducted Guinevere was being held there by Melwas, king of the Summer Country; this tale may be the inspiration for the Lancelot-Guinevere adultery story that later becomes so central to Arthurian lore. Caradoc also explains the name "Glastonbury" as a translation of the British word for "city of glass," linking the city to the Celtic underworld, frequently imagined as a glass island or fortress.

Somewhat later, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain* (ca. 1138) said that Arthur was carried to Avalon to be healed of his wounds; around 1150, Geoffrey's *Life of Merlin* said the same thing and noted that Avalon was "the island of apples," another way of referring to the Celtic otherworld. Geoffrey does not, however, identify Glastonbury as Avalon.

Perhaps because the "Isle of Glass," already associated with Glastonbury, and "Avalon" were alternate names for a magical, unearthly realm, Glastonbury began to be thought of as Avalon. The link between the real site and the locus of myth was cemented in 1191 when the Benedictine monks of Glastonbury Abbey said they discovered the bones of Arthur and Guinevere, the remains conveniently identified by a lead cross that noted they were buried "in the isle of Avalon." Gerald of Wales, writing in 1194 after he visited Glastonbury, seems to be the first writer to bring the various strands of the legend together: In his *On the Education of Princes,* he relates that Arthur was taken to Glastonbury by its ruler, Arthur's kinswoman Morgan, to be healed, and that Glastonbury was formerly known as both Isle of Glass and as the Isle of Avalon because of the many apple trees there.

Modern historians agree that the monks of Glastonbury perpetrated an archaeological fraud. A fire at the monastery in 1184 destroyed its ancient wattle chapel of St. Mary, the goal of many pilgrims, and the monks needed money for rebuilding, as well as a new shrine. Relics always attracted pilgrims, and the remains of Arthur—not a saint but a famous king—would entice them and their offerings. The fraud was widely accepted in medieval England, at least by those of Saxon or Norman descent. For the Welsh, con-

quered first by the Anglo-Saxons and then by the Normans, Arthur was not dead; they awaited the return of their national redeemer, the famous “once and future king” who would come from Avalon to save them from their foreign oppressors. Gerald of Wales reports that King Henry II directed the monks to look for Arthur’s corpse; some historians believe this to be true, and that Henry did so to dampen Welsh hopes of Arthur’s return and a consequent revolution. Most historians agree that King Edward I, when he visited Arthur’s tomb in 1278, did so for political reasons. Edward was in the middle of a campaign to subjugate the Welsh. When he visited Glastonbury, he had Arthur and his queen disinterred and reburied. Edward, by drawing attention to Arthur’s remains, hoped to prove that the Welsh hero was definitely dead and would never return from Avalon to lead a political revolt.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. *The Mists of Avalon* is told from the point of view of the female characters in Arthurian legend; how does this change affect the meaning of the story? How does *Mists* define femaleness?
2. Some readers of *The Mists of Avalon* object that Bradley's vision of the Dark Ages is unhistorical. What do you think Bradley would have replied to this objection?
3. Bradley creates a utopian past where Christians and Pagans happily co-exist in mutual tolerance. Is paganism compatible with Christianity?

Suggested Reading

Bradley, Marion Zimmer. *The Mists of Avalon.* New York: Ballantine Books, 1987.

Other Books of Interest

Ashe, Geoffrey. *King Arthur's Avalon: The Story of Glastonbury.* New York: Dutton, 1958. [Argues that a pagan cult of the goddess inspired veneration of a "gnostic" Virgin Mary at Glastonbury/Avalon.]

Carley, James P., ed. *Glastonbury Abbey and the Arthurian Tradition.* Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2001.

Crombie, Deborah. *A Finer End.* New York: Bantam, 2001. [This book, from a popular series of mysteries, features the Grail.]

Fortune, Dion. *Glastonbury: Avalon of the Heart.* York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 2000. [Mystical meditation on the importance of Glastonbury.]

Hutton, Ronald. *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.

———. *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Murray, Margaret. *The God of the Witches.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970.

Powys, John Cowper. *A Glastonbury Romance.* Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1996. [Epic novel about pagan and Christian grails at Glastonbury.]

Rickman, Phil. *The Chalice: A Ghost Story*. London: Pan/Macmillan, 2000. [Horror novel about a Dark Grail.]

Spence, Lewis. *The Magic Arts in Celtic Britain*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999. [Argues that the Grail was a talisman of a Druid mystery/fertility cult; Arthur is a dying/rising god.]

Lecture 12:
A Quintet of Grail Films [1974–1991]:
What Does the Grail Look Like?

The Suggested Viewings for this lecture are the films *Perceval le Gallois, Excalibur, Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, The Fisher King,* and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail.*

Introduction

The Grail lends itself well to filmic treatment because its seeker traditionally aims to *see* it, either in a vision or in real life. The visual theme is most to the fore in the Cistercian *Quest for the Holy Grail,* where the holy vessel represents the beatific vision promised to Christians in the afterlife; because the monk-knights who pursue the Grail in that text are pursuing that heavenly vision, through the Grail they experience a number of dramatic and mystical sights. But a visual theme attaches itself to the Grail even in its first appearance in Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval.* In that romance, Perceval must learn to be a skilled interpreter of both what he hears and what he sees, both of words and of images. That tradition of visual interpretation lasts to the present, where the hero of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* is a "symbologist," an interpreter of signs and symbols. Most contributing to the tradition of seeing the Grail, however, are a quintet of films that all draw, to a greater and lesser extent, on written versions of the Grail story even while creating new meanings for the Grail.

I. Eric Rohmer's *Perceval le Gallois* (1978) is paradoxically the most traditional and the most innovative film version of the Grail quest. Rohmer closely follows Chrétien's text but in an unusual visual style.

