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# The Legend of the Grail and *War in Heaven*: From Medieval to Modern Romance

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## Mythcon 50

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### The Legend of the Grail and *War in Heaven*: From Medieval to Modern Romance

#### **Abstract**

Compares *War in Heaven* to its literary sources, particularly *Le Morte Darthur*. Notes the ways the former incorporates specific aspects of the Grail legend, as well as the differences Williams introduced to adapt the legend for a twentieth-century novel.

#### **Additional Keywords**

Grail (legend) in *War in Heaven*; Malory, Thomas. *Le Morte Darthur*—Relation to *War in Heaven*; Williams, Charles. *War in Heaven*—Sources

# The Legend of the Grail and War in Heaven

## From Medieval to Modern Romance

### Judith Kollmann

Let me begin with the obvious: Charles Williams was a Christian and a writer (of poetry, novels, biography, criticism and drama) to such a degree that his passion for imaginative literature and his commitment to Christianity came before almost anything else--certainly before anthropology or folklore, while myth and legend were significant to him because of their potential as vehicles for the expression of his faith or of linguistic beauty. They opened, rather than closed, the imagination. Therefore, although Williams was very familiar with all types of Grail materials, including Frazier's Golden Bough and Jessie Weston's From Ritual to Romance, the first realization about his treatment of the Grail story in War in Heaven is that anthropological hypotheses concerning the origin of the chalice are not relevant to this novel. The primary influences are literary. Williams left the more anthropological treatment to his acquaintance, T.S. Eliot, who had published The Waste Land in 1922, eight years prior to War in Heaven. Both The Waste Land and a much more recent work that also bases its treatment of the Grail on anthropological theories and archeological finds, Mary Stewart's Arthurian trilogy, illustrate the same point: for works of literature that deal with scientific plausibility, whether in the areas of psychology or history, the anthropologist's perspective is the only viable option. However, Williams was not concerned with scientific plausibility but with spiritual possibility, and therefore went to that branch of the legends in which the things of the spirit flourish: in that fusion of romance with religious mysticism that has always been the essence of the medieval romances. When Kenneth Mornington, one of Williams' chief protagonists, has a vision of the Grail, he perceives its significance from its literary perspective:

This, then, was the thing from which the awful romances sprang, and the symbolism of a thousand tales. He saw the chivalry of England riding on its quest--but not a historical chivalry . . . Liturgical and romantic names melted into one cycle--Lancelot, Peter, Joseph, Percivale, Judas, Mordred, Arthur, John Bar-Zebedee, Galahad--and into these were caught up the names of their makers--Hawker and Tennyson, John, Malory and the mediaevals. They rose, they gleamed and flamed about the Divine hero, and their readers too--he also, least of all these. He was caught in the dream of Tennyson; together they rose on the throbbing verse.

And down the long beam stole the Holy Graal,  
Rose-red with beatings in it.  
He heard Malory's words. . . . The single tidings came to him across romantic hills.<sup>1</sup>

Williams points out, in War in Heaven, that Jessie Weston had taken the legend From Ritual to Romance, although he jokingly mistitles her study as From Romance to Reality, which is a sly allusion to the fact that, from his perspective, that is exactly what

this anthropological work did: by explaining the Grail historically, Weston explained it away. No romance is left in her theories. Williams did precisely the opposite: he took a fragment of Arthurian romance, re-set it in the context of twentieth century life, and then expanded the possibilities of spiritual experience by returning imaginative splendor to the mystery of the Grail. As he wrote in his notes to his Arthurian poems, "No invention can come near it; no fabulous imagination excel it. All the greatest mythical details are only there to hint at the thing which happens; that which in the knowledge of Christendom is the unifying act, perilous and perpetual, universal and individual."<sup>2</sup>

The legend of the Grail entered Western Europe in the twelfth century romance, Perceval, by Chretien de Troyes. This is its first mention in any written document, and it is already essentially Christian and a spiritual object for which one must search. The story underwent three more centuries of change and development before Malory translated the French Quest del Saint Graal and gave England its definitive version. All subsequent writers who have chosen Arthurian romance for a subject have consulted Le Morte Darthur as the fundamental source-text, and although Williams was familiar with later versions, notably Tennyson's Idylls of the King and Robert Stephen Hawker's Quest of the Holy Graal, Malory nevertheless remains his basic text. The one extraordinary addition that Williams made, and which will be discussed later in this paper, is the figure of Prester John.

