



UDC: 82.091

Rewriting the Holy Grail: The Grail-Hero (From Arthurian Romance to Pop Culture)

Ana Rita Martins

Departamento de Estudos Anglisticos | Department of English Studies
Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa

CEAUL - Centro de Estudos Anglisticos da Universidade de Lisboa | ULICES - University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies

Received: 2016-08-02

Accepted: 2016-09-20

Published online: 2016-10-13

Abstract

Usually identified as the dish, plate or cup used by Jesus Christ at the Last Supper, the Holy Grail is, since the late twelfth century, a key part of the Arthurian Cycle. Although some authors (such as R.S. Loomis and J. Weston) have claimed its origin to rest in pagan traditions, the Holy Grail has become deeply intertwined with Christian myth, particularly with the legend of the Holy Chalice.

In the earliest Arthurian romances the Grail-Hero(es) had to prove himself (themselves) physically and mentally worthy of finding the Holy Grail. However, in later retellings he (they) must also be pure and spiritually perfect. In modern adaptations, though, such requirements are seemingly ignored so college professors, like Indiana Jones in *Indiana Jones and the Lost Crusade* (1989), may find the Holy Grail. This paper aims at analyzing the role of the Grail-Heroes in Arthurian romance, identifying their main characteristics, how they evolved as well as to reflect upon and compare their features in contemporary reinterpretations of the medieval sources.

Keywords: Holy Grail, Grail-Winner, Medieval Arthurian Romance, Medievalism.

The Holy Grail in Medieval Arthurian Romance

The Holy Grail has for long been a crucial part of the Arthurian cycle and, to a certain extent, has also become irrevocably connected to the Knights of the Round Table. However, the way the Holy Grail is represented, whether in the Middle Ages or today, has suffered tremendous changes and has been a source of intense academic and popular debate. While this article does not aim to focus on the Grail itself or on which of the many theories behind its origin might be the best,¹ it is important to consider how the Grail was depicted during the medieval period.

When speaking about the Holy Grail in the Middle Ages, Chrétien de Troyes' *Le Conte du Graal* or *Le Roman de Perceval* (The Story of the Grail or Perceval, c.1181-1191) is unmistakably a key text, especially because it is the author's work that began the Grail legend within the Arthurian cycle:

¹ For a throughout study on the Holy Grail, see *The Grail: A Case Study* (2014). D.B. Mahoney (Ed.). New York, N.Y.: Routledge.



No one, before Chrétien de Troyes, had written the name of the Grail. This doesn't mean the myth of the Grail didn't exist before him, nor that the word "Grail" was an invention of this writer. But the facts are as follows: from the chronological perspective, which forms a solid system of reference, Chrétien de Troyes seems to be the initiator of the Grail legend. (Markale, 1982/1999, p.1-2)

In *Le Conte du Graal*, the French writer explores the nature of chivalry and puts it into conflict not only with the appeal of (ideal) love, but also with a spiritual ideal. The Grail appears in what is referred to as the Grail Procession, but interestingly it is only "[u]ngraal":

Quequ'ilparloient d'un etd'el,
Unvallezd'unechanbrevint,
Qui une blanche lance tint
Anpoigniee par lo mileu,
Et passa par entre lo feu
Et cil qui ou lit se seoient.
Et tuitcil de leianzveoient
La lance blanche et lo ferblanc,
S'an is tune goute de sanc
Do fer de la lance ansomet, (...)
Atait dui autre valet vinrent,
Qui chandeliers en lor mains tindrent
De fin or, ovrez a neel.
Li valletestoientmoltbel
Qui les chandeliers apportoient.
En chascun chandelier ardoient
Dis chandoilles a tot lo meins.
Un graal entre ses .II. meins
Unedamoiseletenoit,
Qui aviau les vallezvenoit,
Et belle etgente et beinsenee,
Quant elefuleianzantree
Atot lo graalqu'ele tint,
Unesi grant clartezivint
Qu'ausinperdirent les chandoilles
Lorclartécomme les estoilles
Quant li solauxluist o la lune.
Aprésceli en revintune
Qui tint untailleord'argent.
Li graaus qui aloitdevant
De fin or esmeréestoit (Chrétien, 1181-1191/1994, p.1035-1037)²

²“As they were speaking of one thing and another, a squire came forth from a chamber carrying a white lance by the middle of its shaft; he passed between the fire and those seated upon the bed. Everyone in the hall saw the white lance with its white point from whose tip there issued a drop of blood (...)Then two other squires entered holding in their hands candelabra of pure gold, crafted with enamel inlays. The young men carrying the candelabra were extremely handsome. In each of the candelabra there were at least ten candles burning. A maiden accompanying the two young men was carrying a grail with her two hands; she was beautiful, noble, and richly attired. After she entered the hall carrying the grail the room was so brightly illuminated that the candles lost their brilliance like stars and the moon when the sun rises. After her came another maiden, carrying a silver carving platter. The grail, which was introduced first, was of fine pure gold.” (Chrétien, 1181-1191/2004, p. 420-421). All translations into English are taken from W.W. Kibler's translation in *Arthurian Romance*.