A. The content of the film is traditional.

1. It faithfully retells the story of Perceval's development from rustic fool to heroic knight, concentrating on the religious teaching of the hermit who instructs Perceval on the meaning of the crucifixion.
2. The film ends with Perceval entering a church where a passion play is being performed; hence Perceval actually sees the crucifixion. Jesus is played by the same actor as Perceval, implying that Perceval realizes his identity not as a knight but as a Christian, someone made in the image of God who must put on the "image of Christ."

B. The style of the film is innovative, for Rohmer attempts to re-create the experience of hearing a romance in the twelfth century.

1. The film is narrated by a chorus of male and female singers who both provide medieval music and guide our understanding of the story.

2. It is also narrated by characters who switch from first person to third person.
3. The look of the film re-creates miniatures in medieval manuscripts. The look is not realistic but stylized: Props and scenery are minimal. Outdoor scenes feature castles and trees made out of paper; indoor scenes create the impression that we are looking at a picture.
4. The effect is to remind us that we are seeing a filmed version of a text; this technique stimulates us to interpret what we're seeing instead of passively viewing it.

II. John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981) is the story of Arthur filtered through Wagner and Jessie Weston, a fertility myth where the fortunes of the land depend on the fortunes of the king.

A. The theme is communicated by the film's title; Excalibur is a symbol of royal male potency, sexual and political. The sword takes on the symbolism of the lance in *Parsifal*; the Wagnerian debt is signaled by the use of three of Wagner's operas in the musical score. The sword's function is clarified by Merlin, played as the wizard appears in medieval romances, as an impish figure with a dark sense of humor. Merlin says that Excalibur is a "sword of power," and this power derives from its being "part of the Dragon," "a being of power," a representation of the forces of nature. Excalibur glows green, the color of nature.

1. Opening scenes relate Excalibur's connection with sexual power. Merlin gives the sword to Arthur's father Uther, who uses it in his private war waged because of his lust, from which Arthur is produced.
2. Excalibur as a symbol of political power emerges when Arthur pulls the sword from the stone. He says it has "the power to unite all men." Merlin connects this unifying power to Arthur's mystic identity with the land: "You will be the land and the land will be you."
3. A crisis occurs when Arthur uses Excalibur for personal and not public reasons; he misuses it twice, both times having some connection with his sexual life.
   a. When first meeting Lancelot, he uses it to defeat the French knight. The sword breaks because Arthur has used it in pride and rage.
   b. When Guinevere and Lancelot run away from Camelot to consummate their love, Arthur pursues them and thrusts Excalibur into the ground between them. Merlin laments that there is now "the king without a sword, the land without a king."
   c. That Arthur has misused his power emerges when he is seduced by his sister, Morgana.
      i. From this incestuous sexuality is born Mordred, who will kill Arthur.
      ii. Arthur wastes away, as does the land, which becomes a muddy and barren wasteland.

B. Because of this misuse of male power, some female element must be invoked to correct the situation. The Grail is identified with Guinevere; the knights state that "only the Grail can restore leaf and flower; only the Grail can redeem us."

1. Perceval is the successful Grail seeker. As in Chrétien, he is a foolish boy who develops into Arthur's valued hero. As in Chrétien, he approaches the Grail castle twice.
2. The visit to the Grail castle is a visionary experience. Perceval does not ask but is asked a question: "What is the secret of the grail?" Perceval fails to answer.
3. Perceval meets Lancelot, now a priest or monk, who complains about the failure of knights, whom he blames for the wasted condition of the kingdom: "They made themselves gods." He pushes Perceval into the river.
4. Perceval has another vision of the Grail castle. Again asked the question, he recognizes that Arthur is the questioner and he replies that the secret of the Grail is that "You and the land are one."
5. Perceval brings Arthur the Grail; he drinks from it as Perceval tells him, "You will be reborn and the land with you." Arthur recovers, and visits Guinevere, who gives him Excalibur, which he uses in his final fatal battle. Perceval returns the sword to the Lady of the Lake.

III. Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989) is, despite its modern setting in the war against the Nazis, a traditional version of the Grail quest.

A. The Grail is "the cup of the blood of Jesus Christ." It can give youth and eternal life. Here the Grail was discovered by three knights of the First Crusade, one of whom guards it still.

B. In 1938, the Grail is sought by Walter Donovan, a millionaire who wants eternal life; he is in league with the Nazis, who "want to write themselves into grail history." Initially Indy agrees to find the Grail to find his father, a professor of medieval literature. After his father tells him "the quest for the grail . . . is a race against evil," Indy agrees to pursue it for the forces of good.

C. Indy interprets signs and symbols to find the Grail.

D. To reach the Grail, Indy must prove his worth by passing four tests; three have precursor in medieval romances:

1. The Breath of God demands humility.
2. The Word of God demands knowledge of God's name.
3. The Path of God demands a leap of faith.
4. The final challenge is to choose the correct Grail from dozens of candidates; this is a modern challenge.

E. His adventures teach him the following, as it does traditional Grail seekers:

1. His true identity.

a. He recognizes that he is part of a family and reestablishes intimacy with his father.

b. His father recognizes his identity by calling him "Indiana."

2. Acceptance of a realm of belief beyond that of fact.

IV. Terry Gilliam directed Richard La Gravenese's script of *The Fisher King* (1991), a modern Grail quest. La Gravenese credits Jungian Robert Johnson's analysis of the Grail quest as a search for male psychic wholeness, but the script also updates Eliot's urban wasteland to late twentieth-century Manhattan.

A. The inhabitants of this wasteland suffer from madness and lack of connection, but can heal themselves when they find their interconnected identities. The plot revolves around the relationship between two Fisher Kings, two psychologically wounded men.

1. Jack Lucas, a "shock-jock" who thinks he has potency: His theme song is "I've Got the Power." A narcissist, womanizer, and misanthrope, he spurs one of his listeners to go on a killing spree.

