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"The Grail Myth Revisited: from Chrétien de Troyes to Tennyson"

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The Grail Myth Revisited: from Chrétien de Troyes to Tennyson

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Resumen

Este trabajo estudia la reinterpretación del mito del Grial**,** comparando su primera aparición en la literatura francesa –en *Perceval o el Cuento del Grial* de Chrétien de Troyes– y la reinvención victoriana de Alfred Lord Tennyson en *Idylls of the King*. Analizaremos cómo evolucionan los personajes, símbolos y objetos sagrados**,** demostrando cómo el mito refleja las preocupaciones espirituales y morales de cada época

Palabras clave: Grial, Tennyson, Chrétien de Troyes, reinterpretación

Abstract

This paper studies the reinterpretation of the Grail myth**,** comparing its first appearance in French literature – in Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval, or The Story of the Grail*– with Alfred Lord Tennyson's Victorian reinvention in *Idylls of the King*. We will analyse how characters, symbols, and sacred objects evolve, demonstrating how the myth reflects the spiritual and moral concerns of each era.

Keywords: Grail, Tennyson, Chrétien de Troyes, reinterpretation

Résumé

Ce travail étudie la réinterprétation du mythe du Graal, comparant sa première apparition dans la littérature française – dans *Perceval ou le Conte du Graal* de Chrétien de Troyes – et la réinvention victorienne d'Alfred Lord Tennyson dans *Idylls of the King*. Nous analyserons comment évoluent les personnages, les symboles et les objets sacrés, démontrant comment le mythe reflète les préoccupations spirituelles et morales de chaque époque.

Mots-clés : Graal, Tennyson, Chrétien de Troyes, réinterprétation

1. Introduction

The Grail myth, rich with layers of symbolism, narrative motifs, and spiritual significance, occupies a foundational place in Western literary and cultural traditions. Originating in the medieval period, the Grail story has undergone numerous reinterpretations and adaptations, reflecting the evolving social, religious, and ideological climates of successive eras. This bachelor's thesis undertakes a comparative study of the Grail myth as it appears in Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval, or the Story of the Grail*, widely regarded as the earliest literary work to introduce the Grail and its quest, and Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, a Victorian-era poetic cycle that reimagines Arthurian legend for a nineteenth-century audience, grappling with questions of morality, faith, and national identity. The leap from the Middle Ages to the Victorian period is deliberate and aims to explore how the Grail's symbolic weight shifts across time, particularly in moments of cultural transformation. Rather than offering a comprehensive history of Grail literature, this study examines two representative texts that mark the myth's origins and one of its most ideologically charged reimaginings.

Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval* establishes many of the foundational elements associated with the Grail legend: the mysterious vessel itself, the enigmatic Fisher King and his desolate kingdom, the sacred spear, and the figure of Perceval as the youthful, often naïve knight whose spiritual and moral development forms the heart of the narrative. These elements intertwine Christian symbolism with the courtly ideals and folkloric traditions of the twelfth century, creating a narrative that is equally mystical and embedded in medieval culture. Chrétien's text, although unfinished, inspired a vast tradition of Grail literature that expanded, complicated, and sometimes contradicted the original story, fossilising the myth within the medieval imagination.

By the nineteenth century, the Grail myth experienced a profound revival, intertwined with the broader Medieval Revival and the Victorian fascination with chivalry, spirituality, and national heritage. Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* emerges as a central text in this revival, revisiting the Grail quest through the lens of Victorian values and anxieties. Written during a period marked by religious doubt, imperial

ambition, and social change, Tennyson's retelling reshapes the Grail's meaning: the quest, already imbued with spiritual significance in Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval*, becomes an explicitly moral and spiritual trial, reflecting contemporary concerns about faith, duty, and the consequences of failure.

As Laura Hibbard Lambdin and Robert T. Lambdin note, *Idylls of the King* is "a work that mirrors contemporary problems caused by the juxtaposition of Victorian self-confidence with the equally powerful Victorian deep despair: the feeling that this was a golden, ideal time was undercut by the knowledge that it could suddenly end" (Lambdin and Lambdin 15). Key figures such as Perceval (here, Percivale) and Pellam, along with iconic objects like the Holy Grail and the Lance of Longinus, are reinterpreted, their medieval symbolism infused with Victorian ideas about purity, corruption, and redemption.

This comparative literature study is organised into three main chapters. The first offers a detailed examination of the Grail myth as it first appeared in Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval, or the Story of the Grail*. It explores Celtic influences, core narrative and symbolic elements, including Perceval's role as a Christian and courtly hero, the Fisher King and his desolate land, and the magical objects associated with the Grail. Particular attention is given to narrative delegation techniques that generate multiple Grail versions within the medieval text.

The second chapter shifts to nineteenth-century England, contextualising the Arthurian revival and offering a critical reading of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* focused on the Grail. This analysis highlights both the continuities and divergences from Chrétien's source. Two of Tennyson's idylls, "The Holy Grail" and "Balin and Balan," are examined to show how he reshapes figures such as Percivale and Pellam, as well as sacred objects like the Holy Lance.

Finally, the conclusion synthesises the findings of both analyses, demonstrating that the evolution of the Grail myth, from Chrétien's medieval romance to Tennyson's Victorian epic, reveals shifting conceptions of heroism, faith, and spiritual fulfilment. It argues that Tennyson's reinterpretation underscores the tension between sacred ideals and human fallibility, reflecting nineteenth-century concerns with moral certainty, religious doubt, and the search for meaning in an uncertain age.

Through this comparative approach, the thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of how medieval myths are reinterpreted in response to the moral and spiritual questions of later periods, demonstrating the Grail's lasting power as a symbol of both aspiration and limitation.

2. The Grail Myth in the Middle Ages

The sociocultural context of the Middle Ages fostered the rise of relic worship and belief in the intervention of supernatural forces. Famine haunted towns and cities every four years; leprosy and plague were well-known afflictions; the poorest suffered the consequences of war and occupation; justice and security for both property and people were weak or nonexistent. Flooding threatened communities near rivers, while fires were a constant risk due to the lack of firefighting systems and the widespread use of wood as a building material. The peasants' hardship was reflected in popular uprisings such as the Shepherds' Crusades (1251 and 1320) or the Great Jacquerie (1358).

The veneration of so-called 'sacred' objects, such as the Holy Lance or Lance of Longinus, discovered in 1098 in Antioch; the Holy Blood of Jerusalem, brought back during the Second Crusade by Thierry of Alsace, Count of Flanders (1146); or the knife used to scrape the blood from Christ's wounds, allegedly given to the Abbey of Fécamp by an angel, were considered tangible realities that easily justified the existence of God in the minds of the people. They were often invoked by priests as evidence of the divine (Guerrand 5-6). Stories began to emerge around these relics, soon to be venerated, feeding the imagination, literature, and faith to such an extent that they became "myths". Among these is the one that will be the focus of this chapter: the myth of the Grail.

Initiated in the 12th century with Chrétien de Troyes' verse narrative, Grail literature continued to flourish in the 13th century in prose form, to such a degree that, in the words of Jean Frappier, "the creation surpasses the intentions of its creator[1]" (20). In this way, the motifs introduced by Chrétien, the Grail knight, the relics in the procession, their guardian and his kingdom, the unbreakable sword, and the story's

[1] For quotes taken from Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval*, we will use the edition by Jean Dufournet (2003) referenced in the final bibliography ("*P.*" denotes this edition). To aid comprehension, English translations will be provided in the main text, with the corresponding Old French passages in footnotes. Quotations from academic authors will be presented in the original language in which they were consulted.

narrators, inevitably evolved and transformed over time. From this evolution emerged a universal myth, now firmly rooted in literature, the Quest for the Grail, and two archetypes : the innocent hero (the "blessed fool" embodied by Perceval), and the wounded king (a reflection of his kingdom, represented by the Fisher King):

> Cet immense développement, ce cycle où gravitent autour du même thème des œuvres fort diverses entre elles par l'inspiration et par le talent des auteurs, mais où toujours le Graal invite l'homme, ou du moins le héros, à se dépasser lui même, était en germe dans le roman de Chrétien et, plus précisément encore, dans sa description du cortège (Frappier 19)[2].