The meaning of the Grail Procession is never completely (or satisfactorily) established, as the hero of the story, Perceval, does not dare to ask who was served by the grail: "Si n'osamie demander/ Do graal cui l'an en servoit" (Chrétien, 1181-1191/1994, p.1037) and what the procession means, thus failing to cure the Fisher King. Perceval does not succeed in asking these questions because of the hero's sin against his mother who died of grief, an idea underlined by Alan Lupack³ who pointed out that Perceval's lack of concern for his mother, whom he actually sees fainting before he leaves to Arthur's court, seems analogous to his lack of compassion for the wound of the Fisher King; hence, his failure to achieve the Grail. On the other hand, Jean Markale stated the knight's failure is due to his youth and lack of experience:

He [Perceval] does not succeed because he is not yet himself, because he has not yet attained the necessary maturity. He is not driven from the castle but flees from it: driven to desperation by his solitude, he can only resume his errantry. (1982/1999, p.14)

Later in the narrative, Perceval's uncle informs him that this Grail is magical for it can sustain and bring comfort to those who are ill:

Cil cui l'an en sertestmesfrere, (...)

Ne necuide pas queil ait

Luz ne lamproies ne salmon,

D'une sole hoiste li sainzhom,

Quel'an en celgraal li porte,

Sa vie sostientetconforte.

Tantsaite chose est li Graals (Chrétien, 1181-1191/1994, p.1130)⁴

In addition, as one considers the Grail itself, three important aspects must be held in mind: 1) in Chrétien de Troyes' version of the story, the Grail is not actually a cup, but a platter or hollow dish; 2) this object is identified as "a" grail and not "the Grail" of later tradition, which means that 3) it is neither linked to the cup used by Jesus Christ at the Last Supper nor to the one said to have been employed to collect Christ's blood at the crucifixion. In fact, the Grail, as it appears in medieval Arthurian romance, will only become intertwined with the cup used by Jesus Christ in the last decade of the twelfth century when Robert de Boron wrote *Joseph d'Armathie*.

In *Joseph d'Armathie*, Boron not only associated the Grail with the cup used to collect the blood of the crucified Christ, but also with the one used at the Last Supper, hence paving the way to the guardianship of the Sacred Vessel. Even though, as quoted above, in Chrétien's text there is an unexplained supernatural host, which is likely to be an allusion to the sacramental bread used in the Eucharist, when Boron created such connection he contributed to making the Grail of Arthurian myth a Christian symbol. However, even after Boron's account, the Grail is not always represented as a cup.

In *Parsival* (early thirteenth century), by Wolfram von Eschenbach, the Grail is described as a powerful stone called *lapis* or *lapisitexillis*⁵. According to the story, in addition to providing food, drink and preventing aging, those who see the green stone

³ See Lupack, A. (2007). The Holy Grail. *The Oxford Guide to Arthurian Legend and Literature*, especially p.213-218.

⁴ "The man served from it is my brother. (...) And do not imagine he is served pike or lamprey or salmon. A single host that is brought to him in that grail sustains and brings comfort to that holy man – such is the holiness of the grail!" (Chrétien, 1181-1191/2004, p.460).

⁵ See also the Welsh romance *Peredur*, included in the well-known collection *The Mabinogion*. Even though *Peredur* is not considered a Grail romance, the Grail does appear in the story as a severed head that is carried on the plate with blood.



will neither die within a week, nor be able to change their appearance. Furthermore, it allows the phoenix to rise from its own ashes. In spite of this description, in Wolfram von Eschenbach's retelling, the Grail is a religious symbol since a) it was brought from Heaven to Earth by angels when the war between Lucifer and the Trinity began; and b) its power derives from a small white wafer placed on top of it every Good Friday by a dove, representing the Holy Spirit. Thus, even when it is not a cup, the Grail seems to be a Christian symbol. Notwithstanding, this interpretation is not accepted by all critics who believe the Grail to be a much more ancient icon linked to old myths.

On the one hand, according to Jessie Weston, in *From Ritual to Romance*, the Grail stories are a Christianization of ancient pagan rites of fertility. Weston claimed that the cup and the lance (both part of the Grail procession) are "sex symbols of immemorial antiquity and world-wide diffusion, the Lance, or Spear, representing the Male, the Cup, or Vase, the Female, reproductive energy" (1920/2005, p.75). The author went on to state that the Fisher King (or Wounded King) is "the figure of a divine or semi-divine ruler, at once god and king, upon whose life, and unimpaired vitality, the existence of his land and people directly depends" (1920/2005, p.62).

On the other hand, in *Wales and the Arthurian Legend*, Roger Sherman Loomis stated, "the Grail legend is a composite of Celtic tales and motifs, often quite independent of each other, and woven into a lovely and mysterious, but quite inharmonious tapestry" (1956/1977, p.24).⁶ In the work *The Grail. The Celtic Origins of the Sacred Icon* Jean Markale made the same connection between the Grail narratives and Celtic texts.⁷

To sum up, it is possible to broadly distinguish three main groups when it comes to the origins and interpretation of the Holy Grail: 1) those who maintain that the Grail originated in Christian myth and, as a result, its symbolism should be interpreted within Christian dogma; 2) those who believe the Grail to be a part of an ancient ritual through which the fertility of the land was restored; 3) those who are of the opinion that the Grail legend's origin lies in Celtic motifs and can only be understood by looking at old Irish and Welsh legends.