2. Henry Sagan, a professor of medieval literature whose wife is killed by Jack's listener. He is driven mad.

a. He creates an alter-ego based on Perceval the Fool. He becomes Parry, a self-styled knight and urban vigilante. He fights mental demons who take the form of a Red Knight.

b. He worships from afar Lydia Sinclair, who works at a publisher of romance novels.

c. He is essentially homeless but establishes a kind of hermitage in the urban wasteland stocked with Grail paraphernalia.

d. He is on a quest for the Grail, a trophy in the library of a "castle" on Fifth Avenue and the symbol of "God's divine grace."

B. Parry rescues Jack from thugs who mistake him for a vagrant. Parry tells Jack a version of the Fisher King where the wounded King "loses faith in others and in himself"; a fool heals the wounded king by a simple act of generosity.

1. Jack at first helps Parry—not to get the Grail but to win Lydia—because he feels guilty.

2. After Parry is beaten by thugs and falls into a catatonic state, Jack helps Parry because he simply wants to. Dressed as Parry, he steals the "grail." Parry recovers health and sanity and rejoins Lydia.

3. Jack, too, is healed. He finds forgiveness, friendship, and the ability to love.

V. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), directed by Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones, is a burlesque of the Grail myths that satirizes the tendency to romanticize the Middle Ages.

A. King Arthur has a vision in which a cartoon God tells him to seek the Holy Grail. God says, "Your knights shall have a task to make them an example in these dark times."

B. The knights seem an example only of silliness. Arthur remarks that Camelot "is a silly place." This comment sums up what most people whom the knights encounter make of the Grail quest.

C. In spite of the film's humor, it has a serious point: One of the knights kills a sententious "Famous Historian"; this action represents a collision between serious history and fantasies about the Middle Ages.

D. Outside of the silly Grail quest, the film gives a realistic picture of the Middle Ages, with its brutality, plague, revolting peasants, and filth.

Summary

These five films all forge different relationships between medieval and modern interpretations of the Grail quest. Rohmer in *Perceval le Gallois* believes that the message of Chrétien's original romance, a lesson in love of God and neighbor, is still meaningful in the modern world. John Boorman in *Excalibur* gives us a vision faithful to Jessie Weston's fertility interpretation of the Grail, but locates it squarely in the Middle Ages; the fertility myth comes off as antiquated. Steven Spielberg sets his *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* unmistakably in the twentieth century, although in a story that reproduces much of the plot and theme of medieval Grail quests. Terry Gilliam gives us two different interpretations of the Grail quest: *The Fisher King* agrees with Rohmer that the modern world still needs stories of divine grace and love, although Richard LaGravenese's script emphasizes a very modern idea of psychological wounding. But in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail,* Gilliam and his codirector Terry Jones, although they obviously love the Grail myth, dismiss it as a way of looking at the Middle Ages.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why do legends from the Middle Ages so frequently provide the subject matter for modern fantasy?
2. Is John Boorman in *Excalibur* more interested in showing the early Middle Ages realistically or as a fantasy world?
3. Is *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* disrespectful of the Grail myth?

Suggested Viewing

Excalibur. Director John Boorman. Orion, 1981.

The Fisher King. Screenplay Richard LaGravenese. Director Terry Gilliam. Tri-Star, 1991.

Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade. Director Steven Spielberg. Lucasfilm/Paramont, 1989.

Monty Python and the Holy Grail. Directors Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones. Python, 1975.

Perceval le Gallois. Director Eric Rohmer. Les Films du Losange, 1978.

Books of Interest

Goodrick-Clarke, Nicholas. *The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and Their Influence on Nazi Ideology.* New York: New York University Press, 1992. [Reliable history of the Nazis' interest in the occult.]

Harty, Kevin J. *Cinema Arthuriana: Essays on Arthurian Film.* New York: Garland, 1991.

Rahn, Otto. *Crusade Against the Grail: The Struggle between the Cathars, the Templars, and the Church of Rome.* Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2006. [The book that gave rise to myths that the Nazis searched for the Grail.]

Lecture 13:
Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln's *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* [1982] and Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* [2003]: Is the Holy Grail the Bloodline of Jesus?

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln's *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* and Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code.*

Introduction

In April 2006, two of the three authors of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* sued Dan Brown's publisher, Random House, for plagiarism on the grounds that Brown had violated their copyright by using their research. Though Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh lost their case, the two works do share similar plots: the search to discover that romances about the quest for the Holy Grail (San Greal) are actually allegories for the quest to discover the Royal Bloodline (Sang Real) of Jesus, that is, his descendants.

I. What *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* and *The Da Vinci Code* agree on.

A. Jesus was only a human with a claim to being King of Israel. Proof of his humanity is that he married his disciple Mary Magdalene.

B. A pregnant Mary Magdalene escapes persecution by traveling to France, where she has at least one child. In time, Jesus' bloodline married into the Merovingian dynasty.

C. The Emperor Constantine in 325 CE decided to consolidate his power by uniting it with Christianity. Constantine called the Council of Nicea and had it declare that Jesus was the Son of God; he simultaneously created a new Bible that supported a divine Jesus.

D. The Church aimed to eliminate the progeny of Jesus; hence the bloodline's followers protected it through a secret organization, the Priory of Sion.

E. Proof for the existence of the Priory of Sion and of the Royal Bloodline was discovered in the Secret Dossiers discovered in the Bibliothèque Nationale in the 1960s. The Dossiers include a list of the Grand Masters of the Priory; these include luminaries such as Botticelli, Isaac Newton, Victor Hugo, Jean Cocteau, and, of course, Leonardo da Vinci.