Among the continuators of Chrétien's work, we will mention the works that contributed the most to the consolidation of the myth. The first two Continuations of the *Conte du Graal*[3] concern the adventures of the knights Gawain and Perceval, respectively, following the events in Chrétien's work. The Third Continuation of the *Conte du Graal*, attributed to Manessier, continues Chrétien's poem, completing the quest and unravelling the mystery of the Fisher King. The Fourth Continuation, by Gerbert, focuses on the episode of the broken sword. The texts *Joseph d'Arimathie* by Robert de Boron and the *Didot-Perceval* (anonymous and in prose) both consider the Grail as a Christian relic: the Holy Grail. The *Lancelot-Graal*[4], also known as the Vulgate Cycle or the Pseudo-Map Cycle, is a vast collection of five prose novels in Old French, dating from the early 13th century. It constitutes a significant rewriting and expansion of

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[2] "This immense development, this cycle where works of very different nature revolve around the same theme, varying greatly in inspiration and the authors' talents, but where the Grail always invites man—or at least the hero—to surpass himself, was already in germination in Chrétien's novel and, more precisely, in his description of the procession."

[3] The first continuation is dated from the end of the 12th century, titled *Continuation Gauvain*, and has been preserved in manuscript from the BnF, fr. 794 (https://www.arlima.net/mp/premiere_continuation_du_conte_du_graal.html). The second continuation, attributed to Wauchier de Denain and without a title in manuscripts A and B, is dated from the late 12th century [short version]; early 13th century [long version] (https://www.arlima.net/uz/wauchier_de_denain/deuxieme_continuation_du_conte_du_graal.html). The third continuation is dated around 1230 (https://www.arlima.net/mp/manessier.html) and the fourth around 1235 (https://www.arlima.net/eh/gerbert_de_montreuil.html). *Li romanz de l'estore dou Graal*, falsely titled *Joseph d'Arimathie* in verse, dates from around 1200 and has been preserved in the manuscript from the BnF, fr. 20047 (https://www.arlima.net/qt/robert_de_boron/le_roman_de_joseph_d_arimathie.html). *Didot-Perceval*, *Didot Perceval* or *Perceval de Didot*, also dated around 1200, has been preserved in two manuscripts: in manuscript BnF, nouvelles acquisitions françaises 4166 (sigla D) and in the Biblioteca Estense Universitaria, MS α.L.9.30 (sigla E) (https://www.arlima.net/mp/perceval_de_didot.html).

[4] This cycle is composed of *Lancelot* in prose, *La Queste del Saint Graal*, *La Mort Artu* (where Lancelot, Galaad, Perceval, and Bohort participate in the quest for the Grail), *L'Estoire de Merlin*, and *L'Estoire del Saint Graal*, an amplification of a prose version of Robert de Boron's *Joseph d'Arimathie*.

existing Arthurian legends, incorporating the story of Lancelot and the quest for the Holy Grail more deeply. *Perlesvaus* or *Li Hauz Livres du Graal*, whose date and content are much debated, features knights of the quest such as Lancelot, Gawain, and Perlesvaus or Perceval, with the latter as the victor. Although the list continues, it is also important to note foreign versions, such as the two German versions: *Parzival* by Wolfram von Eschenbach and *Diu Crône* by Heinrich von dem Türlin, the Norse tales *Percevalssaga* and *Valvers páttr*, or *Peredur*, a Welsh prose narrative parallel to Chrétien's *Perceval*, though probably not entirely dependent on it. Also, two pastiche prologues were later associated with the *Conte du Graal*, the *Elucidation* and the *Prologue of Bliocadran*.

Over the course of various versions, the Christianization of the legend is undeniable. Although Chrétien maintains the coexistence of different traditions, the conception of Perceval is reinterpreted by his successors, who gradually abandon, or even condemn, the Celtic basis, revealing a reality consciously rooted in the Christian tradition's imagination. Thus, the scene of Perceval's Grail castle, initially ambiguous, becomes colored with hagiography: the Grail turns into a biblical paroxysm and will henceforth be identified with the chalice used during the Last Supper; the allusion to the "fisher of men" becomes associated with the ichthus; the lance that bleeds transforms into the Holy Lance, which writers will link to the story of Longinus, and Joseph of Arimathea will be closely connected to the family of Grail keepers (Méla 124-125).

Our work will focus on the analysis of the myth in its first literary occurrence in Chrétien de Troyes, in order to precisely examine the initial motifs that will later be diluted and transformed over time by other writers and readers. To achieve this, we will organise our study around two characters: the hero of the story, the young Perceval, and the Fisher King, an enigmatic figure around whom all the elements concerning the Grail revolve.

2.1. *Perceval, or the Story of the Grail* by Chrétien de Troyes

Perceval, written at the request of Philippe d'Alsace between May 14, 1181, and September 1190, at the time when the Count of Flanders was leaving for the Third Crusade, incorporates the first mention of the Grail in French literature. Unfortunately,

its author, Chrétien de Troyes, died before completing the work he had begun, thus inspiring other authors to continue the unfinished story.

According to Chrétien's text, the source that inspired his novel remains a book lost to history, brought by Philippe d'Alsace, who recounts a 'conte du Graal' in verse: "[…] it is the tale of the Grail, of which the count gave him the book, […]" [*P.*, ll. 66-67])[5], the origin of which, according to the three most widespread theories, would be a Christian legend, a pagan fertility myth, or an adventure tale of Breton origin, or, more likely, a Latin blend of these three traditions (Frappier 53-54).

Following the tradition of courtly novelists who prefaced their works to highlight their content or their own role as poets, Chrétien de Troyes precedes his five Arthurian novels with prologues. To add credibility to his work, Chrétien opens the prologue of his *Perceval* with a proverb and a maxim from the Gospel, both related to the harvest and the regeneration of the earth motifs that resonate with the story of the Grail keeper, the Fisher King, a central figure of this analysis, whom we will revisit later: "He who sows little will reap little, and he who wants to make a good harvest must scatter his seed in a place that will return to him a hundredfold, for in a land that is worthless, the good seed dries up and disappears." [*P.*, ll. 1-6)][6].

2.1.1. A Brief Summary

Perceval, an innocent youth, ignorant of his past, lives with his mother in a secluded forest, far from the chivalric world. One day, after meeting five of King Arthur's knights, he decides to become a knight and announces his departure, despite his mother's pleas, who reveals to him that his father and brothers have died in battle. Before he leaves, she gives him precious advice: to pray to God, to respect knights, and to help damsels in distress. Devastated, she collapses in sorrow after his departure. On the road, Perceval comes across a pavilion where a beautiful maiden rests. Remembering his mother's advice, he kisses her and takes her ring, unaware he is committing an offence. The next day, her fiancé, the Proud Knight of the Moor, furious to learn about the theft, swears to seek revenge. Upon arriving at King Arthur's court,

[5] Original verses: "Ce est li contes del Graal / Don li cuens li baille le livre ." [*P.*, ll. 66-67]

[6] Original verses: "Qui petit seme petit quialt, /et qui auques recoillir vialt / an tel leu sa semance espande / que fruit a cent dobles li rande ; / car an terre qui rien ne vaut, / bone semance i seche et faut. " [*P.*, ll. 1-6]

Perceval finds an environment of humiliation: the Red Knight has challenged and ridiculed the king's knights. Although still inexperienced, Perceval bravely confronts him, kills him, and takes his armour. This feat leads to an unexpected outcome: a young maiden who had never laughed suddenly bursts into joy.