In the article "The Holy Grail: From Romance Motif to Modern Genre", Juliette Wood presented a small but useful summary of the Grail legend:

A mysterious vessel or object which sustains life and/or provides sustenance is guarded in a castle which is difficult to find. The owner of the castle is either lame or sick and often (but not always) the surrounding land is barren. The owner can only be restored if a knight finds the castle and, after seeing a mysterious procession, asks a certain question. If he fails in this task, everything will remain as before and the search must begin again. After wanderings and adventures (many of which relate to events which the young hero fails to understand the first time), the knight returns to the castle and asks the question which cures the king and restores the land. The hero knight succeeds the

⁶See R. S. Loomis, *The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol* as well.

⁷See especially chapters One and Two.



wounded king (usually called the Fisher King) as guardian of the castle and its contents. (2000, p.170)

While not encompassing many of the details of the Grail Quest in Arthurian legend, Wood's summary provides a good synopsis and clearly points out the goal of the chosen knight: to heal the Fisher King, which will lead to the renewal of the land's fertility. However, Wood does not clarify how a knight is chosen. What qualities must these heroes possess? What tests do they have to undertake? It is to these questions that we now turn.

The Grail-Hero in Medieval Arthurian Romance

The role of the knight in the Grail Quest is without a doubt paramount. Nevertheless, the glory of achieving it is reserved for a selected few whose virtues stand out from the rest. In fact, even though the knight who is destined to attain the Grail changed during the Middle Ages, he (for the medieval hero is a man) must be brave, honest, courteous towards those around him (whether they are men or women), selfless and pious. In this period only four knights were considered worthy of achieving the Grail and it is on them that this study will focus⁸; they are: Gawain, Perceval, Galahad and Bors.

Of the four, King Arthur's nephew, Sir Gawain, is possibly the least known as a Grail-Hero. There is only one text in which he appears as a successful candidate⁹, *Diu Crône* (*The Crown*, c. 1224), attributed to Heinrich von dem Türlin. In this German poem of about 30,000 lines after a long search for the Grail Gawain reaches a wondrous realm where he meets Sir Lancelot and Sir Calogreant. They eventually ride to a castle where an old lord, who provides them with food and drink, receives them. While his companions fall asleep, Gawain witnesses the Grail Procession and asks his host about the meaning of the marvellous events thus ending the quest and "delivering both folk and land" (Matthews, 1990, p.151).

In *Gawain: Knight of the Goddess. Restoring an Archetype*, John Matthews pointed out that the poem "contains some markedly primitive aspects of Gawain's career, and in all probability represents a story which, though current at the time (c.1224) was subsequently lost (...)" (1990, p. 147). In the earliest Arthurian texts, Gawain is the bravest, most courteous knight of Arthur's realm; he also appears as the peacemaker: "(...) in the Welsh texts Gwalchmai (...), Arthur's favorite nephew – from the maternal side, of course – is the man for delicate situations, diplomatic endeavors and reconciliations" (Markale, 1982/1999, p.16-17). However, in the *Vulgate* (1210-1230) and *Post-Vulgate Cycles* (1230-1240), his position as the most chivalrous knight is handed down to Sir Lancelot, whose rise coincidentally matches with Gawain's fall from grace, undermining his role as a Grail-knight. Matthews argued that *Diu Crône* recovers an earlier tradition by placing Gawain "in the role he had always exemplified, and for which his previous career had fitted him – that of the supreme paragon of chivalry,

⁸ Lancelot is thus excluded from the present study seeing as, although he was initially linked to the holy mission, his sinful love-relationship with Queen Guinevere, Arthur's wife, prevents him from actually finding the Grail.

⁹ Note that the *First Continuation* of Chrétien de Troyes' *The Story of the Grail or Perceval*, which was composed in the late twelfth century and exists in three distinct versions, is centred on Gawain whose adventures to find the Grail Castle continue where Chrétien's narrative stopped. In *Perlesvaus* (circa 1190-1195) Gawain is also able to reach the Grail Castle and witness the Grail Procession, but he is so awed by this vision that he forgets to make the questions he had already been instructed to ask, thus failing the quest once again.



above both Lancelot and Perceval, and as a Grail knight *par excellence*" (1990, p.154). Possibly due to Gawain's downfall as the best knight of the Round Table, Sir Perceval became the centre of many of the Grail stories, leading to what are called the Perceval Versions.