A brief summary of Malory's version is as follows: the Grail, which has resided in relative obscurity at King Pelles' castle for centuries, comes of its own volition to Arthur's Pentecostal feast, where it manifests itself to the assembled company. Immediately almost every knight present vows to search for it. The story then follows a few individuals; Gawain, representative of the average knight, too secular to understand the spiritual nature of the quest and who consequently fails utterly; Lancelot, too enmeshed in adultery to completely break from his sin, who undergoes great spiritual torment and achieves only a limited success in a brief glimpse of the Grail; then the three successful searchers, Bors, Percivale and Galahad, each of whom understands the nature of what he seeks. Their achievement of the Grail is celebrated at a Mass in which the mysteries of the chalice, identified with the theology of the Catholic Mass, are unveiled. All three knights leave England, taking the vessel to the city of Sarras in the East. There, Galahad and Percivale die, both having asked for death, while Bors returns alone to court to tell the story.

Since War in Heaven is set in the twentieth century, an emphatically post-Arthurian era, the spectacular entrance of the Grail into Arthur's hall obviously must be eliminated. Instead, the novel begins with a dead body under a desk in a publisher's office. This corpse has, incidentally, given critics a hard time; at least one has suggested that either

Williams didn't know what kind of novel he was writing and had fallen into a murder mystery by accident, or that he was simply determined to make his "metaphysical thriller" as thrilling as possible. In either case, it is felt that the novel is artistically a failure, not only because of this flawed opening but because of a lack of discipline in Williams' writing in the early novels--what C.S. Lewis also disparaged, describing Williams as "largely a self-educated man, labouring under an almost oriental richness of imagination."<sup>3</sup> While it is true that Williams wrote with high spirits and wit, and loved to work with matters of the occult, in this case there is a deliberate joke on the reader, for Williams is writing very much within the Grail tradition. The presence of an unknown, unidentified corpse in a chapel is a common motif in Grail literature;<sup>4</sup> furthermore, its presence here also suggests a little of the Waste Land motif, for Williams is slyly implying that a publisher's office, the modern "shrine of intellect" is a twentieth century chapel. That the man has been murdered by a diabolic agent is also a standard feature of the Grail stories, in which diabolic incidents abound. Usually it is Galahad who rescues these situations or otherwise tidies them up as a manifestation of his sanctity; in *War in Heaven* it is Prester John who does the tidying, for all the human characters--diabolic or angelic agents alike, as well as the victims--are somewhat more helpless than in the traditional legends.

In both Malory's and Williams' versions, the Grail becomes all at once the vessel in the spotlight. Everybody wants it--in Malory, spiritually; in Williams, physically and materially. In *Le Morte Darthur* "everybody" means the knights of the Round Table. In *War in Heaven*, "everybody" consists of two groups, each consisting of a triad of characters--the Archdeacon, Mornington and the Duke of North Ridings on the side of the angels, and Gregory Persimmons, Manasseh, and "the Greek" on the side of the diabolic. In addition, there is a third group, somewhat peripheral to the central action (which is concerned with the question of "Who has the Grail?"). This third group consists of the Rackstraw family: Lionel, Barbara, and their young son, Adrian. These three not only do not want the Grail but remain largely unaware of it, and, in various ways, become the victims of the diabolical party.

Williams' search for the chalice contains a number of parallels with the basic Arthurian Grail quest; one of the most interesting is that the three main protagonists are, as Mornington observes, analogous to Bors, Percivale, and Galahad: "The Archdeacon's Galahad, and . . . you [the Duke] must be Percivale, because you're a poet. And Bors was an ordinary workaday fellow like me" (p. 120). Mornington is almost correct; actually, he himself is more like Percivale than is the Duke, in that, like Percivale, Mornington dies willingly in the achievement of the vessel, and, judging from the quotation above, his is also the soul of a poet. In addition, his life is more ascetic than the Duke's. As were the three original knights, all three modern questors are unmarried. Nevertheless, for Charles Williams neither virginity nor chastity are especially significant, a point in which he differed greatly from Malory, for whom virginity bore mystical properties, and, incidentally, from Tennyson, for whom chastity in marriage was not only vital for the quest of the Grail but for the maintenance of Arthur's kingdom. The Duke's reaction to the Grail, while a perfectly valid