Yet, Perceval knows nothing of the codes of chivalry. Gornemant of Gorhaut, an experienced knight, teaches him the essential values he must learn: modesty, the art of combat, and courtesy, finally making him a knight. Perceval then arrives at the castle of Blanchefleur, Gornemant's niece, a noble lady in peril. Perceval, captivated by her charm, successfully defends her from her enemies, thus restoring peace to her castle and promising to return after meeting with his mother, whose health status is unknown to him.

Continuing his journey, Perceval is welcomed at the castle of the Fisher King, a mysterious but unrecognisable ruler, who offers him a marvellous sword. During a sumptuous feast, a strange procession passes before his eyes: a bleeding lance and a glowing Grail. Remembering Gornemant's advice not to speak too much, Perceval remains silent. The following day, while leaving the castle, he meets a young woman who turns out to be his cousin,[7] who reveals to him the consequences of his silence: by failing to ask questions about the Grail, he has condemned the Fisher King and his kingdom to prolonged suffering.

Soon after, he encounters the Proud Knight of the Moor and challenges him to a duel. Unfortunately, the sword given to him by the Fisher King breaks, first signalling Perceval's failure, then his triumph. He then meets Gawain and returns to Arthur's court, where he is hailed as a fully-fledged knight. During a feast, a maiden rides in on a mule and denounces Perceval's inaction in the face of the Grail mystery. She then proposes quests to other knights, while Perceval, struck by the revelation, makes an oath: he will never sleep two nights in the same place until he reveals the truth about the Lance and the Grail.

[7]Perceval's first cousin, who remains anonymous throughout the narrative, defines herself in this way, which emphasises her symbolic role without requiring full individualisation, as is the case with other secondary characters. Curiously, Perceval does not ask her name either.

After several adventures, the narrative dwells on Gawain's exploits before returning to Perceval, who, five years later, still wanders, unable to find an answer and having forgotten God. Finally, he meets a hermit, his mother's brother, who reveals the final piece for understanding the meaning of his failure with the Fisher King and directs him toward the path of faith.

In relation to the scope of Gawain's adventures and his role in the quest, this thesis does not seek to resolve the debate between Martí de Riquer, Jean Frappier, and Erich Köhler: whether, originally, *Perceval* was composed of two works brought together under the same volume due to a scribe's modifications or error, or whether Chrétien always intended one to be the knight of the Grail and the other the knight of the Lance, the focus of the work is undeniably on a spiritual chivalry that prevails over courtly chivalry, which can only be fulfilled through it. In this sense, Perceval is the only one to stay with the Fisher King, with whom he also shares a family bond; he is the only one to observe the procession, to fail in the quest, and to promise to return to solve the riddle. For all these reasons, it is he who will be analysed as the hero of the Grail.

2.1.2. Perceval or the Unexpected Hero

Perceval, another "blessed fool", like the Ivanouchka-Douratchok (Jeannot *le petit nigaud* or the Little Simpleton for the French audience, and Jack, as *in Jack and the Beanstalk* or *Jack the Giant Killer*, for the English audiences.) of Russian legends, is characterized by his luminous innocence, an almost comical purity that nevertheless allows him to access the Grail Castle and undertake the quest, distinguishing him from the other knights of Arthur and transforming him into a spiritual elect. The creation of Perceval seems to be the result of this fictional character and Philippe Auguste (future King of France and ward of Philippe of Alsace), who, at the time of the creation of *Perceval*, was only an adolescent of high nobility, raised in the countryside, with an impotent father and a mother against whom he had rebelled. As mentioned earlier, Philippe of Alsace delivered a manuscript to Chrétien de Troyes as a base; aware of his ward's rapid transition to adulthood, he likely wished that Philippe Auguste, the young French prince he was educating, would have a good example of chivalry and Christianity to admire in a novel.

2.1.2.1. A Brave and Christian Knight

Perceval's initiation into knighthood happens gradually, beginning with a theoretical knowledge of weapons and culminating in a spiritual awakening, all while embracing courtly love and chivalric values. In this way, Chrétien de Troyes presents a young man who finds the birds' song delightful in the springtime: "It was the season when trees blossom, when the woods are covered in leaves and the meadows turn green, when the birds sing sweetly in the branches in the morning, when every creature burns with joy." [*P.*, ll. 69-73])[8], a trait that courtly romance authors would never attribute to a peasant, and one that, for knights, evoked ideals of love and beauty.

Here, Perceval's noble origin is already foreshadowed, even though the young man is unaware of his past and lineage. Moreover, his intuition draws him toward knighthood, his very nature urges him to find his destiny, and his fascination with the five knights he encounters in the forest, whom he mistakes for devils and angels, illustrates this: "These must be angels that I see here**"** [*P.*, l. 138]; "My mother didn't lie when she told me that angels were the most beautiful beings that exist, except for God, who is more beautiful than all" [*P.*, ll. 142–145].)[9], linking the chivalric aesthetic of armor, shields, and lances with divinity: "I see here Our Lord God, I believe, for I behold one who is so beautiful" [*P.*, ll. 146–147]; "—[…] Are you God? —No, by my faith." [*P.*, l. 174]; "But you are more beautiful than God. / For if I were someone else, better, / So shining and so made!" [P., ll. 179–181][10] and raise a crucial question in the narrative: that of appearances. What makes a knight? Is it the fact that King Arthur, the "maker of knights," has named him? Is it the weapons, the armour? Chrétien de Troyes delicately responds to this question with a conditionally affirmative answer, since his ideal knight, the one who is (or will be) able to succeed in the quest for the Grail, will become not only a courteous knight as required, but also, and most importantly, a pious man.

Perceval remains ignorant of his origins because his mother did not want to lose another member of her family in battle; she raised an innocent young man who, despite her

[8] Original verses: "Ce fu au temps qu'arbre florissent, / Fuellent boschage, pré verdissement / Et cil oisel an lor latin/ Doucement chantent au matin / Et tout rien de joie enflamme " [*P.*, ll. 69-73]

[9] Original verses: "Ce sont ange que je voi ci. » [*P.*, l. 138]; " Ne me dist pas ma mere fable, / Qui dis que c'estoient deable / Ne me dist pas ma mere fable, / Qui me dist que li ange estoient / Les plus beles choses qui soient, / Fors Deu qui est plus biaus que tuit." [*P.*, ll. 142-145]

[10] Original verses: "Ci voi je Damedeu, ce cuit, / Car un si bel an i estgart" [*P.*, ll. 146-147] ; "—Estes-vous Dieu ? —Nenil, par foi. » [*P.*, l. 174] ; "Mes vos estes plus biaus que Deus. / Car fusse je ore autreteus, / Einsi luisanz et einsi fez ! "" [*P.*, ll. 179-181]

efforts to instil in him a religious education, could not fully understand or embrace it. Although he remembers her teachings, they never took root in Perceval: "…she also told me, to teach me, that in order to protect myself, I should make the sign of the cross; but I will despise this teaching: no, truly, I will not make the sign, but I will strike the hardest with one of my javelins […]" ([P., ll. 117-122])[11]. The text describes his courageous spirit, but the idea of sin has already been instilled in him; pride is an offense to God that must not be committed ("Ah! Lord God, forgive me! [...]" [P., l. 137]; "[...] Yes, truly, I have committed a great sin [...]" [P., l. 139])[12]. Thus, Perceval's religious understanding is partial, even somewhat literal, and always immature. The arrival of spring stirs his energy and drives him to leave the forest in search of King Arthur; at this point, his education must be hastened. The Widow Lady, Perceval's mother, gives him a hasty summary of the life of Jesus Christ and urges him to enter churches and monasteries ("A place where the service of the one who created heaven and earth and placed men and beasts in it is celebrated" [P., ll. 574-576] and "A beautiful and very holy house with its relics and treasures, where the body of Jesus Christ the holy prophet is sacrificed..." [P., ll. 578-581] respectively) [13] to pray.