The Perceval Versions, which form the bulk of the Arthurian Grail texts, vary considerably, but in all of them it is Sir Perceval's role to achieve the Grail that will heal the Wounded King (or Fisher King) and often re-establish abundance to the land he presides over. In the beginning of Chrétien de Troyes' *Le Conte du Graal*, the hero appears to be a self-centred boy whose knowledge of the world is so little that when he first sees Arthur's knights he believes them to be divine beings:

Et quant il les vit en apert
Que do bois furent descovert,
Si vit les haubers fremienz
Et les hiaumes sclerzet luisanz
Et vit lo vertet lo vermeil
Reluire contre lo soloil
Et l'oret l'azur et l'argent
Si li fumolt tres belet gent
Et dit: «Biaus sire Dex, merci!
Ces ont ange que je voi ci. (...)
Et li maistres des chevaliers (...)
Si lo saluete seüre
Et dit: «Vallez, n'aiés peor!
- Non ai je, par lo Salveor,
Lo Criatoran cui je croi.
Estes vos Dex? (Chrétien, 1181-1191/1994, p.946-948)¹⁰

Perceval is ill-clad, unlettered and lacks the chivalric graces expected of a knight. Only interested in getting answers to his own queries, he is oblivious both to what the knights ask of him and to King Arthur's questions when he arrives at court. Notwithstanding, although he lacks proper training, Perceval is shown to be an especially talented knight who can fight off some of the best-trained men, like Sir Kay. Interestingly, Perceval keeps a close bond with Gawain, the epitome of courtly values, whose courtesy and courage are (when Chrétien was writing) beyond reproach. It is against such flawless behaviour that Perceval is measured only to surpass it by learning the spiritual values that will allow him to put others before himself and render service to God, the ultimate step to achieve the Grail. Perceval is also an interesting Grail-knight because, unlike the earlier Gawain and the later Galahad, he is a simple young man, innocent and naive, but also foolish, which is why the first knights he encounters believe him to be no more than a dumb animal:

- Sire, sachiez tot entresait

¹⁰« (...) when he caught sight of them coming out of the woods, he saw the glittering haubers and the bright, shining helmets, the lances and the shields – which he had never seen before – and when he beheld the green and vermillion glistening in the sunshine and the gold, the blue and silver, he was captivated and astonished, and said: 'Lord God, I give you thanks! These are angels. I see before me.' (...) the leader of the knights saw him (...) rode swiftly on towards the boy and greeted him and reassured him, saying: 'Don't be afraid, young man!' 'I'm not, by the Saviour I believe in,' replied the boy. 'Are you God?'" (Chrétien, 1181-1191/2004, p.382-883)



Que Galois sonttuit par nature
Plus folquebestes en pasture,
Il estensincommeunebeste.
Fosest qui delezluis'areste,
S'a la muse ne viautmuser
Et lo tans en folie user.(Chrétien, 1181-1191/1994,p.949-950)¹¹

In *Didot Perceval* (1190-1215), the knight is the son of Alain li Gros who, shortly before his death, is warned that Perceval is to become the Grail King. As a result, he advises the young man to go to Arthur's court where he should ask to be knighted. Perceval, an inexperienced young man but no longer the simpleton Chrétien described, is knighted by Arthur himself and proves to be a skilled warrior. Perceval's innocence, though, might be one of the reasons why he is the Grail-Winner: he does not seek the Grail for his own interest or because he can gain something, such as glory or fortune, but to heal the Fisher King. At this point, unlike Galahad who succeeds him, Perceval is neither portrayed as a perfect knight nor is he physically chaste. In *Parzival* (c.1200-1210) by Wolfram von Eschenbach, for example, he is married but still becomes the Grail King, proving that the qualities which make a true lover and knight might not be so different from the ones of a faithful servant of God- a vision that seems to contradict the ideal perpetrated by Sir Galahad.

Sir Galahad, known as the perfect knight, is the son of Sir Lancelot¹² and Elaine of Corbenic, daughter of King Pellès. In the Vulgate *Quest del Saint Graal*, for instance, Galahad is identified as the descendant of Joseph of Arimathea and of the biblical David, an ancestor of Jesus Christ according to the New Testament, which marks him as a Christian hero. He is described as pious, brave, courteous, but also as a great warrior. In Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* (1485) he is identified as "the beste knyght of the worlde" (1485/2004, p.498) seeing as only he can sit on the Siege Perilous; once he does, letters magically appear on the seat claiming, "Thys is the syege of Sir Galahad, the hawte prynce" (1485/2004, p.500). Following Christian ideals, Galahad remains a virgin, rejecting the earthly pleasures his father is unable to.

The introduction of Galahad as a knight and the Grail-Hero has often been linked to the progressive addition of Christian values and moral ideals into the Arthurian Cycle, which led to Galahad's rise as the finest of Arthur's knights. However, Galahad is usually not alone in his quest for the Grail. In the Vulgate *Queste del Saint Graal* and in Thomas Malory's narrative, a triad of heroes was established: Bors, Perceval and Galahad.

The reasons for establishing a trio of Grail-Knights might well be linked to the religious significance of the number three in Christian religion, which gained more significance as the story was developed by later authors. According to the *Dictionnaire*

¹¹“Sir, you must be aware that all Welshmen are by nature more stupid than the beasts in the field: this one is just like a beast. A man is a fool to tarry beside him, unless he wants to while away his time in idle chatter” (Chrétien, 1181-1191/ 2004, p.384).

