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The Holy Grail

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The Holy Grail

Abstract
Brief overview of the Grail legend, its development and function for various time periods.

Additional Keywords
Grail (legend); Grail as symbol in literature; Diana Paxson; Tim Kirk
It is my belief that the legend of the Holy Grail, like any other myth, became so popular because it expressed a problem and proposed a solution for which the men of the 13th and 14th centuries in Europe felt a deep need. To explain this, let me offer you a brief and necessarily superficial outline of the cultural history of the Middle Ages up to that time.

All the peoples of Europe have passed through a heroic period at one time or another. For England, France and Germany this was the 7th through 10th centuries. The popular ideal during this period was the warrior-hero, the dragon-slayer and savior of his people, whose main virtue was strength, although towards the end of the period the attribute of fidelity to his lord or people was added. Beowulf is perhaps the best example. Those few who had knowledge of letters were mainly engaged in the production of hagiology, and some last faint imitations of Roman literature.

But by the 11th century the Vikings who had settled in France had become the Normans, had adopted and developed the feudal system, and begun to systematically conquer England, Italy, Greece, and anywhere else the government was weak. As they by this time had adopted the Frankish tradition, they looked upon Charlemagne as their hero, and took along with him his ideal of a Christian Empire.

Now Charlemagne’s ninth century empire hardly outlasted his lifetime, but his ideal of a united Christendom gained power in the minds of men until by the 11th century it was almost universal, and its focus was the Holy War. Instead of seeking his own glory, the man of might was now supposed to use his prowess for the glory of his faith, destroying all infidels and rescuing the Holy City. Indeed, the first Crusade was militarily successful, but its end result was a massive culture shock to the peoples of Europe, as they discovered that the lands of the Bible featured sand and rock rather than milk and honey, that Jerusalem the Golden was a collection of mud huts, and, what was even more important, the attainment of their goal left them the same sinful men as they had been before. Hardly less significant was the discovery that the hated infidel and the despoiled Greek possessed civilizations next to which their own was barbaric. The idea of the Holy War remained a unifying force and a favorite political play for the next four centuries, but only the first Crusade was successful, and as successive bands of Crusaders returned abashed and disillusioned, gradually the idea that simple Might alone was not enough began to take hold. It was this feeling that encouraged such desperate ventures as the Children’s Crusade, and, I think, led thoughtful men such as Chrétien de Troyes to seek some means of making the knights worthy of their goal.

We know very little about Chrétien de Troyes—only that he wrote at the court of Marie de Champagne, daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine by her first husband the King of France, and later at the court of Philip of Flanders. As far as we can tell, he is the man who firmly married the Celtic imagination to the feudal culture, and wrote the definitive seminal tales of Sir Lancelot and Guinevere, supreme examples of courtly love, and the story of the quest for theHoly Grail, the supreme attempt to Christianize the ideal of knighthood. The purpose of courtly love was to teach the warrior manners. The purpose of the Grail quest was to teach him virtue.

The Grail itself as an object had appeared several years earlier in a work by Robert de Boron, giving its “history” from the time of the Last Supper to its arrival in England, and treating it in much the same manner as other legends of holy relics. Percival, as the callow youth who goes through various experiences designed to bring him to maturity, was also a stock character. However as far as is known, Chrétien was the first to combine the two stories, and make Percival’s search a story of spiritual development.

In Chrétien’s tale, Percival’s mother, hoping to keep him alive, brings him up in the wilderness, in complete ignorance of the courtly world. However one day he chances to see some knights, and immediately, though dimly, he recognizes his heritage. He leaves his mother fainting by the way, blunders his way to and from Arthur's court, surviving his adventures because of his great strength, and finally arrives at the castle of a great gentleman (who turns out to be his uncle) where he achieves him the proper knighthly weapons and the externals of courtly behavior. After he leaves this place he rescues a maiden from a forced marriage and has various other adventures and finally, after riding through a wasteland, meets the Fisher King, (who also turns out to be his uncle) who invites him to his palace. The Fisher King’s palace is of course, the Castle of the Grail. Percival minds his manners at the feast set before him, and accepts a magical sword with fitting grace, but he expresses no concern for his host, who is lame, nor when the Grail and Lance are borne through the hall, does he ask what is going on. In the morning the castle is deserted, and much puzzled, Percival fares forth once more.