The reader imagines a young Philippe Auguste, captivated by chivalry, without a father, which, from a theological perspective, means "avec un Dieu absent de son cœur "[14] (Quéruel 67); a young prince who must be guided onto the right path but who, blinded by his youth, is not always able to see beyond appearances. By choosing chivalry, Perceval and Philippe do not choose the associated responsibilities but rather the power it gives them. In this way, Perceval's adventures become "une suite d'actes discourtois sans lien évident entre eux sinon le vassal naïf qui les vit, et dont le caractère s'apparente difficilement avec celui d'une histoire d'amour" (Quéruel 62)[15].

Born of an illustrious lineage of island knights, Perceval carries within him the blood of chivalry. Although his mother tried to shield him from this heritage, his nobility is

[11] Original verses: "Et si dist por moi anseignier / Que por aus se doit an seignier ; / Mes cest anseing desdeignerai, / Que ja voir ne m'an seignerai, / Einz ferrai si tot le plus fort / D'un des javeloz que je port… " [P., ll. 117-122]

[12] Original verses: : " Et dist : Ha ! sire Deus, merci ! » (P., l. 137) ; « Hé ! voir, ore ai-je mout pechié…" [P., l. 139]

[13] Original verses: " –Uns leus ou an fet le servise / Celui qui ciel et terre fist / Et homes eet bestes i mist. » [P., ll. 574-576] ; « Une maison bele et saintisme / Et de cors sainz et de tresors, / S'i sacrefie l'an le cors / Jesucrist, la prophete sainte…" [P., ll. 578-581]

[14] "with a God absent from his heart"

[15] "a series of discourteous acts with no obvious connection between them other than the naïve vassal who witnesses them, and whose character is hardly relatable to that of a love story".

confirmed with each victory, up until his failure at the Fisher King's castle, facing a challenge that is not traditionally chivalrous, requiring distance and spiritual awareness that he has not yet acquired (Frappier 79). Perceval's education is unbalanced; having seemingly lost the male lineage of his family, made up of great knights, he is raised in religion by his mother, who tries to protect him from the grim fate of his closest kin: two brothers who were killed in battle and are father, maimed in war, who loses his lands and fortune after suffering an injury between the legs and finally dies of grief after hearing the news of his sons' deaths.

An ideal education, both chivalric and Christian, would have perfectly prepared him for any quest. But his destiny, despite his mother's efforts to keep him from the path of his ancestors, had decided otherwise. While the ways of God are inscrutable, He had nonetheless set Perceval's path from his birth, and this predestination is reflected in his adventures, confirming at each stage that he is following the path meant for him. Thus, in combat, even without training, he is up to the task – as seen in the episode with the Red Knight – and his discourtesies are not taken as offenses; even King Arthur excuses his behavior ("If the young man is naïve, perhaps he is a gentleman of high lineage; and if his manners come from the education he received from an unworthy master, he may still become valiant and wise." [*P.*, ll. 1012-1016])[16] and places great hopes on him. Even a maiden at the court in Carduel prophetically announces his destiny: Perceval will be the greatest knight in the world ("Young man, if you fulfill the entirety of your life, I think and believe deep in my heart that in the whole world there will not be, and there will not exist, and no one will know a knight better than you […]" [*P.*, ll. 1039-1043])[17], and, as if by enchantment or miracle, she laughs after not having laughed in years.

Given his constant mistakes, his mother's recommendations for introducing him to knighthood are not sufficient: he must serve the ladies and maidens, not remain without asking the names of his companions for too long, and seek the company of wise and honorable men... But this hero in formation sometimes forces his hand without realizing it, as, for example, with the Maiden of the Tent, the friend of the Orguilleux de la Lande, who suffers the consequences of Perceval's actions.

[16] Original verses: "Por ce, se li vassal est naïf, / S'est-il espoir moult jantis hon ; / Et se ce li vient d'aprison / Qu'il ait été à vilain mestre, / Ancore peut-il être preux et sage" [*P.*, ll. 1012-1016]

[17] Original verses: "Vaslez, se tu viz par aage, / Je pans et crois an mon corage / Qu'an trestot le monde n'avra, / N'il n'iert, ne l'an ne l'i savra / Nul meillor chevalier de toi." [*P.*, ll. 1039-1043]

Perceval is a tabula rasa at the beginning of the story, his social awkwardness can only be described as naïveté. He has more of a childish ignorance caused by his upbringing than innate foolishness, and those around him quickly realize that he is a rough stone that must be polished.

The absence of his father and brothers affects how Perceval embarks on his knightly journey. Initially, his mother's advice consists of basic notions of courtesy, and in order to learn about all things knightly, Perceval will have to rely on the goodwill of the knights and servants he encounters (*P.*, ll. 1120-1145) until he reaches Gornemant de Goort, who will teach him the art of knighthood. Perceval's evolution is reflected in the taking of the armor of the Chevalier Vermeil, discarding his clothes because they were "much worse than those made by his mother" (*P.*, ll. 1161-1172): the quality of the Chevalier Vermeil's clothes reflects his value as a knight, just as Perceval's garments symbolize the protection and teachings given by his mother, as well as his Christian values. Perceval keeps the clothes given by his mother for their practicality and the armour of the Chevalier Vermeil for its aesthetics, as he is still fixed in the idea of classical chivalry, not yet aware of the importance of God in his life.

At Gornemant's, Perceval receives a chivalric education that is both technical and moral: a knight must not kill a defeated opponent, and he must not invoke his mother's authority. This training, moreover, contradicts one of his mother's earlier recommendations: not to talk too much. Rejecting the lesson to ask his companions' names out of caution will cost him dearly, as he will later be unable to ask the Fisher King any questions about the Grail or the Lance. Yet Gornemant's figure is essential: he embodies the paternal figure for Perceval (whose biological father remains anonymous and unknown). By dubbing him knight, Gornemant creates a strong filial bond, having instructed him as he would his own son. He also teaches him all the knowledge he lacks, from how to carry a shield to how to spur and guide a horse: "What one does not know, one can learn, if one is willing to put in effort and attention, my dear friend [...]" (*P.*, ll. 1463–1465)[18]. These are essential skills that Perceval quickly masters, considering that at the beginning of the story, he does not even know the names of basic weapons or the parts that make up a suit of armour.