F. The descendants of Jesus walk among us today.

II. *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* frames this argument as history.

A. And specifically as French history:

1. The bloodline is linked with the village of Rennes-le-Château in southern France, where in 1891 a priest, Bérenger Saunière, supposedly discovered in his church of St. Mary Magdalene coded parchments pointing to the bloodline. Since he spent considerable

funds refurbishing the church in an odd fashion that, if interpreted correctly, points to the bloodline, he must have been blackmailing the Vatican with some secret that threatened its power.

2. Saunière was able to discover the secret because the area around Rennes-le-Château was home to both Cathars and Knights Templar; both groups were privy to the secret of the bloodline and attacked by the church for this heresy. Indeed, the Priory created the Templars as their military wing.
3. The bloodline is traced in detail through French history, culminating in Pierre Plantard, who is willing to serve as king of France.

B. The "history" of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* has been extensively debunked as a hoax largely perpetrated by Pierre Plantard.

C. The authors of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* practice an odd kind of history; they say that their argument is not based on objective facts but should be taken as an article of faith.

1. They maintain that proof is not essential to their claims.
2. Proof could not be found in conventional histories, which are methodologically flawed and mere "smokescreens" to cover what really happened; evidence of the truth has been suppressed.
3. Hence they will "reconstruct" history by appealing to myth and legend, particularly those of the Grail. They write "with a vision akin to that of the novelist."

III. Dan Brown reorients the myth of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*. The Holy Grail is Mary Magdalene, and the search for the Holy Grail is the search for the "lost sacred feminine." The Grail seekers here search for the body of Mary Magdalene and a caché of documents that will prove her marriage to Jesus.

A. Like Weston and Bradley, *The Da Vinci Code* posits that all ancient peoples—including the Jews—practiced worship of the "divine order of Nature," imagined as the balance between masculine and feminine forces and the partnership of male gods and female goddesses. The chief rite of this nature religion is a sacred marriage, *Hieros Gamos.*

B. As in Bradley, in the natural order, the goddess is more important than the god. Because of their ability to give birth, all women are considered sacred.

C. Mary Magdalene was a goddess; Jesus meant her to head his church, which ostensibly was one of goddess worship: the Priory of Sion still practices the *Hieros Gamos* to worship "Mary Magdalene as the Goddess, the Holy Grail, . . . and the Divine Mother."

D. The church demonized Mary Magdalene and women in general to protect its claim to being the sole means to salvation. Hence the Church is responsible for all misogyny, including witch hunts.

E. The suppression of the feminine element has led to a history of masculine-fueled war, destruction, and suffering. This path of history can only be corrected by a return to the sacred feminine.

IV. Is *The Da Vinci Code* reliable history?

A. The novel's characters continually assert that their claims are "true history" backed by "persuasive scientific evidence" and the work of scores of academic historians.

B. The claims of the novel have been extensively debunked.

C. But for *The Da Vinci Code,* there is no such thing as objective history.

1. "History is always written by the winners."

2. History is whatever any one personally believes is true.

Summary

The pseudo-history *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* and the novel *The Da Vinci Code* both contend that the secret that the Grail conceals is that mainstream Christianity is a hoax. Both works have at their core the idea that Jesus was not a divine messiah but a human being whom the Church, along with the Emperor Constantine, deified for political reasons. Constantine, they claim, did so to hide the fact that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene, with whom he had children; the descendants of Jesus' bloodline are still among us. The two works contextualize this notion differently: For the authors of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail,* the secret of Jesus' bloodlines has political ramifications: Jesus' descendants should rule Europe. Dan Brown borrows much of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*'s plot, but changes the significance of its secret: In *The Da Vinci Code,* Jesus was not a god, but his wife, Mary Magdalene, is a goddess, whom he meant to be head of a church that worshipped "the sacred feminine." The authors of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* published their book as history; *The Da Vinci Code* is a novel, but its author seems to believe in the theories his characters promulgate. Both works are informed by the idea that there is no such thing as objective history; rather, for all these authors, history is simply whatever story people choose to believe in.

Mary Magdalene: The Wife of Jesus?

The New Testament mentions Mary of Magdala twelve times but provides little information about her. Luke tells us that Jesus traveled with a group of women including "Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out"; she and the other women "provided for [the disciples] out of their means" (8:2–3; RSV). All four gospels make Mary a witness of the crucifixion, and Mark, Matthew, and John show her as the first to see the risen Jesus, who commands her to spread the good news to the male disciples. John 20:1–18 has the most detailed resurrection story, where Mary finds an empty tomb but believes someone has stolen Jesus' body. As she stands weeping, Jesus appears but she doesn't recognize him; she believes he is the gardener until he reveals himself by calling her name.

In the Middle Ages, this sparse narrative was expanded to produce a substantial if fictional biography of the Magdalene. The legend got its greatest impetus in 591 when Pope Gregory the Great preached a sermon that assumed that Mary Magdalene, who went to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body with spices, was identical with two other women. One is Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus, who sits at Jesus' feet as his disciple (Luke 10:39), is together with her brother and sister loved by Jesus (John 11.5), and anoints his feet with ointment and wipes them with her hair (John 12:3). The other is an anonymous "sinner" who similarly anoints Jesus (with ointment she carries in an alabaster jar), wipes his feet with her hair, and kisses them; moved by her devotion, Jesus says, "her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved very much" (Luke 7:47). This last verse inspired Gregory to make Mary an exemplar of repentance. Gregory specifies that Mary's sin is prostitution. He did not choose this sin arbitrarily but because, as he points out, Old Testament prophets depict the nation of Israel as a prostitute when it turns away from God. Hence the prostitute symbolizes any sinner, as does Mary Magdalene: She represents, as Gregory puts it, "the prostituted soul" (Sermon 33).