¹² Lancelot du Lac is first introduced into Arthurian tradition by Chrétien de Troyes' narrative *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* (*Lancelot, The Knight of the Cart*, circa 1170), in which he is described as the bravest and most perfect knight.



des Symboles – Mythes, Rêves, Coutumes, Gestes, Formes, Figures, Couleurs, Nombres, the number three is:

universellement un nombre fondamental. Il exprime un ordre intellectuel et spirituel, en Dieu, dans le cosmos ou dans l'homme. Il synthétise la tri-unité de l'être vivant ou il résulte de la conjonction de 1 et de 2, produit en ce cas de *l'union du Ciel et de la Terre*. (...) est un nombre *parfait* (**tch'eng**), l'expression de la totalité, de l'achèvement: il ne peut y être *ajouté*. C'est l'achèvement de manifestation: l'homme, fils du Ciel et de la Terre, complète la Grande Triade. C'est d'ailleurs, pour les Chrétiens, la perfection de l'Unité divine: Dieu est Un en trois Personnes. (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1982/1990, p.972)

As the perfect number and, symbolically, the ultimate expression of the divine, the number three is also linked to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Bearing this in mind, it seems fitting that in later narratives the three purest and most perfect Knights of the Round Table should be the one selected to find the Holy Grail, even though in *Le Morte D'Arthur* the honour of ascending to the Heavens along with the Holy Grail and a multitude of angels is reserved to Galahad alone:

suddeynly departed hyssoule to JesuCryste, and a grete multitude of angels bare hit [Galahad] up to hevynevyn in the sight of hys two felowis. Also thes two [felawes] saw com fromehyvyn an hande, but they synat the body; and so hit cam ryght to the vessell and toke hit, and the speare, and so bare hit up into hevyn – and sythen was there never man so hardy to sey that he hade seyn the Sankgreal. (Malory, 1485/2004, p.586)

Of the triad of knights to successfully complete the Quest, only Bors (or Bohort), the Younger, returns to Arthur's court, he is also the only one who is not caste and, therefore, not pure. His sin, though, results from being deceived by King Brandegorre's daughter who by means of a magical ring sleeps with the knight and conceives Helyan le Blanc (Helaine the White), who will grow to become a Knight of the Round Table himself. Yet, perhaps because his offence (unlike Lancelot's) does not result from carnal weakness, but from the interference of magic, his sin seems to be somewhat forgiven as God allows him to accompany Perceval and Galahad. After Arthur falls in battle against Mordred, Bors is described as having lived a holy life, dying on a Good Friday in the Holy Land. In modern adaptations Bors' role in the Grail Quest has nearly been forgotten as Galahad, probably due to his role as the perfect knight, became the primary Grail-knight in British and American tradition.

In fact, in many twentieth and twenty-first centuries' adaptations of the Arthurian legend, it is Galahad who succeeds in achieving the Holy Vessel. However, the Grail is no longer a subject limited to Arthurian tales or Christian narratives, it has become a sought-after object, or maybe even a bloodline, that can be attained by someone who does not have to be a knight or even (as we shall see) a strong believer in God. The reasons underlying this change are most likely related to there-envisions around the Grail Quest, which loosely seem to be of three kinds.



Firstly, there are Arthurian or knightly adventure narratives that may include new characters, locations and stories, but are always set against a medieval backdrop and tend to involve the most famous of King Arthur's knights in the Quest. This type of reworking comprises adaptations that are entirely placed in the Middle Ages, such as the film *Excalibur* (Dir. J. Boorman, 1981).¹³ Secondly, probably inspired by Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), there are narratives in which medieval characters as well as the Grail are relocated from the Middle Ages either to the present or to the future, like the graphic novel *Camelot 3000* (1982-1985). Finally, and thirdly, there are storylines with contemporary settings and characters who become involved in the search for the Holy Vessel. Examples of these types of envision are *Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade* (Dir. S. Spielberg, 1989), and *The Da Vinci Code* (D. Brown, 2003), to name only two. As a result, in the last section of this work we must ask: "what are the features of these new Grail-Winners?" and "how are they different from the medieval ones?"

The Grail-Hero: The Quest in Pop Culture

After centuries during which the attention given to Arthur and his knights' adventures waned, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there was a renewed interest in ancient cultures and traditions, namely the Celtic ones, that would eventually lead to the translation of a number of medieval texts into modern English and to the reprint of romances published in the Middle Ages, like *Le Morte d'Arthur*. The renewed interest in all that is medieval has led to the development of multiple and varied readings of the Middle Ages in which King Arthur and his Knights have taken a prominent role. The nineteenth century was a crucial period for Arthurian revival not only because of the growing interest in earlier cultures and traditions, namely in England, Wales and Ireland, but also due to the artistic, literary and intellectual movement called Romanticism. In addition, the work developed by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and its later followers, Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris, among others, helped define how people imagined the medieval period. The Grail was naturally a source of interest for the Pre-Raphaelites who dedicated themselves to painting it. These representations are crucial because the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics and their representation of Arthurian elements greatly influenced twentieth century imagination. Considering the three different types of Grail re-envisions already identified, let us start with John Boorman's film, which is a clear example of the Pre-Raphaelite influence.