[18] Original verses: "Ce qu'an ne set, puet an aprandre, / Qui i viaut pener et antandre, / Fet li prodon, biaus amis chiers." [*P.*, ll. 1463-1465]

2.1.2.2. A Courtly Hero The Love of Blanchefleur

Once he has mastered weapons, a courteous knight must be initiated into the art of love. After Perceval promises to prove his worth against Blanchefleur's enemies, Gornemant's niece undertakes this initiation, first finding comfort in his arms, as she herself was overwhelmed by desperate circumstances: "[…] I would rather kill myself with my own hand." (*P.*, l. 1998); "[…] and our [strength] has dwindled; our provisions have run out to the point that there is not enough left to feed a bee, and we have reached the stage where tomorrow, unless God intervenes, the castle will be surrendered to him, unable to be defended, and I too will be taken prisoner." (*P.*, ll. 2018–2025).[19]

By defending her from a dreadful fate, Perceval proves his courtesy and devotion to Blanchefleur, gaining her *druerie*, her courtly love and devotion, in return, even though it is she who takes the initiative to seek him out in the middle of the night: "[…] and she has embarked on the adventure with bravery and courage. But it is not for a trifle: she resolves to go to her guest and confide part of her troubles to him." ([*P.*, ll. 1954–1959])[20]. Despite the night spent "cheek to cheek," the games of "kissing and embracing," the "tender words" exchanged, and the "pleasant and joyful hours" shared between them, Perceval takes the risk and fights Clamadeu, "a man whom no knight had ever yet been able to defeat" [*P.*, ll. 2612-2613][21]. Perceval, according to Jean Frappier, "n'obéit qu'à l'instinct de sa prouesse ou déjà peut-être, à la conscience d'un devoir strictement chevaleresque et personnel : cette fois, il défendra Blanchefleur malgré elle. C'est dire qu'un Perceval ne saurait rester prisonnier du formalisme courtois"[22] (104). Although wealth and lands are offered to him, he sets out to find his mother, promising to return and rule over the people who long for his presence: "[…] the land too could have been entirely his if he had agreed not to have his heart elsewhere. But something else matters more to him: he remembers his mother, whom he

[19] Original verses: "Ençois m'ocirrai de ma main. » [*P.*, l. 1998] ; "Et nostre vitaille épuisée, / que il n'an a ceanz remés / Don se poïst repestre une es ; / Si somes ataint atreset / Que demain, se Deus ne le fet, / Li será cist chastiaus randuz, / qu'il ne puet estre desfanduz, / Et je avuec como chétive" [*P.*, ll. 2018-2025]

[20] Original verses: "Si s'est an avanture mise / Come hardie et courageuse ; / Mes ce n'est mie por oiseuse, / Eins se panse que ele ira / A son oste et si lid ira / De son affaire une partie" [*P.*, ll. 1954-1959]

[21] Original verses: "Vers cui n'ot pooir an bataille/ Nus chevaliers onques encore" [*P.*, ll. 2612-2613]

[22] "[…] obeys only the instinct of his prowess or perhaps already the awareness of a strictly chivalric and personal duty: this time, he will defend Blanchefleur despite her wishes. This means that a Perceval cannot remain trapped in courtly formalism"

saw faint, and he wishes to see her again more strongly than anything else." [*P.*, ll. 2915-2920][23].

At this point, Perceval has already undergone a necessary and appropriate initiation into romantic experience. Chrétien had no need to make him a Galahad[24]; it is understood that after the Grail quest, for which he has been chosen, Perceval will return to marry Blanchefleur, with his lineage already restored thanks to his success with the Fisher King. Bringing this event forward would deprive Perceval of a freedom he needs to fulfil his mission as a knight, tying him to a fixed place when he must still learn the spiritual path before succumbing to a form of social courtesy like marriage (Marx 21). His ignorance of his mother's death keeps him in motion, and it is thanks to this that, by chance or by fate, he discovers the Fisher King's castle.

After he fails in the Grail quest, the sight of drops of blood from a wounded goose on the snow[25] plunges Perceval into a kind of trance. In this state, the memory of Blanchefleur, apparently forgotten since his departure, consumes an entire morning of reverie, suspending the passage of time. Those who attempt to violently pull him away from this contemplation cannot succeed ("[…] for the blood and the snow together reminded him of the fresh complexion of his beloved's face. Absorbed in this thought, he forgot himself […]" [*P.,* ll. 4199–4212]; "[…] fascinated by the sight, it seemed to him that he saw the fresh colours of his beautiful beloved." [*P.*, ll. 4208–4210])[26]. Chrétien de Troyes does not portray Perceval as a chaste and pure character. Even though Galahad already existed in the Arthurian legend, it is understood that the marriage between Perceval and Blanchefleur will take place in a future where the knight will have been freed from his commitments—the discovery of his mother's fate and the resolution of the mysteries of the Grail and the Bleeding Lance. Moreover, God's blessing seems to be implied in their union ("These two, it seems, were made by God

[23] Original verses: "La terre, se il li pleüst / Que son coraje aillors n'eüst. / Mes d'autre chose plus li tient : / De sa mere li resovient / Que il vit pasmee cheoir, /S'a talent qu'il l'aille veoir /Plus grant que de nule autre chose" [*P.*, ll. 2915-2920]

[24] Galahad is a character who was introduced later into the Arthurian legend, notably in the continuations of *Perceval* and especially in the *Vulgate Cycle* of the 13th century, particularly in *La Queste del Saint Graal*. It is in these later texts that he becomes the pure knight, son of Lancelot, destined to complete the quest for the Grail..

[25] The triad formed by the blood, the snow, and the bird, associated with the colours red, white, and black, is typically Celtic; it appears that Chrétien de Troyes omitted one of the colours to craft this image.

[26] Original verses: "Que li sans et la nois ansanble / La fraîche color li resanble / Qui ert an la fase s'amie ; / Si panse tant que il s'oblie," [*P.*, ll. 4199-4212] ; "Li ert avis, tant li pleisoiti, / Qu'il veïst la color novele / De la fase s'amie vele" [*P.*, ll. 4208-4210]

for one another, to bring them together." [*P*., ll. 1872–1874])[27], since their virtue, symbolized by their beauty, was equal: "If they were not both mute, they are so handsome and beautiful, each in their own way, that never did a knight and a maiden seem so perfectly matched" [*P*., ll. 1868-1871])[28].

It is only at this moment that Perceval seems capable of unlocking a new stage in his chivalric formation, triggered by the beautiful vision of his beloved and the nostalgia she evokes. Nevertheless, the future of their union remains uncertain: although the text osuggests it, Chrétien de Troyes never completed this part of the narrative.

2.1.2.3. The Name "Perceval"

In his quest for knighthood, the hero discovers his own identity. Indeed, until the scene where his cousin asks him outside the Grail castle, this naïve hero thought his name was "Dear Son" (as his mother always addressed him), and, appropriately, he had never needed to know or give his true name[29]. Like the heroes of Celtic legends, he will guess[30] his name 'Perceval'[31] after staying with the Fisher King. This revelation forms part of an initiation rite akin to those of heroes in Celtic, Irish, and Welsh legends, such as *Cath Maige Tuired* or *Hanes Taliesin*.

Before this, the epithets assigned to this character all stem from a positive evaluation: "Young man," "dear friend," "dear brother," "friend," "my brother," "dear nephew," "dear lord," "dear son"… This suggests that he has something remarkable about him, making him making him consistently welcomed and allowing others to recognise his special, divinely chosen nature as a hero: "And he, who did not know his name, guesses it and says he is called Perceval the Welshman. He does not know whether he is

[27] Original verses: : "Que de l'un et de l'autre sanble/ Que Deus l'un por l'autre feïst/ Por ce qu'ansanble les meïst." [*P*., ll. 1872-1874]

[28] Original verses: "S'il ne fussent muël andui, / Tan test cil biaus et cele vele / Qu'onques chevaliers ne pucelle / Si bien n'avindrent mes ansanble" [*P*., ll. 1868-1871]

[29] Throughout the narrative up to this point, he is simply referred to as "the Welshman" or "the young man.".

[30] Etymologically, the French verb *deviner* (to guess or foresee) is connected to the supernatural, through *le devin* (the seer), and *divinare* means "to know what is hidden, in the manner of a seer" (Quéruel 1995). There are three possible meanings for the verb *deviner*: intuition, inspiration, or revelation, and Chrétien's text does not allow the translator to definitively choose among them..

[31] The name Perceval functions both within the Christian vision of the hero as "God's chosen one" and to establish his connection to the Celtic tradition: it is believed to derive from the Welsh Peredur, the name of a hero from Breton mythology (the Matter of Britain).

speaking the truth or not, but he speaks the truth without knowing it." [*P.*, ll. 3573-3577][32].