Ironically, recent books—including *Holy Blood, Holy Grail,* Margaret Starbird's *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar*, and Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince's *The Templar Revelation*—that argue Mary of Magdala was Jesus' literal bride all do so by making the same mistake as Gregory, that the Magdalene is identical with Mary of Bethany and the sinner with the jar of expensive ointment. They view this composite Mary's anointing of Jesus as a marriage ceremony. Perhaps more curiously, Starbird and Picknett & Prince, like Gregory, choose to identify Mary as a prostitute, although they assert that she was a sacred prostitute serving a pagan goddess.

Both the Old and New Testaments speak of the relationship between God and his people as a marriage; the metaphor is based on the Song of Solomon, which depicts the mutual love of a bride and bridegroom. For Christians, the Bridegroom symbolizes Jesus and the bride represents the Church (Ephesians 5). Because Gregory views Mary Magdalene as an image of the Church redeemed from sin, he identifies her in two sermons with the Bride of the Song of Songs (Sermons 25 and 33). The identification makes sense, since Mary, if we accept her constructed identity, like the Bride kisses her Bridegroom, loves and is beloved by him, anoints him with spices, and seeks him through the streets of Jerusalem only to find him in a garden. The Middle Ages accepted Mary Magdalene as the Bride of Christ, but no one thought this meant that Mary and Jesus were literally married, had sex, or produced children; their “marriage” was understood to be a metaphor for their close union in divine love.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. One of Dan Brown's characters says "History is always written by the winners." Do you agree?
2. *The Da Vinci Code* is the best-selling novel ever; what is it about the book that has interested so many readers? Why have some of those readers accepted Brown's theory of the Grail as fact?
3. The authors of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* use myths and legends as evidence for their hypothesis that Jesus was married and had children. What are the dangers of using literature as evidence for history? What kind of historical knowledge can fiction give us?

Suggested Reading

Baigent, Michael, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln. *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*. New York: Dell, 1983.

Brown, Dan. *The Da Vinci Code.* New York: Doubleday, 2003.

Picknett, Lynn, and Clive Prince. *The Templar Revelation: Secret Guardians of the True Identity of Christ.* New York: Touchstone, 1998.

Starbird, Margaret. *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar: Mary Magdalen and the Holy Grail.* Rochester, VT: Bear & Co., 1993.

Other Books of Interest

Gardner, Lawrence. *Bloodline of the Holy Grail: The Hidden Lineage of Jesus Revealed.* New York: Barnes and Noble, 2003.

Haskins, Susan. *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1993.

Putnam, Bill, and John Edwin Wood. *The Treasure of Rennes-Le-Château: A Mystery Solved.* Thrupp, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2003.

Lecture 14:
Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* [1988]:
Do We Need the Grail?

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are Umberto Eco's *Baudolino* and *Foucault's Pendulum.*

Introduction

Foucault's Pendulum by Umberto Eco (1932–)—an Italian professor of semiotics at the University of Bologna, a literary critic and theorist, a scholar of medieval and modern philosophy, a student of popular culture, and a best-selling novelist—was written as a direct response to *Holy Blood, Holy Grail,* but it works just as well as an answer to *The Da Vinci Code.* In fact, recently, *Foucault's Pendulum* is often described as "the thinking reader's *Da Vinci Code*" because it covers many of the same topics, but critically. The novel satirizes those works' tendency to confuse history with myth and points out the dangers of such confusion.

I. The plot of *Foucault's Pendulum* parallels the story behind *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*: Three men construct a conspiracy theory that assumes that the Knights Templar were occultists privy to an explosive secret about the Grail. But in Eco, the conspiracy theory is perpetrated as a hoax.

A. Three employees of a publishing house that specializes in esoterica construct their "Plan," "a universal plot," out of frustration with the "lunatic" authors they work with.

1. Jacopo Belbo is the editor who first conceives of the Plan. He is a failed hero.

a. He is a type of Fisher King figure; though not literally wounded, he is psychically. He describes himself as impotent because of his inability to find true love or to create.

b. He is also a Perceval-type character who asks the important question of this Grail quest: "Is that a fact?"—a statement of skepticism about grand philosophical ideas.

2. The main narrator, Casaubon, is an authority on the Templars; a freelance researcher who fancies himself the "Sam Spade" of learning. His name points to a skeptical nature coupled with a desire to believe in grand myths. He is named after both of the following:

a. Isaac Casaubon, the Renaissance philologist who proved that the *Hermetic Corpus* did not preserve ancient Egyptian wisdom but was written about 300 CE; this Casaubon represents rational scholarship.

b. A dried-up scholar in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* who wastes his life searching for "the key to all mythologies"; this Casaubon represents the urge to create universal myths.

3. Diotallevi is an editor who believes that he is Jewish; he is an atheistic practitioner of Cabala. Like his friends, he is torn between doubt and faith.

II. The Plan begins when the three publishing house employees meet a prospective author, Colonel Ardenti. Inspired by *Holy Blood, Holy Grail,* he claims he has proof in a coded manuscript that the Knights Templar had a plan to conquer the world by utilizing the Grail, here a radioactive stone that harnesses cosmic energy.

III. The three editors become exasperated by the leaps in logic, arbitrary connections, and fantastic "research" in the esoteric books of their "Diabolical" authors. To amuse themselves, building on Ardenti's ideas, they construct their "universal plot" by linking together all of the conspiracy theories they run into. Their premise is that "the Templars have something to do with everything"—that all secret societies throughout history are fronts through which the Templars carry out their plot to locate the cosmic Grail.

A. The Plan connects the Templars and the Grail to the following:

1. Almost every myth about the Grail discussed in this lecture series: medieval Grail romances, especially Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*; Frazer's *The Golden Bough*; the Gnostics and the Cathars; Celtic myths of Avalon; Druids; Atlantis; the Nazis; *Indiana Jones* movies.

2. Other conspiracy theories about the Grail: Cabala; Jewish legends about the golem; alchemy, which used vessels to create the Philosophers' Stone; Freemasons; Jesuits; Rosicrucians; Bavarian Illuminati; voodoo; and Foucault's pendulum, a scientific instrument used by Leon Foucault to prove that the earth revolved.