one, is suggestive of his somewhat less mature spiritual development. His is a response to a sense of history and of hierarchy, appropriate to his state as a Duke and as a Roman Catholic: "He was aware of a sense of the adoration of kings--the great tradition of his house stirred within him" (p. 135). But the Archdeacon, the Galahad-figure in the novel, is, like the knight, the one most perfectly in harmony with the Grail and what it represents, for he sees through it the essential unity of the material and spiritual universe, and perceives the Grail, as he does all its prototypes (all communion vessels), as a symbol of God: "Sky and sea and land were moving , not towards that vessel, but towards all it symbolized and had held. . . .the Sacred Elements seemed to him to open upon the Divine Nature, upon Bethlehem and Calvary and Olivet, as that itself opened upon the Centre of all" (p. 137). All three responses are valid; all three in combination is perhaps Williams' concept of the most perfect human response possible to the Grail and to God. However, it is the Archdeacon's response that comes closest to perfection because it maintains its objectivity and its serenity, seeing the Grail as priceless, yes, but still not an end in itself. Its real value lies in what it represents, and that value is the same one possessed by any eucharistic vessel: it is a means to God. It is not, in itself and by itself, God. As the Archdeacon is fond of saying: "Neither is this Thou; yet this also is Thou".

It is, therefore, fitting that the Grail is first recognized for what it is by the Archdeacon. However, he is knocked over the head for it and the chalice is seized by the villains, only to be found again by the Archdeacon, rescued by him and by Mornington and the Duke, returned to the demonic party, and, finally, rescued by Prester John. In Malory the Grail is found only when it chooses to show itself and, never threatened, it always remains its own master; in the novel the demonic forces, extraneous and largely subsidiary elements in the medieval legends, become a central theme as they struggle to obtain the vessel, to use it, to degrade it, to destroy it and finally to destroy by means of it; however, the threat is more apparent than real. The Grail, seemingly a helpless object, is ultimately impervious to real harm. Williams' implication is that, in the same way, the person who chooses to seek the Grail--or what it represents--is similarly protected from the real harm of ultimate spiritual destruction (although not, of course, from material destruction). This theme, not found in any of the medieval versions, is a particularly modern one. The point of genuine similarity between the medieval and the modern versions is in the function of the vessel as a spiritual catalyst. Its sudden appearance polarizes and clarifies peoples' actions into either good or evil, into acute white or black, and precipitates those who are mature in the ways of either good or evil into their fate. Those who are not so developed are sent back into the ordinary, workaday world. Thus, the two individuals who are totally committed to evil, Manasseh and the Greek, are destroyed--not because the Grail is vindictive, but because this is, quite simply, what these characters have desired and chosen. Gregory Persimmons, however, who has appeared to be the nastiest of the three but who has, although along perverted ways, been searching for genuine spiritual life, finds it, is sent back to face trial and hanging for murder, and, by that means, presumably will achieve spiritual regeneration. Giles Tumulty, who is, by the way, Williams' folklorist and archeologist, whose name is derived from "guile",

"tumulus" and "tumult", and who is described by Mornington as "the nearest to a compound of a malevolent hyena and an especially venomous cobra that ever appeared in London" (p. 62), is also thrown back into the mundane world. One of the few characters who returns in a second Williams novel, he reappears in *Many Dimensions* and this time manages to destroy himself completely. Kenneth Mornington is also killed, by means of sorcery, in the fight for the Grail; the Archdeacon, Galahad-like, dies peacefully and willingly during the eucharistic service at the modern version of the spiritual city of Sarras, the church at *Castra Parvulorum*. The Duke returns to his daily Duke-ish life; like Bors, he returns to court.

The most striking use of legendary materials in *War in Heaven* occurs during the celebration of the Mass with which the novel concludes. Like Malory's *Tale of the San Greal*, the novel climaxes in a great Mass in which the mystical properties of the vessel are made visible to the onlookers. As Williams was directly indebted to Malory, the original passage is worth quoting at some length:

. . . therewithall besemed them that there cam an olde man and four angelis frome hevyn, clothed in lyknesse of a byssshop, and had a crosse in hys honde. . . . And it semed that he had in myddis of hys forehede lettirs which seyde, 'se you here Joseph, the first byssshop of Crystendom, the same which oure Lorde succoured in the cite of Sarras in the spirituall palleys'. . . .

And than the byssshop made semblaunte as though he wolde have gone to the sakeryng of a masse, and than he toke on obley which was made in lyknesse of brede. And at the lyfftyng up there cam a vigoure in lyknesse if a chyld, and the vysayge was as rede and as bryght os ony fyre, and smote hymselff into the brede, that all they saw hit that the brede was foumed of a fleysshely man. . .