Leaving the castle of the Fisher King, the young hero meets his cousin, whose identity he does not yet know, but who, upon seeing him and recognising his lineage, reveals his name: Perceval the Welshman. This revelation is accompanied by another, more tragic one: his cousin reproaches him for not having asked the crucial questions that could have healed the Fisher King and restored the kingdom, and also reveals to him the death of his mother, information that would have been essential before embarking on the quest for the Grail. His mother died of grief and sorrow after his departure for King Arthur's court and was buried. Perceval is, for the first time, alone in the world; his cousin renames him "Perceval the Unfortunate".

The Celtic tradition interprets the acquisition of a name as an initiatory moment that grants access to another world or a place that bridges the human world and the world of marvels. For Perceval, this place will be the castle of the Grail. In this sense, Jean Marx asserts that the Fisher King, Perceval's cousin, is the one who initiates him into the quest for which Perceval is destined… when he is ready. The acquisition of the name is the essential condition for fulfilling his destiny. For Reto Bezzola, the discovery of the name is equivalent to the acquisition of personality: Perceval is no longer the son, brother, or lord of anyone once he is no longer identified by his relationship with someone else. However, for Philippe Ménard, the discovery of the name has no repercussions on the hero's behavior and, therefore, is merely a literary technique already employed by Chrétien in *Erec and Enide* or *The Knight of the Cart*, where he reveals the names of the heroes very late (cited in Frappier 120-121).

This revelation is a major turning point: by learning his name, Perceval begins to understand who he is and where he comes from, which is essential for the continuation of his Grail quest and his development as a fully realised knight. It marks an important step in his transition from the state of a naive wild youth to that of an individual aware of his identity and destiny.

[32] Original verses: : "Et cil qui son non ne savoit /Devine et dit que il avoit / Percevaus li Galois a non, / N'il ne set s'il dit voir ou non ; / Mes il dist voir, et sï nel sot." [*P.*, ll. 3573-3577]

Perceval is not characterised by great reflective ability nor by deep sensitivity; he is young, and one of his youthful faults is his impulsivity, as he always prioritises action and movement. It seems that the author intended to depict Perceval's evolution, from his naive youth, where his adventures are marked by clumsy but well-intentioned acts, to his transformation into a knight capable of fulfilling the Grail quest. As Jean Frappier points out:

> Chrétien venait de lancer dans la littérature quelque chose de plus qu'un splendide sujet de roman ; il venait de donner la vie à un mythe. En usant de ce mot, je ne fais pas tellement allusion aux origines probables de la légende ; je veux dire surtout que, pendant des années, autour de l'idée et du symbole du Graal, allait se former une cristallisation des pensées, des sentiments et des rêves de plusieurs générations (5)[33].

2.2. The Fisher King and His Kingdom: A Wasteland

In the process of Perceval's knightly formation and, subsequently, in the myth of the Grail, the figure of the Fisher King proves to be fundamental. The Fisher King first appears after Perceval's adventures at Blanchefleur's castle, when he returns home to confirm his mother's death. Along his journey, on a bank, in a small boat, and accompanied by another man, he meets the Fisher King. This king, who suffers from a wound preventing him from riding a horse, dedicates himself to fishing as a pastime. While he casts his hook, he warns Perceval of the impossibility of crossing the bank on horseback and tells him that he will not find either a ford or a bridge to do so. He then offers him lodging at his mysterious castle "near the river and near the woods," where Perceval will be welcomed with great hospitality. During a solemn dinner, Perceval witnesses a strange procession. Here begins the story that will connect the Fisher King and the quest for the Grail, now undertaken by Perceval.

The importance of this character in the construction of the Grail myth therefore requires a special study, which we will organize into three chapters: the first will present the unique procession the Fisher King offers to Perceval and introduce the magical elements associated with the Grail; the second will explore the Fisher King as the

[33] "Chrétien had just introduced into literature something more than a splendid subject for a novel; he had just given life to a myth. When I use this word, I am not so much referring to the probable origins of the legend; I am primarily saying that, for years, a crystallisation of thoughts, feelings, and dreams from several generations was to form around the idea and the symbol of the Grail."

guardian of the Grail, as well as the Lance and the magical Sword he will offer to the young hero; finally, the third will examine how Chrétien unveils the story of this character through three narrative voices, aiming to present him as a consolidated myth, seemingly known by all and so widespread that Perceval encounters three figures capable of discussing it at length: the hero's cousin, the Hideous Maiden, and the hermit. Thus, we will see the Fisher King, like Perceval, unfolding all his nobility and magnificence, up to the height of the stories that exalt him... even before they are told

2.2.1. The Procession Scene and the Story of the Fisher King

The magical nature of the enigmatic character that Perceval has just encountered is evident: his castle appears and disappears randomly, and he can move stealthily and at an alarming speed despite his illness. When Perceval arrives, the Fisher King is already waiting for him, lying on a bed, dressed in a black sable hood like a mulberry, with a purple band. A gentleman with greying hair, he is unable to rise to greet Perceval. The text describes a sumptuous castle: " […] one would not have found a more beautiful or better-built one, even as far as Beirut. It was square, made of light-colored stone, with two turrets. The great hall was in front of the tower, and in front of it were galleries." [*P.*, ll. 3050-3057][34].

The galleries of the castle are more beautiful than those of Limoges[35], and its hall can easily accommodate more than four hundred men, with massive columns supporting the mantle of a large fireplace. A large ivory table, a single piece, two ebony trestles, which neither rot nor burn, and a tablecloth whiter than that of the Pope are just a few of the magnificent objects brought in by numerous servants. Perceval dines on a well-roasted deer haunch with hot pepper, clear wine, and grated sour cheese in golden cups. After the meal, he enjoys fruits: dates, figs, nutmeg, cloves, pomegranates, electuaries, ginger from Alexandria, plitis, aromatic herbs, resontif, and stomachic preparations. He drinks spiced wine without honey or pepper, wine flavoured with mulberry, clear syrup, and more. The wealth, luxury, quality, and abundance of the feast are more than noticeable.

[34] Original verses: “Lors vit devant lui an un val / Le chief d’une tor qui parut ; / L’an ne trovast jusqu’a Barut / Si bele ne si bien assise. / Quarree fu, de Pierre bise, / S’avoit deus torneles antor. / La sale fu devant la tor / Et les loges devant la sale.” [*P.*, ll. 3050-3057]

[35] In the 12th and 13th centuries, Limoges was an important centre for the production of metal objects made of copper, silver, and gold, generally with a religious purpose, decorated with enamel.

The Fisher King places Perceval near him and speaks to him as an equal, offering him wonders fit for an emperor.

As Perceval and the Fisher King sit at the table and various dishes are served, a mysterious procession passes in front of them several times. The procession consists of a servant carrying a white *lance* that bleeds, two young men holding gold candelabras, a maiden carrying a *grail* of gold and precious stones, whose presence lights up the hall, and another maiden carrying a silver tailloir. The grail and the lance are the two elements that pique Perceval's curiosity. Though warned not to ask too many questions, he refrains from inquiring about their obvious magical nature. The Fisher King then retires to his chamber, carried by four servants, leaving Perceval with other attendants and the chance to ask questions about the Grail and the Lance he has seen.

The day after the procession, Perceval finds the castle empty, with all doors closed. As if he had overstepped the bounds of hospitality, the drawbridge is raised, forcing him outside. The only signs of human life are the horse prints leading toward the forest and the narrator's words ("... and the people of the house were awake." [*P.*, l. 3358]; "... for no one will answer him." [*P.*, l. 3421])[36]; which confirm that the inhabitants of the castle are still present, though invisible or hidden, without further explanation. Neither the Fisher King nor his kingdom will physically appear again in the narrative, only as a legend.