Excalibur is centred on Arthur from the events that led to his conception to his death at Sir Mordred's hands. There are several points of interest in this adaptation, but for the purpose of this paper only those concerning the Grail will be focused on. To begin with, one must acknowledge the influence J. Weston's work *From Ritual to Romance* had on Boorman's film since the connection between King and Land is given central attention. In fact, the Grail Quest only begins after a lighting caused by the birth of the King's incestuous child with his witch-sister Morgana wounded Arthur. The birth of Mordred along with Guinevere's and Lancelot's love affair seem to equal the Dolorous Stroke that maims the King and leads to the wasteland. The bond between King and Land is made clear throughout all the film as Merlin tells Arthur: "You will be the land,

¹³Other adaptations included in this category are *Lancelot du Lac* (Dir. R. Bresson, 1974), *Perceval le Gallois* (Dir. E. Rohmer, 1978), *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (Dir. T. Gilliam and T. Jones, 1975), *Parsifal* (Dir. R. Blank, 1980), among others.



and the land will be you. If you fail, the land will perish. If you thrive, the land will blossom" (Boorman, 1981). Once this bond is broken, only the Grail can restore it: "Arthur: We must find what was lost. The Grail... Only the Grail can restore leaf and flower. Search the land... the labyrinths of the forests...to the edge of...within. Only the Grail can redeem us" (Boorman, 1981).

While Boorman clearly stated *Excalibur* was based on Thomas Malory's work¹⁴, the Grail-Winner is not Galahad, but Perceval. The reasons behind Boorman's choice might be connected to a) the director's wish to bring forth an older version of Arthurian legend less contaminated by Christian symbolism in which Perceval is the true Grail-Knight and myth is crucial, "The film has to do with *mythical* truth, not historical truth; it has to do with man taking over the world on his own terms for the first time" (Boorman, 1981); and b) the intention behind the Grail Quest itself, since *Excalibur's* Quest is in fact an ordeal of loyalty and patriotism to redeem Arthur and restore the land's fertility. Perceval achieves the Grail because of his devotion to God and to Arthur himself. It is Arthur's voice the viewers hear at the Grail Castle and the King is the one who questions Perceval, thus inverting the order found in medieval texts where the knight is meant to obtain the answers and not provide them:

What is the secret of the Grail? Who does it serve?

Perceval: You, my lord.

Who am I?

Perceval: You are my lord and king. You are Arthur.

Have you found the secret...that I have lost?

Perceval: Yes. You and the land are one. (Boorman, 1981)

The character development of Perceval is also noteworthy. He is at first a determined, although naive, boy who is awed by Lancelot's shiny armour (a scene clearly evoking Chrétien de Troyes' *Le Conte du Graal*). Later at Arthur's court, when Guinevere is blamed for being the reason behind Lancelot's absence and, as a result, is accused of betrayal, it is Perceval who offers to defend her honour. For such bravery, Arthur knights the hero. Further on, after initiating the Grail-Quest, Perceval refuses Morgana and is hung on a tree of corpses where he is left for dead and sees the Grail for the first time. Terrified by the experience, Perceval fails to achieve the Grail.

Nevertheless, finally, after what seems to be the Round Table's downfall and Lancelot's rejection of him, the knight has nothing else to lose. In a moment of grace, Perceval succeeds. Bearing in mind that Galahad is the Grail-Winner in *Le Morte d'Arthur*, considered the most influential Arthurian romance in British and American culture, it is noteworthy that Perceval (perhaps because of his very human, imperfect nature) is the one chosen in several modern versions of the Quest as testified by the graphic novel *Camelot 3000* (1982).

Written by Mike W. Barr and Brian Bolland, the narrative of *Camelot 3000* is a good example of a different sort of contemporary adaptation as it brings forth medieval characters and relocates them in an imaginary future. In the year 3000 alien creatures invade the Earth, an event that will lead to a series of adventures, which in turn trigger the discovery of King Arthur's tomb, Merlin's resurrection and the reinstatement of the

¹⁴ See "John Boorman in Interview", *American Cinema Papers* (1981).



Round Table. The knights who feature in the story are (in order of appearance) Lancelot, Kay, Perceval (spelled Percival), Galahad, Gawain, and Tristan, who interestingly reincarnates as a woman. The Grail Quest begins as only the Grail can provide the cure for both Tom's¹⁵ radiation poisoning and the strange illness that affects the also restored witch Morgan le Fay. The Grail itself is depicted as the cup used both by Christ in the Last Supper and to collect his blood at the crucifixion:

Arthur: Sir Percival and Galahad claim to have seen it, lad... (...) 'Tis said to perform miracles, for it was twice associated with our Lord...Once when he did use it to perform the first communion, on the night he was betrayed...and again when he died on the cross for all our sins... the Grail did serve to collect some of the holy blood he shed. 'Tis said that Joseph of Arimathea took the Grail with him when he left the Holy Land. Where he secreted it, we do not know...but we shall find it, Tom. (Barr and Bolland, 1982/2008, Chapter Nine, p.3-4)

In *Camelot 3000*, Perceval, whose body is genetically altered against his will to that of a Neo-Man (a monstrous-like being) is identified as a descendant of Jesus Christ, he has "Sang Real" in him and is the chosen Grail-Winner given that Galahad excuses himself, "I sought the Grail in my last life, and seeing its image alone transfigured me... Once is enough for any man to see it, my friend – now it is your turn!" (Barr and Bolland, 1982/2008, Chapter Nine, p.10).