. . . he [Joseph] vanysshed away. And the sette hem at the table in grete drede and made their prayers. Than loked they and saw a man com oute of the holy vessell that had all the sygnes of the Passion of Jesu Cryste bledynge all opynly, and seyde,

'My knyghtes and my servauntes, and my trew chyldren which bene com oute of dedly lyff into the spirituall lyff, I woll no lenger cover me frome you, but ye shall se now a parte of my secretes and of my hydde thynges. Now holdith and resseyvith the hyghe order and mete whych ye have so much desired.'

Than toke He hymselff and holy vessell and came to sir Galahad. And he kneled adowne and resseyved hys Saveoure.<sup>5</sup>

Like Malory, for Williams this communion service is the height of the Grail experience because that which the Grail symbolizes becomes present, and that, of course, is Christ, the epitome of the Christian mystical experience. But whereas in *Le Morte Darthur* this is handled somewhat clumsily, Williams simplified the proceedings. Malory was well aware that he was on delicate theological ground and therefore stayed close to his source, for the French *Quest* has been written under the supervision of the Cistercian monks during the thirteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Thus, to celebrate the mass it was necessary for Malory to begin with the advent of the arch-priest, Joseph of Arimethea, who must

consecrate the bread before the "fiery child" of the conception smites itself into the wafer. Only then does the resurrected Christ appear from within the chalice. The dogma is precise. Charles Williams simply made the priest and the Christ into one figure, that of Prester John, the semi-fabulous person who suddenly is mentioned in the twelfth century as "a Christian conqueror and potentate who combined the characters of priest and king, and ruled over vast dominions in the Far East."<sup>7</sup> He is mentioned variously in medieval documents as king in India, Abyssinia and Ethiopia. Historically he might have been a Nestorian, or, more probably, the Chinese prince Yeliu Tashi, who conquered eastern and western Turkestan in the twelfth century. Whoever he may have been, Prester John had become associated with the Grail by the time of Wolfram von Eschenbach, appearing in his thirteenth century *Parzival* as the son of Feirfeir, the piebald black-and-white half-brother to Parzival, and the "maiden who through all her virgin day had carried the Holy Grail."<sup>8</sup> In Albrecht von Scharfenberg's *Die Jungere Titurel* (ca. 1270) Parsifal is not related to Prester John but becomes his heir and assumes his name (Waite, p. 419), while in the *Dutch Lancelot* (early fourteenth century) "the Priest-King appears to have been Perceval's son." (Waite, p. 430) Therefore, although the name of Prester John has been associated with the Grail since the medieval era, it is clear that Charles Williams' conception of this figure is far more imaginatively, fully and coherently developed than in any preceding Grail legend with which I, at any rate, am familiar.

An additional source for Williams' character may well be A.E. Waite's lengthy study, *The Hidden Church of the Holy Graal*. Waite had been Williams' mentor while he was a member of the group of magicians known as the Order of the Golden Dawn, around 1903. Waite, in *The Hidden Church*, dealt with the influence of St. John the Divine on the Grail legend. In one sense, the myth began in the Fourth Gospel, a point which Williams acknowledged in his novel. As Waite expressed it, "The great contention of the Gospel is that the Word became flesh...the doctrine concerning the communication of Divine Substance is taught more explicitly by St. John than by the rest of the evangelists." (p. 622) Moreover, traditions abound regarding this John; "they issue from the evasive intimation of his gospel that he was to remain on earth until the Second Coming of the Saviour. From his ordeal of martyrdom he therefore came forth alive, according to his legend, and so he remained, in the opinion of St. Augustine, resting as one asleep in his grave at Ephesus." (pp. 662-63)

Williams' Prester John combines attributes of both legendary Johns with perhaps a soupçon of the Baptist thrown in along the author of Revelations. To Mrs. Lucksparrow, the Archdeacon's housekeeper, he is a Chinaman; Persimmons' chauffeur sees him as an Indian; Persimmons himself sees a face "surely as European as his own" (p. 154). Prester John, in the novel, is a young man who wears a soft gray suit, gloves and walking-stick. He says of himself "I am Prester John, I am the Graal and the Keeper of the Graal. All enchantment has been stolen from me, and to me the Vessel itself shall return'....'I am John...and I am the prophecy of the things that are to be and are. You who have sought the centre of the Graal, behold through me that which you seek, receive from me that which you are'" (pp. 189 and 246). Further, although dressed as a contemporary Englishman, he has been moving about the world not only in time but also in

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## The Case for Clear Thought

Richard L. Purtil, C.S. Lewis's Case for the Christian Faith (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 146 pp.