The actions, or rather, the inaction of Perceval during the episode of the procession are influenced both by the lessons in conduct he received from Gornemant and by his unconscious. Chrétien emphasises two reasons, repeating them three times (*P.*, ll. 3204-3212, 3241-3246, 3292-329[37]7) the first, that Perceval remains silent because he wants to follow Gornemant's advice, and the second, that the fact that he abandoned his mother shapes his performance and reactions during the quest, a fact revealed by his cousin (*P.*, ll. 3593-3595). Indeed, after leaving the castle, Perceval meets his cousin, who informs him of his mother's death. She directly accuses him of being responsible for her death, and establishes a connection between this 'sin' and the situation at the

[36] Original verses: **"**Et la meisniee fu levee." [*P.*, l. 3358] ; **"**Que nus respondre nel i viaut," [*P.*, l. 3421]

[37] The narrator explains three times that Perceval refrains from asking questions because Gornemant taught him courtesy and circumspection. Although the connection to Gornemant is less explicit in the third instance, Perceval's silence and its consequences are reiterated. The narrator explains Perceval's logic: he does not yet repent because he does not know what he has lost. The reproach from his cousin later will make this link with Gornemant explicit.

Grail castle (ll. 3600-3603): she implies that his failure at the castle is a consequence of this initial wrongdoing. These two explanations intersect and appear equally valid and complementary to each other.

She also informs him that there is no inn within a twenty-five league radius, making it impossible to locate the place on a map: its location, therefore, is not fixed. In Perceval's eyes, the Fisher King is a "very rich and very courteous" man, and his castle is "the best he had ever seen in his life." It is his cousin who reveals to him that he was wounded by a javelin between the hips during a battle, which left him unable to ride a horse and led him to find his pleasure in fishing. Although he has hunters, archers, and gamekeepers in his forests, as well as a court, he remains disabled, and his health and lands could only have been restored if Perceval had asked the expected questions: "the state of the king who is infirm, who would have regained full use of his limbs and the governance of his land, and great good would have come of it! But know now that great misfortunes will befall you and others." [*P.*, ll. 3587-3592][38]. Perceval's cousin then elaborates on the misfortunes resulting from Perceval's silence, describing the Fisher King's fate as irreversible: he will never be fully healed, and he will lose everything because of his silence. Furthermore, the consequences will affect the entire land: husbands will die, leaving their daughters orphaned and their wives widowed, several knights will perish, and their lands will be ravaged.

After his failure at the Grail castle (where he failed to ask the necessary questions), Perceval wanders for years. He eventually meets a hermit, who is a figure of wisdom and spirituality. This meeting is a spiritual turning point for Perceval. The hermit explains to Perceval the complex genealogy related to the Grail and his own family: he reveals that the father of the Fisher King is Perceval's maternal uncle (the brother of his mother and also the brother of the hermit)[39]; thus, the Fisher King is revealed to be Perceval's maternal cousin. This revealed genealogy emphasises the complex kinship and the central role of Perceval's family in the quest for the Grail. It is the father of the

[38] Original verses: "Le buen roi qui est maheigniez / Que toz eüst regaigniez / Ses manbre et terre tenist, / Et si granz bien san avenist ! / Mes or saches que grant enui / An avandront toi et autrui" [*P.*, ll. 3587-3592]

[39] According to the text, "the Fisher King is the son of his own brother" — a formulation that may appear somewhat ambiguous. In Chrétien de Troyes's work, it is generally understood that the Fisher King is the son of the Maimed King (also called the Rich King), who is Perceval's maternal uncle — that is, the brother of Perceval's mother and also the brother of the hermit. Therefore, the "brother" mentioned here ("his own brother") most likely refers to Perceval's uncle (and the hermit's brother), who is the father of the Fisher King.

Fisher King whom the Grail sustains, nourishing him with a consecrated host. This miraculous sustenance explains why he has remained in the same room for over fifteen years, his survival is attributed to his profound spirituality

Chrétien de Troyes acts here as a true narrator of echoes: the story of the Fisher King already finds a parallel in that of Perceval's father, who, also a great knight, was wounded in battle between the legs, weakened by his infirmities and the loss of his lands, and died of sorrow. He died before the start of the narrative, so it cannot be the same character. The description of "a beautiful and very holy house with its relics and treasures, where the body of Jesus Christ the holy prophet, whom the Jews humiliated, is sacrificed" [*P.,* ll. 578-583][40], offered at the beginning of the novel by the hero's mother, seems to fit perfectly with the Grail castle, but it is only an allusion to a generic monastery meant to help identify it. Through this superposition of suffering and infirm paternal figures, whose lands are damaged or lost, and sacred or enchanted spaces housing relics, Chrétien de Troyes blends Celtic and Christian traditions, while linking Perceval's lineage to that of the Fisher King.

The story of the Fisher King also finds a parallel when compared to that of his father; they appear as diametrically opposed figures, according to Frappier (205-206): one fishes with a line in the river, the other has not left his room in fifteen years; one delights in strange and refined dishes, the other feeds only on a host; the father's survival is ensured by the Grail, while that of the Fisher King is not; one interacts with Perceval, while the other remains an enigma. This contrast between the excess and humility of the son and the father also reflects the opposition between courtly chivalry, more attractive and radiant, and spiritual chivalry, more austere and demanding, especially considering that Perceval, absorbed and amazed by his stay, forgets to ask the necessary questions.

The Fisher King seems to be inspired by the Celtic king of the Otherworld, Bran the Blessed, known for his hospitality and enchanted cauldron, or even by the Irish god Nuadu, holder of a cauldron of abundance and a magical sword, whose name literally means "fisher." He is also associated with the Brittonic god Nodens, a deity linked to water, the underworld, hunting, fishing, and fertility rites (Lozac'hmeur 284). The character's inspiration may also stem from figures like Llud and Llewelys in Welsh

[40] Original verses: "une maison bele et saintisme / Et de cors sainz et de tresors, / S'i sacrefie l'an le cors / Jesucrist, la prophete sainte, cui giu firent honte mainte" [*P.*, ll. 578-563]

tradition, or Lugaid Mac Niad and Conaire Mór in Irish tradition, whose stories involve kingdoms in crisis saved by magic, in which a split figure, often brothers or a father and his son, plays a crucial role in restoring order. Moreover, a reference to Tara, the sacred place where the kings of Ireland were chosen by the Celtic gods and considered a gateway to the Otherworld, might also be relevant (Jodogne 585-586). It is possible that the version of the Fisher King that arrived at Chrétien de Troyes was diluted over the years or even altered by the author himself.

Although a cousin of Perceval and thus belonging to the same generation, the Fisher King has silvered hair, emphasising his ambiguous existence between two worlds, a condition also reflected in his unstable and elusive kingdom (Jodogne 585).

2.2.2. The Objects Accompanying the Grail: The Magical Spear and Sword

The procession scene in the Fisher King's castle, central to the novel and truly strange, is key to this study because it invites a deeper analysis of the objects and characters associated with this episode. As we described, Perceval observed a lance and a Grail during the procession, objects fundamental to the formation of the legend. A sword of great symbolic value completes the triad of mystical objects that this chapter will focus on.

Before leaving the castle, the Fisher King had given Perceval an exceptional sword: a steel blade engraved with an ornate golden pommel, said to have come from Arabia or Greece, and a scabbard adorned with Venice goldwork, richly decorated. Upon seeing this weapon, Perceval immediately understands two things: its unbreakability, except in a very specific danger, and the fact that only its blacksmith can repair it. A servant carries it suspended around his neck and tells of its origin: it is a gift from the monarch's niece, "the fair maiden," intended to be given to someone capable of using it well. There would only be three swords of this nature.