The first person he meets is a lady (who turns out to be his cousin), who is lamenting her slain lord. She tongue-lashes Percival soundly, and tells him that if he had asked about the marvels he saw the wasteland would have been restored, the wounded King healed, and that because he has not done this there will be further suffering and wandering for him, and furthermore, that the reason he was not inspired to ask the Question was because of his sin in deserting his mother, who has now died of sorrow. Percival immediately swears to seek the Castle once more and repair his omissions. This quest, and the adventures it involves, are the chief matter of the Quest legend.

Sword, cup, and lance, magic castle and wasteland, all can easily be traced to Celtic legends. But to point out that this is where Chrétien must have got them does not negate Chrétien’s genius in putting them together with the other aspects of this story, or “explain” what this particular use of the “means”. Chrétien continues the story past the proclamation of the Grail quest at court, at which point Gawain volunteers for it, thus creating the precedent for questers from Arthur’s court. There follow some miscellaneous wanderings, at the end of which Percival meets a hermit (another uncle) who explains to him that he is destined by birth to achieve this quest, and who gives him some religious instruction (which seems to be what he needed all along) and sends him on his way. At this point Chrétien’s tale breaks off.

Now in the Middle Ages originality was no virtue—even authors who were making up their stories out of whole cloth referred to mythical sources (to the unending confusion of scholars), and in an age which thought nothing of starting a cathedral it would take 400 years and several architects to build, there would be no prejudice against continuing someone else’s work. Therefore, almost before Chrétien’s ink was dry, continuators sprang up to carry on and on and on
that the story of Percival's quest. Rather than bring to an end, marvels were proliferated, and Gawain, and later other questors, were given whole sections of the tale. The result of all this was that by the end of the 14th century the main emphasis had changed from the development of Percival from barbarian to a Christian knight to the story of what happened to all those extremely worldly knights of Arthur's court who went on the quest.

The definitive expositor of this final form of the legend was Malory, who gave to the Grail Quest the whole of Book XVI of his Morte D'Arthur. Now Malory was very frankly (and demonstrably) no originator, but rather a re-teller (in some places a translator) of the French Arthurian romances in prose which had been written shortly before his time. His genius was in editing and combining them into what has become the definitive version of the Arthurian legend. Sometimes in the preceding century the implications of the changes in the Grail story had been recognized, and Percival, the no-longer-so-innocent barbarian, was replaced by Galahad, the Haute Prince as destined achiever of the Grail.

I am afraid that for most of us the character of Galahad, with his pure heart and strength of ten, has been rather spoiled by Tennyson's version of him. In Malory's version, Galahad is so hemmed about with marvels that he seems more holy than heroic, a figure out of hagiology rather than legend. I think that he is meant to represent the pure form of the ideal, and for this reason he is given two companions, Bors and Percival, representing lesser and more attainable degrees of purity. There are also the completely unsuccessful questors, among whom Lancelot and Gawain are the most important, with whom the reader may identify. In fact the chief interest in Malory is in the development and destinies of these others. Among them they cover almost all the ways for a layman to achieve holiness, as well as displaying the main reasons he may fail to do so.

Malory wrote at the very end of the medieval period. Indeed, by his time the New Learning had dominated Italy for 200 years, and was making serious inroads into the northern countries. The Morte D'Arthur itself was one of the books printed by Caxton at the first English press. By the time Spenser took up the Arthurian legend, at the end of the Elizabethan period, medieval and neo-classic mythology were inextricably mingled, and the Grail legend was lost.

But not forgotten. With the Romantic Revival Malory's version became important once more, and Tennyson restored the Grail story to its old place of importance in the Arthurian canon. However during the intervening centuries all had suffered a sea-change. Tennyson was using the old tales to express the needs of his own age, and his version of the Grail story makes it an example of the destructive effects of religious enthusiasm, one of the chief causes of the breaking of the Table Round.