3. Literary works and authors, including Eliot's *The Waste Land,* Dante, Shakespeare, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, and William Faulkner; films including *The Maltese Falcon,* Orson Welles' *Lady from Shanghai,* and *Star Wars*.

B. The Plan explains all of the events of world history, including the Crusades, Napoleon's conquest of Europe, the Russian Revolution, the rise of Stalin, World War II, the Holocaust, and even wars in the Persian Gulf: all are the result of attempts to locate the grail.

C. The Plan's universal character, its totally comprehensive nature, its ability to explain every important event in world history, are all parodic of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail,* which is explicitly mentioned in the course of constructing the Plan.

D. The Plan goes horribly wrong when the Diabolicals take it seriously and hunt down first Belbo and then Casaubon to reveal the secret of how to find the Grail.

IV. Eco's intentions behind this extreme parody:

A. To expose pseudo-histories as being less about history than about faith; people seem to require something to believe it; with the decline of religious faith, Eco suggests, people will construct new stories in which to believe.

B. Esoteric pseudo-historical conspiracy theories will always be attractive because they claim to reveal secrets; people who believe in them feel they have real knowledge and power. Conversely, no one pays much attention to wisdom that isn't kept secret.

C. But Eco suggests that we ought to reject secret knowledge and instead live with common sense and reason. The secret of Eco's Grail is that there is no secret. He makes these points through Casaubon's common-sensible girlfriend, Lia, who proves that Ardenti's manuscript was simply a medieval laundry list, and who gives birth to Guilio, Casaubon's child, his real Holy Grail.

Summary

Umberto Eco in *Foucault's Pendulum* gets the last word in this series of lectures because his novel is a commentary on the whole tradition of the Grail, and particularly on nineteenth- and twentieth-century occult theories that center on it. *Foucault's Pendulum* is a parody of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* and similar pseudo-histories. Its three main characters, employees of an occult publishing house, jokingly create the conspiracy theory to end all conspiracy theories: All the secret societies that have ever existed—especially the Knights Templar—are in league to find the Grail, here a radioactive stone whose power allows its possessor to control the universe. Various esoteric groups, unfortunately, take the editors seriously and attempt to discover the whereabouts of the Grail. Eco satirizes the human desire to construct myths, like that of the Grail, that promise complete happiness or complete knowledge through penetrating secrets, as well as the propensity of Grail enthusiasts to mistake fiction for reality. We'd all be a lot happier, Eco suggests, if we'd just use our common sense instead of chasing after the Grail.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. *Eco's Pendulum* is often called "the thinking reader's *Da Vinci Code,* and with its nonlinear narrative and quotations in many languages, it demands that the reader do a lot of thinking. Who do you think Eco imagines that he's writing for?
2. Eco suggests that people are fascinated by conspiracy theories because, in a world without faith, they need something to believe in. Why does human nature seem to demand a belief in something?

Suggested Reading

Eco, Umberto. *Baudolino.* Trans. William Weaver. New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2000. [In an Eco novel set in the Middle Ages, Baudolino, a chronic liar and prankster, invents the story of the Grail.]

———. *Foucault's Pendulum.* Trans. William Weaver. New York: Harcourt Brace-Jovanivich, 1989.

Other Books of Interest

Bulwer-Lytton, Sir Edward. *The Coming Race*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005. [Popular Victorian novelist best known for beginning his novel *Paul Clifford* with the line "It was a dark and stormy night"; *The Coming Race,* as well as *Zanoni* (1842), is the source of some of the theories of occult power that Eco relates.]

Yates, Frances. *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment.* New York: Routledge, 2001. [Classic on the relation between science and the occult in the Renaissance and later.]

Suggested Readings:

Baigent, Michael, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln. *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*. New York: Dell, 1983.

Barber, Richard. *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.

Bradley, Marion Zimmer. *The Mists of Avalon.* New York: Ballantine Books, 1987.

Brown, Dan. *The Da Vinci Code.* New York: Doubleday, 2003.

Chrétien de Troyes. *The Story of the Grail (Perceval)*. Trans. William W. Kibler. *Arthurian Romances*. New York: Penguin, 1991.

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Eliot, T.S. *The Waste Land.* Ed. Michael North. Norton Critical Edition. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.

Frappier, Jean. *Chrétien de Troyes: The Man and His Work.* Trans. Raymond J. Cormier. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1982.

James, M.R., ed. *The New Testament Apocrypha.* Berkeley, CA: Apocryphile Press, 2004. [Includes the Gospel of Nicodemus, one of Robert de Boron's sources.]

Littleton, Scott C., and Linda A. Malcor. *From Scythia to Camelot*. New York: Garland, 1994.

Loomis, Roger Sherman. *The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

Mahoney, Dhira B., ed. *The Grail: A Casebook.* New York: Garland Publishing, 2000.

Malory, Sir Thomas. "The Tale of the Sankgreal." In *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory* [aka *Le Morte D'Arthur*]. Ed. Eugène Vinaver, rev. P.J.C. Field. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

"Peredur, Son of Efrawg" and "Branwen, Daughter of Llyr." *The Mabinogion.* Trans. Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones. New York: Dutton, 1949.

Robert de Boron. *Merlin and the Grail: The Trilogy of Prose Romances Attributed to Robert de Boron*. Trans. Nigel Bryant. Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2001.

Suggested Readings (continued):

Picknett, Lynn, and Clive Prince. *The Templar Revelation: Secret Guardians of the True Identity of Christ.* New York: Touchstone, 1998.

The Quest of the Holy Grail. Trans. P.M. Matarasso. New York: Penguin, 1969.

Starbird, Margaret. *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar: Mary Magdalen and the Holy Grail.* Rochester, VT: Bear & Co., 1993.