One wonders sometimes whether, with so many works by C.S. Lewis still available in bookstores and even on news-stands, books based substantially upon quotes from him are really needed. With his argument so cogent, his style so fluent, his works so coherent, isn't a collection of fragments superfluous? In the case of the present book there are two justifications for its publication. First is the appearance of fifteen previous unpublished letters by C.S. Lewis, a bonanza of new material, rich, important, worth the price (which in Canada for this slim volume was \$13.25!) Second is the fact that the author is, like Lewis himself, a teacher of philosophy (which Lewis taught at one point) and a Christian. His work is a fine review of Lewis's apologetic oeuvre, drawing together works many will not have read, or read once, and that not recently, and set forth in a clean, logical, and pleasantly readable form. Each chapter contains a specific topic and these develop appropriately from one another in a clear sequence, from "Reasons for Belief in God" to "Death and Beyond," stopping to consider the nature of God, the nature of Christ, miracles, faith, other religions, the Christian life, and prayer in between. It is an excellent resume, balanced and accurate, of Lewis's positions on these matters, framed not only with explanation but commentary and even, in some cases, with riposte.

Lewis's newly published letters add a spice of freshness for readers who are deeply familiar with the ten works (including three collections of essays and one of previously published letters) which are quoted. Purtil makes especially frequent use of The Last Battle, which he calls "one of Lewis's greatest books (p. 130). This might send some readers back to what is both the darkest and most numinous of the Narnian novels. Most appropriately, J.B. Phillips's translation of the New Testament is used alongside, matching Lewis's language in its vigour and clarity.

C.S. Lewis's Case for the Christian Faith sets forth its matter in an orthodox, centrist manner, without veering in an evangelical or charismatic or any other direction. Screwtape will hate it!

Nancy-Lou Patterson

Grail, continued from page 22

space; Giles Tumulty has caught glimpses of him in South America and in Samarcand. And, like John the Divine, he apparently is destined to remain on earth until the Second Coming. And he combines these characters with Malory's Joseph. It is a tremendous unification, therefore, of many myths within one fabulous person who ultimately resolves the enigma by showing himself to be Christ the King. The Archdeacon had already perceived that this is what the universe, land and sea and sky, is growing toward. Prester John

opens "upon the Centre of all" (p. 137) and does so explicitly during the great Mass of the Grail:

all separate beings...were concentrated on that high motionless Figure--motionless, for in Him all motions awaited His movement to be loosed, and still He did not move. All sound ceased; all things entered into an intense suspension of being; nothing was anywhere at all but He.

He stood; He moved his hands. As if in benediction He moved them, and at once the golden halo that had hung all this while over the Graal dissolved and dilated into spreading colour; and at once life leapt in all those who watched, and filled and flooded and exalted them....At a great distance Lionel and Barbara and the Duke saw beyond him, as He lifted up the Graal, the moving universe of stars, and then one flying planet, and then fields and rooms and a thousand remembered places, and all in light and darkness and peace. (p. 254-55)

What Charles Williams accomplished in War in Heaven, his second novel, was, quite simply, to give the legend of the Grail new vitality by demonstrating its relevance to a twentieth century in which interest in the demonic occult abounds along with religious ignorance and despair. By by-passing the anthropological answers to the legend, Williams was able to re-establish the evocative wonder with which people, up to the nineteenth century, had been able to view this myth. He made the medieval romance into a modern one, and instead of closing down the mystery of the Grail, opened it out once again to "the Centre of all."

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>War in Heaven (1930; rpr. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), pp. 136-7. Henceforth all page citations to this text will be given in the body of the paper.

<sup>2</sup>"The Figure of Arthur," from Arthurian Torso, in Taliessin Through Logres, The Region of the Summer Stars, Arthurian Torso, by Charles Williams and C.S. Lewis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 197.

<sup>3</sup>Humphrey Carpenter, The Inklings (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), p. 115.

<sup>4</sup>Jessie Weston, From Ritual to Romance (New York: Doubleday, 1957), pp. 12, 17, 50, 115, 116, 120, 122.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas Malory, The Works of Thomas Malory, ed. Eugene Vinaver (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 734-35.

<sup>6</sup>The Quest of the Holy Grail, ed. P.M. Matarasso (Baltimore: Penguin, 1971), pp. 20-21.

<sup>7</sup>Encyclopedia Britannica, 11th edition, vol. 22, p. 304b.

<sup>8</sup>A.E. Waite, The Hidden Church of the Holy Graal (London: Rebus Ltd., 1909), p. 387.