When Perceval along with Lancelot, Guinevere and Tomgo to Glastonbury Tor in search of the Grail only he can first see the guardian of the Holy Vessel who, following Chrétien's text, is his uncle. Perceval uncovers the hidden Grail, and heals Tom, but soon after the knight dies: "Please... don't try to touch me... But I wanted to thank you... for fighting for me... and for freeing me..." (Barr and Bolland, 1982/2008, Chapter Nine, p.20), Perceval states while his body is burnt and soul elevated to "the next world" (Barr and Bolland, 1982/2008, Chapter Nine, p.20).The guardianship of the Grail is then passed on to Lancelot, but ends up disappearing in the final battle between Arthur and Morgan le Fay.

In *Camelot 3000* the Quest for the Holy Grail thus seems to recover the ideals of medieval narratives: Perceval is not only pure and whole, but also, even in his mutilated state, a descendent of Christ. Therefore, the idea that the Grail-Winner(s) must be worthy and Christian remains.

Finally, looking at storylines set in modern days in which contemporary characters in advertently or not become involved in the quest for the Grail, can the same statement be applied? In *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (IJLC, 1989), the third adventure film of Spielberg's internationally famous archaeologist, the hero embarks on an epic quest. Following Arthurian tradition, the Holy Grail is again the cup used in the Last Supper and at the crucifixion. Its powers include the gift of prolonging life and of healing. The gift of youth is also mentioned in the film, but as Indiana Jones arrives at the temple where the Grail is hidden, the knight who has been guarding it for seven hundred years is clearly an aged man. One may then presume that while the

¹⁵ In *Camelot 3000*, Tom is a young man who discovers Arthur's tomb and awakens the King. He is fatally wounded by a poisonous radiation beam aimed at Arthur, thus saving the monarch's life by sacrificing his own. Tom's character was introduced in Barr and Bolland's graphic novel and does not appear to have any medieval precursor.



Holy Vessel prolongs life, it does not necessarily grant eternal youth. Like in medieval tales as well as in *Excalibur* and *Camelot 3000*, in Spielberg's film the Grail-Winner must also surpass a number of challenges in order to fulfil the Quest; they are: "The Breath of God", "The Word of God" and "The Path of God".

Interestingly, even though these ordeals appear to be aimed at defying a hero's faith, in *IJLC* they become more like tests of knowledge as only one who can decipher the cryptic meaning of the instructions can manage to safely reach the cave where the Grail rests.

Besides the three initial trials, there is one final challenge that is both a test of knowledge and of selflessness. Once Indiana Jones arrives at the temple where the Grail lies, he is faced with the ultimate trial: to choose the right Grail among multiple objects (much like Perceval in *Camelot 3000*). When the hero takes his chance at picking the true Holy Grail, he is able to make the right decision due to his knowledge of Jesus Christ's life: the archaeologist chooses the cup of a carpenter because he knows Jesus was a carpenter and would most likely possess a simple earthenware cup than one made of gold. In addition, Indiana's success is in a large scale linked to his will to rescue his father, Henry, first from the Nazis who kidnap him in order to find the Grail, and second from death after he is shot by the Nazi-allied Walter Donovan. The film *IJLC* particularly focuses on a crucial feature for the twentieth century Grail-Winner: knowledge, as both Indiana and his father are chosen to find the Holy Vessel because of their expertise. As a result, it seems that the modern Grail-Hero must have the learning required to read old parchments, interpret clues and think logically in order to piece together the mysteries of the Grail. Besides Indiana Jones, such hero, as unlikely as some would see him, is found in the symbologist Robert Langdon in *The Da Vinci Code*.

Dan Brown's mystery-detective novel is largely based on the theories presented by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln in *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* (1982) in which the authors suggested Jesus Christ married Mary Magdalene, had children and that these children or possibly their descendants travelled to what is now Southern France.

Consequently, the Holy Grail, or "Sangreal", translated as "Royal Blood", would actually be a reference to the womb of Mary Magdalene and the bloodline she gave birth to. With this premise in mind, *The Da Vinci Code* follows Robert Langdon and police cryptographer Sophie Neveu while they investigate her grandfather's murder. It is only in the very last chapters that Sophie is actually revealed to be one of the last descendants of Jesus Christ's holy lineage, which explains why her grandfather was killed as well as many other secrets. Brown hence explores an alternative religious history, providing several pieces of evidence as proof for this controversial idea, including the renowned painting *The Last Supper* by Leonardo Da Vinci (1496-1498) where the figure at the right hand of Jesus Christ is identified as Mary Magdalene, and not apostle John. Besides the clearly provocative theory brought forth by *The Da Vinci Code*, the novel also presents a quester who is able to achieve the Grail mostly due to his academic expertise. Robert Langdon proves himself to be honest and brave under life-threatening situations, but what seems to establish him as the only one who can help Sophie Neveu is his knowledge of symbols. It is the information he gathered



through years of study that allows him to unravel the mystery of the Grail and finish the Quest by reuniting Sophie with her long-lost grandmother and brother, hence reuniting Christ's family.