Tennyson, Alfred Lord. "The Holy Grail." *Idylls of the King.* Ed. J.M. Gray. New York: Penguin, 1986.

Wagner, Richard. *Parsifal.* Opera Guide 24. New York: Riverrun Press, 1999.

Waite, Arthur Edward. *The Hidden Church of the Holy Grail: Its Legends and Symbolism.* Amsterdam: Fredonia Books, 2002.

Weston, Jessie. *From Ritual to Romance.* Mineola, NY: Dover Books, 1997.

Williams, Charles. *War in Heaven.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1982.

Wolfram von Eschenbach. *Parzival*. Trans. A.T. Hatto. New York: Penguin, 1980.

———. *Parzival and Titurel.* Trans. Cyril Edwards. Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2006.

———. *Willehalm.* New York: Penguin Classics, 1984.

These books are available online through www.modernscholar.com or by calling Recorded Books at 1-800-636-3399.

Suggested Viewings:

Excalibur. Director John Boorman. Orion, 1981.

The Fisher King. Screenplay Richard LaGravenese. Director Terry Gilliam. Tri-Star, 1991.

Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade. Director Steven Spielberg. Lucasfilm/Paramont, 1989.

Monty Python and the Holy Grail. Directors Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones. Python, 1975.

Perceval le Gallois. Director Eric Rohmer. Les Films du Losange, 1978.

GLOSSARY

Alchemy: Late medieval to early Renaissance pseudo-science that sought to produce through scientific experiment the Philosophers' Stone, a substance or object that could transform base metals into gold, cure all ills, and confer eternal youth. As modern chemistry began to split off from alchemy, the pseudo-science began to be thought of allegorically as a means of attaining spiritual transformation.

Allegory: Literary work that contains a sustained nonliteral meaning.

Anglo-Saxons: Inclusive term for the Germanic tribes—Angles, Saxons, and Jutes—who colonized Great Britain beginning in the fifth century; also collectively called the Saxons or the English.

Anthropology: Scientific study of human culture; often includes archaeology and linguistics.

Aryan: Term commonly used till the mid twentieth century to refer to the Indo-Europeans.

Avalon: One of several names for the Celtic underworld; also called the Isle of Glass and the Isle of Apples; associated with the town and abbey of Glastonbury, England.

Beatific vision: Christian term that describes life of the virtuous in heaven; based on Matt. 5: 8, "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God."

Bernard of Clairvaux, St.: 1090–1153; abbot of the Cistercian Abbey of Clairvaux; backed the Order of the Knights Templar; preached in support of the Second Crusade and against the Cathars; known for his mystical commentaries on the Bible, especially on the Song of Songs.

British: Term used to describe the Celtic inhabitants of Great Britain during the Middle Ages; it distinguishes them from the Germanic Anglo-Saxons and the French-speaking Normans; the term is sometimes applied to the Celtic inhabitants of Brittany ("Little Britain") in France, which was settled by Celtic tribes from Great Britain fleeing Anglo-Saxon invaders in the fifth and sixth centuries.

Cabala: A type of Jewish mysticism. Through manipulation of the text of the Torah (the first five books of the Bible), one gains spiritual illumination; one of its ultimate goals is to reveal the secret name of God.

Cathars: Also known as Albigensians. Members of a Christian heretical movement influential in the area of southern France called Provence or Languedoc in the twelfth century. Their beliefs were similar in some respects to those of the Gnostics.

Celts: A sub-group of the Indo-Europeans once inhabiting most of western Europe as well as the British Islands. Their descendants today include the modern Irish, Welsh, and Scots, as well as the Breton people of Brittany in France.

Chivalry: The institution of knighthood or the ideals that knights serve.

Chronicle: Genre of history writing where events are reported briefly on a year-by-year basis.

Cistercians: Order of monks known as "the white monks" whose most famous member was St. Bernard of Clairveaux. The Cistercians were known for their biblical studies and for their meditative tradition.

Confession: A sacrament of the Catholic Church. In 1215 the Church decreed that all Catholics should confess their sins to a priest at least once a year before receiving the Eucharist. Much of medieval literature is concerned with urging readers to make a good confession.

Courtesy or courtliness: The appropriate way of acting while attending a royal or noble court, especially indicating a polite, deferential manner of speech.

Crusade: Military expedition in support of Christianity; the most famous of these attempted to claim Palestine for Christian rule; the Albigensian Crusade was launched against Cathar heretics in 1208.

Cycle: Long literary work comprising a number of shorter works, each of which may stand on its own.

Druids: Class of prophets/priests/poets among the pagan Celts.

Dualist: Any belief system that emphasizes the world is a battleground between the forces of good and evil, light and darkness, and often spirit and matter; Gnostics stressed the opposition between God and an inferior creator, the Demiurge; Cathars believed that God was at war with Satan, maker of the physical world.

Enlightenment: Intellectual movement, beginning in the late seventeenth century, emphasizing the use of reason and science to study objective reality; often continues the Renaissance emphasis on classical civilization as a model for culture.

Eucharist: A sacrament, the chief rite of worship in Christianity; also called Holy Communion. It consists of the blessing of unleavened bread and wine in imitation of Jesus' actions at the Last Supper and/or the consumption of the blessed bread and wine.

Gnosticism: Dualist religious movement of the early centuries CE; salvation is attained through *gnosis*, revealed wisdom about the self and the world.

Golden Dawn, Hermetic Order of the: Group of students of mysticism and practicing magicians popular in England from the turn of the twentieth century through the 1920s. Their beliefs and practices incorporated Rosicrusianism, Egyptian religion, alchemy, Hermeticism, Cabala, and in some cases Christianity. Their most famous member is the poet William Butler Yeats; their most infamous member is the satanist Aleister Crowley.