Novels re-telling the Arthurian story in one form or another have appeared pretty regularly since then. In some of them the Grail appears, in some it does not. T. H. White mentions it, but gives it no importance, in The Once and Future King, but Rosemary Sutcliff's Sword at Sunset is set in the real 5th century, and finds no place for it.

As you are no doubt aware, Charles Williams has treated the Grail twice, once in the novel War in Heaven, in which it appears as the magical device, with only its original religious associations around it, and in his cycle of poems on the Arthurian legend, in which the Grail dominates everything else. These poems are somewhat difficult in form, and even more difficult to find in print. Arthurian Torso, By C. S. Lewis, consists of Williams' unfinished book on the Arthurian legend plus Lewis' exposition of Williams' Arthurian poetry, on the basis of the discussions he and Williams had while that poetry was being written.

As a piece of literary criticism written according to the opinions of a work's authors, instead of in spite of them, it must be almost unique. It also features tantalizing references to Tolkien said one day when he dropped in as Williams was reading a poem, etc., etc. Having been warned, I read the poems in the order Lewis outlines for them (not the order in which they were published), and along with Lewis' explanations, so I cannot judge their effect without such aid. With it, I must feel that Williams has successfully added a new dimension to the story, the discussion of which deserves an essay all its own.

Below you will find a bibliography of the most easily available editions (preferably in English translation) of the various versions of the Grail legend. They make fascinating reading, and I hope that many will give themselves the pleasure of exploring them.

BIBLIOGRAPHY (in the order they were written)

The Conte del Graal of Chrétien de Troyes, in Medieval Romances, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis, Modern Library.


(Continued on page 31, col. 2)
The Myths That Weren't There (an unfinished 8th novel which was printed in Mythlores 6, 7, & 8) Taliesin Through Logres. The Region of the Summer Stars. Arthurian Torso. Collected Plays.

The purpose of the Society is not to promote the sale of commercial books, but rather that the works be read. It is encouraging to know however that all of the above works are in print, and if your local library does not have them they can obtain them.

Many of you are familiar with the name of C. S. Kilby. Those in the Society know him as the Guest of Honor at Mythcon I in 1970, and the only American to have read The Silmarillion. On September 30th 1972, his 70th birthday was celebrated in a very special way. There was a surprise party held at Wheaton College, where he has taught English for many years. Over 250 people were present. President Armerding of the College spoke with enthusiasm about the special Inkling Collection that C. S. Kilby originated. This collection he calls "the best in the world," contains manuscripts by C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, Owen Barfield, J. R. R. Tolkien, George MacDonald, and Dorothy Sayers. The most recent addition to the special collection was over 2,000 pages of manuscripts of Williams which arrived in September. Gifts for the collection, in honor of C. S. Kilby's 70th birthday, totalled almost $4,000, and the party was a great success. The elaborate planning was kept a secret. Hundreds of cards and letters were received, including a special calligraphed card from the Society drawn by Bruce McMenomy. Admirers of the Inklings also have much admiration and gratitude for C. S. Kilby and his work. We wish him the very best.

**MYTHCON IV**

This year's Mythcon will be held on August 17-20 at the Francisco Torres in Santa Barbara, California. Membership is $4 until July 1st; $5 from then to the convention. $1 supporting members receive the Program Book. Make checks payable to Mythcon, c/o the box address.

The program will include: many discussion groups, papers, panels, an art show, a masquerade, a living chess game with characters from mythopoeic works, films, a banquet, music, drama, an auction, and guests of honor.

The rates for food and lodging are very reasonable: $43.50 single occupancy ($36.00 per person - double occupancy) gives you three nights lodging and meals. Mythcon II was held there, so we know how good the food and facilities are. The Torres is a convention center that offers seclusion away from the hubbub of the city. It is a mile from the sea, and the weather is delightfully pleasant in August.

Mythcon is a convention of national participation. Make your plans now for a great summer event.

**GREEN DRAGON** (Continued from page 28)

Mythprint has already been mentioned on page 29. I would encourage you to subscribe if you have not already done so. It is published every month, and sent by Second Class Mail. It is the vital newsletter of the Society and of news related to its interests. In it we report the latest rumors about The Silmarillion; news of the Hobbit movie to be made; and progress reports on Mythcon, in addition to the many features mentioned on page 29.

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