Conclusion: The Grail-Hero Rewritten

Now in the twenty-first century, it is clear that the Quest for the Holy Grail has suffered deep changes, which seem to be connected to two essential points. First, the concept of the Grail itself has suffered many transformations not only within the medieval period, but also in modern times. Initially, the Grail of Arthurian romance seemed only to represent a magical cup and was connected neither to the cup used by Jesus Christ at the Last Supper nor to the chalice employed to collect his blood at the crucifixion. Robert de Boron makes the association between this Arthurian Grail and the Holy Chalice in the work *Joseph d'Arimathie*. In addition, the Grail may take different forms: it can be a chalice, a platter, a stone or even stand for the bloodline of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, its religious dimension seems to have weakened, which we can testify in the use of the expression "Holy Grail" to "denote any kind of great goal or achievement or anything eagerly sought after, from championships in sports to exceptional computer equipment" (Lupack, 2007, p.213).

Second, the figure of the Grail-Hero has also been altered. Throughout the Middle Ages, the Grail-Winner(s) was portrayed as a brave, honest, selfless, heroic knight, who was also pure and penitent – features shared by Gawain, Perceval, Galahad and Bors. However, after the thirteenth century, the Grail-Winner also had to be a Christian, which made believing in God and living according to Christian values crucial to successfully end the Quest. Today, the Grail-Winners seem to still retain features of the early heroes, like courage, honesty and altruism but, for modern questers, faith in God appears to have less importance. In retellings in which the background and the whole story are set in contemporaneity with the Grail as the only medieval element, such as in *IJLC* and *The Da Vinci Code*, the quester(s) achieve the Holy Vessel in part because they have the knowledge to do so.

Jones and Langdon do not seem to be particularly firm believers in God, but they do have a vast knowledge of Christian religious myths, ancient tradition and symbolism. In a time when the importance of technology and information is paramount and knowledge vital, it makes sense that the heroes found on page and screen reflect these cultural changes.

Hence, as Western society in general appears to be moving further away from Christian beliefs, the Grail-Winners and the Grail itself are also shifting to meet the audience's ever changing ideas and values. The readings and re-envisioning of the Grail are altered, adapting to the historical, political and social context in which they are produced. Nevertheless, despite numerous rewritings and transformations throughout the years, Grail-Heroes, whether medieval or modern, seem to maintain a number of personal features that qualify them to act as champions against what one might generally call Evil. They share the same nerve, integrity and a self-sacrificing nature that makes them victorious in their separate quests.



References

1. Barr, M.W. & Bolland, B. (2008). *Camelot 3000*. New York, NY: DC Comics (Original work published in 1982).
2. Chevalier, J. & Gheerbrant A. (1990). *Dictionnaire des Symboles – Mythes, Rêves, Coutumes, Gestes, Formes, Figures, Couleurs, Nombres*. Paris, France: Éditions Robert Laffont/Éditions Jupiter (Original work published in 1982)
3. Chrétien de Troyes (1994). *Le Conte du Graal ou Le Roman de Perceval*. In M. Zink (Ed.), *Chrétien de Troyes. Romans*. (pp. 937-1211). (n.p.): Le Livre de Poche. (Original work published in 1181-1191)
4. --- (2004). *The Story of the Grail or Perceval. Arthurian Romances*. (W.W. Kibler, Trans.). (pp. 381-494). London, England: Penguin Classics. (Original work published in 1181-1191)
5. Kennedy, Harlan (1981, March). John Boorman – In Interview. *American Cinema Papers*. Retrieved from <http://americancinemapapers.homestead.com/files/EXCALIBUR.htm>
6. Loomis, R. S. (1977). *Wales and the Arthurian Legend*. Cardiff, Wales: University of Wales Press. (Original work published in 1956)
7. Lupack, A. (2007). *Oxford Guide to Arthurian Legend and Literature*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
8. Malory, Sir Thomas (2004). *Le Morte d'Arthur*. S.H.A. Shepherd (Ed.). New York, NY: A Norton Critical Edition. (Original work published in 1485)
9. Markale, J. (1999). *The Grail: The Celtic Origins of the Sacred Icon*. Rochester, NY: Inner Traditions Bear and Company. (Original work published in 1982)
10. Matthews, J. (1990). *Gawain: Knight of the Goddess. Restoring an Archetype*. London, England: Aquarian Press.
11. Pallenberg, R., and John B. (1981). *Excalibur Script - Dialogue Transcript*. *Script-O-Rama*. Retrieved from http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/e/excalibur-script-transcript-arthur-merlin.html
12. Weston, J. (2005). *From Ritual to Romance*. New York, N.Y.: COSIMO. (Original work published in 1920).
13. Wood, J. (2000). "The Holy Grail: From Romance Motif to Modern Genre." *Folklore*, 111(2), 169-190. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1260602>

Filmography

1. Boorman, J. (Producer & Director). (1981). *Excalibur* [Motion Picture]. United Kingdom: Orion Pictures.
2. Lucas, G. and Watts, R. (Producers), & Spielberg, S. (Director). (1989). *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* [Motion Picture]. United States: Paramount Pictures.