Good Friday: Day in the Christian liturgical year that commemorates the death of Jesus on the cross, usually a day of mourning and penance; occurs just before Easter Sunday, which commemorates Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

Gospel: "Good News"—literary form in which elements of doctrine are incorporated into a narrative frame. Some gospels—those of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—are "canonical," accepted by the Church as part of the Bible's New Testament. Some are "non-canonical," not accepted as part of the New Testament. Some non-canonical gospels are "apocryphal"—though not accepted as parts of the Bible, these were widely read during the Middle Ages and often relate fabulous stories about the early life of Jesus, his family, and his followers or the activities of the apostles and disciples in the early church.

Hagiographer: "Writer about the holy ones," one who composes saints' lives.

***Hermetic corpus,* Hermeticism:** Named for Hermes, the Greek god of secrets; a group of texts, and the magical practices detailed in them, supposedly written by Hermes Trismegistus ("thrice-great Hermes"), a name for the Egyptian god Thoth. They were written in the first centuries CE and were popular in Europe during the Renaissance.

Hermit: A person who lives alone, usually for religious reasons.

GLOSSARY

History: Genre that relates events taking place in time; in the Middle Ages, one of the chief functions of history writing was to offer moral instruction but not to render objective truth; "history" in medieval terminology often means simply "story."

Indo-European: Name for a family of related languages and the peoples who speak them; includes most of the languages of modern Europe as well as Persian and the languages of India; the root language is also called Indo-European.

Inklings: Literary society that met in Oxford in the years between the First and Second World Wars; its most famous members were C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams.

Logres: Term often used in romances for Arthur's kingdom, or for England generally.

Longinus: Traditional name of the Roman soldier who pierces Jesus' side with a lance in John 19: 34. Legend says that he was blind but cured by blood that traveled down the lance.

Mass: In medieval Christianity, as well as in Catholicism and some churches within the Anglican Communion today, church service during which the Eucharist is celebrated.

Middle Ages: Period of history consisting of roughly one-thousand years between the fall of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance, ca. 450–1450.

Modernism: Literary movement that flourished after World War I. Rejected most conventions of nineteenth-century poetry and fiction, particularly realistic depiction of objective reality; emphasized the subjective nature of all experience.

Monk: Male member of a monastic order. Monks remain in their monasteries praying and working.

Mystery cults: Any of various ancient Middle Eastern religions whose beliefs were kept secret and revealed only to believers upon a ritual initiation; knowledge of this revealed information was supposed to confer entrance to the afterlife.

Nirvana: State of the total cessation of desire and of the attainment of wisdom and compassion; the goal of Buddhism.

Normans: French-speaking descendants of Viking stock who inhabited the French province of Normandy; colonized Great Britain beginning in 1066.

Novel: Literary genre that, in general, tells a story, in a realistic style, about the actions, speech, and thoughts of characters.

Opera: Art form that combines music, singing, poetry, drama, and the visual arts. Because it includes all other arts, Richard Wagner terms it "gesamtkunswerk," "the total work of art."

Pilgrim: One who goes on a pilgrimage, a journey for religious purposes, often to visit relics of a saint.

Prester John: "John the Priest," a mythical priest/king of a Christian realm located variously in India, China, or Ethiopia. The myth of Prester John was popular in Europe during the Crusades.

Relic: The body or body-part of a saint; also an object owned by that person. Relics are considered to be in union with the soul of the saint and hence possess miraculous powers.

Reformation: Broad movement of church reform, starting in the fifteenth century; usually identified with the beginnings of Protestantism and with the actions of the church leaders Martin Luther and John Calvin.

GLOSSARY

Renaissance: "Rebirth," European intellectual movement that sought to return culture to its roots in classical Greece and Rome.

Romance: Literary genre, popular in the Middle Ages, relating the adventures of a knight or knights. It was often concerned with defining an ideal chivalry and frequently takes place in a marvelous landscape.

Romanticism: European intellectual movement, starting in the late eighteenth century and lasting through the nineteenth, often considered a reaction to the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason, science, and classicism; valued the imagination; often found inspiration in the marvelous literature of the Middle Ages as well as in legends and folktales; often had a nationalist element.

Rosicrucians: Name for a secret society supposedly founded by one Christian Rosenkreuz in the fourteenth century; it promised to reveal the mystic secrets of nature and of the self; though now considered a hoax perpetrated in the very early seventeenth century, it was believed to be a real organization in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; many esoteric groups have adopted the name Rosicrucian or a variant, "the Rose and the Cross."

Sacraments: In Christianity, physical signs through which God gives grace; medieval romances link the grail to the sacraments of Confession and especially the Eucharist.

Semiotics: The study of how signs, verbal and visual, acquire meaning.

Templars: Members of a monastic military order begun in 1118 to protect pilgrims to the Holy Land. Accused of heresy in 1307; dissolved in 1312. Claimed by some Freemasons as their predecessors or founders

Theosophy: Religious society founded by Madame Helena Blavatsky, popular in America and Europe at the turn of the twentieth century; proposed that human consciousness spiritually evolves; drew on the myth of Atlantis, ancient Egyptian religion, pagan mystery cults, Gnosticism, Hermeticism, and Hinduism.

Transubstantiation: Religious doctrine that the substance of the bread and wine blessed during the Eucharist changes into the Body and Blood of Christ; officially promulgated by the Church in 1215.

***Tuatha De Danann*:** "The children of the goddess Danu"—a collective term for a group of Irish gods and goddesses.

***Vavasour*:** French term for a member of the lower nobility.

Victorian: Adjective referring to English culture and history during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901). Victorian literature frequently coupled the characteristics of Romantic literature with a concern for stringent morality.

Wandering Jew: A medieval legend, very popular in the nineteenth century, about a Jew who laughed at Jesus as he carried his cross to Calvary and is therefore cursed to wander the earth forever.