From a symbolic point of view, this weapon is rooted in Celtic tradition. As Jean Frappier notes, "it is both a weapon and a talisman from the Otherworld, comparable to the magical swords frequently found in Irish and Welsh legends, and notably to the famous sword of King Arthur, Excalibur" (111-112). The sword thus transcends the

simple status of a weapon and becomes a tangible sign of the hero's destiny, a hint of his belonging to a sacred world. However, this belonging is still latent, suspended by an incomplete personal evolution.

It is worth noting that, although the Fisher King claims the sword is destined for Perceval and expresses his wish to entrust it to him, the latter receives it with a certain indifference, taking it passively, with no particular emotion [P., ll. 3167-3175]. This gesture once again highlights the distance between the hero's potential and his actual realisation. Through this detail, Chrétien de Troyes reminds the reader that, despite his apparent fragility, Perceval is indeed the hero designated for the quest... even if he is not yet fully ready to embrace it.

Shortly thereafter, Perceval's cousin, upon seeing the sword at his waist, reveals that it has never shed the blood of a man nor been drawn in a moment of necessity: "know this: it suited him admirably at his side, and even better at the pommel; and it was clear that, in case of need, he would know how to use it like a true baron." [*P.*, ll. 3176-3179][41]. She also predicts that the sword will betray him when he enters battle. She also shares the name of the blacksmith capable of repairing it, Trébuchet, and the location of his home, near the lake overlooking Cotoatre. This 'virgin' sword thus becomes a mirror of Perceval himself: a knight still inexperienced, intact on the spiritual level, but vulnerable despite the apparent perfection of his equipment. The foreseen break is a metaphor for his immaturity: the union between the weapon and its bearer is premature, signalling that the quest cannot yet be accomplished.

In this passage, the theme of thwarted destiny continues through the scene of the Grail procession, where Perceval, after entrusting the sword to one of the servants, silently observes the solemn passage of the Bloody Lance and the Grail. His silence is not simply a result of ignorance or naivety; it reveals a lack of spiritual formation, an incompleteness in his chivalric education, still too worldly to grasp the significance of what he sees and to act accordingly. Jean Frappier interprets this silence as a symptom of inner insufficiency: "Le silence de Perceval au passage de la lance et du graal correspond à une insuffisance de mérite personnel, à la demi-obscurité d'une conscience

[41] Original verses: " Et sachiez que de grant meniere / Li sist au flanc et miauz el poing, / Et sanbla bien que au besoing / S'an deüst eidier come ber." [*P.*, ll. 3176-3179][41]

encore mal éveillée au sentiment de la responsabilité ; il est, en fin de compte, la conséquence d'un péché" (112).[42]

The Bleeding Lance, on the other hand, is an ambiguous and deliberately undefined symbol in Chrétien de Troyes's narrative. In Christian tradition, Longinus's lance, which pierced Christ's side, does not bleed; the idea of a bloody lance is a later interpolation, mostly found in subsequent versions of the *Conte du Graal*. However, in Chrétien's text, the lance sheds a single drop of blood, continuously followed by another in an uninterrupted flow, a motif much closer to Celtic lances than the Christian myth (Frappier 138). In Celtic literature, the bloody lance is a talisman from the Otherworld, a divine weapon like those of Lug, Oengus, or Celtchar, capable of making blood spring forth even when carried by the wind. It is fundamentally destructive, and Chrétien takes up this image to make it a mysterious sign, full of symbolism, yet never clearly explained (Frappier 189).

Although some elements evoke the well-known legend of Longinus, familiar in contemporary *chansons de geste*, especially the healing drop of blood reminiscent of Longinus's touch to Christ's blood, the writer does not transform the lance into a strictly Christian object. The connection is poetic, not theological. The lance, carried by a servant, is white in appearance, and a drop of blood drips from its tip, flowing down to the hand of the one holding it.

In Chrétien de Troyes's narrative, the Grail, often described as a sacred vessel or mysterious dish, contains the host that sustains the life of the father of the Fisher King. Perceval does not realise that asking the ritual question about the Grail could have saved the Fisher King's kingdom and healed him. Perceval will only discover this later, through his cousin, the Hideous Maiden, and the hermit, who will be the narrators of the Grail story, for both the hero and the reader, gradually revealing the story details and the characters involved.

In *Le Conte du Graal*, Chrétien de Troyes uses the word *graal* as a common noun (*li graaus* in the nominative case; *le graal* in the accusative), referring simply to a dish or bowl. As Edmond Faral notes in *La Vie quotidienne au temps de Saint Louis*, in Chrétien's time, it was common for two people to eat from the same bowl. This

[42] "Perceval's silence at the passage of the lance and the grail corresponds to an insufficiency of personal merit, to the half-obscurity of a consciousness still poorly awakened to the feeling of responsibility; it is, in the end, the consequence of a sin"

concrete and secular meaning is also found in other contemporary or earlier texts, notably *L'Alexandre en décasyllabes* and *La Première Continuation de Perceval*. At this stage, according to Frappier (5-6) the *graal* is neither a chalice nor a ciborium: it carries no explicitly sacred connotation, but simply designates a precious, ornate container holding a host, without any liturgical context.

The term's etymology remains uncertain, though its Latin origin (*gradalis*) is generally accepted. Equivalent forms appear in Old Occitan (*grasau*, *grasal*), in Savoyard (*grala*), or in the Briançon region (*grallon*), all referring to a large hollow vessel. Even if the word does not originate from Celtic vocabulary, its function in the narrative recalls the magical objects of that tradition: dishes, cauldrons, or horns from the Otherworld, endless sources of nourishment associated with prosperity and regeneration. In Celtic tales, these objects are often found at the end of an initiatory quest.

Chrétien de Troyes thus blends elements from Celtic paganism with Christian symbols, creating an object with dual meaning. The Grail contains a host, an innovation unique to the author, but is not used in a ritual context. This presence, however, introduces a sacred dimension without erasing the original magical imagery. Frappier (185) suggests that the host seems to emerge from the Grail itself, evoking a lingering magic despite the beginnings of Christianization: "*l'oiste qui el graal vient*", "the host that appears in the Grail", an ambivalent, almost incantatory phrase, revealing the tension between the sacred and the marvellous.

According to S. Loomis (375–377), the conquest of the Grail depends on the ability to ask the right question, an act of revelation and salvation. For Jean Marx (196), it is about healing the wounded king and restoring fertility to the land, within a myth of regeneration rooted in deep Celtic traditions. This syncretism is also reflected in the treatment of objects: Chrétien "crée un symbolisme des objets merveilleux en ajoutant des suggestions chrétiennes à un vieux mythe païen" (Frappier 203).[43]

The Grail quest becomes inseparable from the evolution of Perceval as a character. As the object gains a Christian dimension, the hero undergoes spiritual growth. His maturation cannot be separated from the transformation of the Grail itself: a pagan, magical object that gradually becomes a symbol of salvation and renewal. The Grail,

[43] "[…] creates a symbolism of marvellous objects by adding Christian suggestions to an old pagan myth."

then, is not merely the goal of the quest, it is also a reflection of the hero's inner journey.

The Grail appears, carried by a lady of great beauty, and its entrance fills the entire hall with light: "[…] such a great brightness spread that the candles lost their glow" [*P*., ll. 3226-3229][44]. It is made of gold and encrusted with precious stones; it crosses the hall several times, yet Perceval does not ask the ritual question: "Whom does it serve?" The question Perceval must utter to succeed in his quest is repeated three times with slight variations, underlining its crucial importance: "and the young man saw them pass, without daring to ask about the grail, whom it served" [*P*., ll. 3243-3245][45]; "without the young man asking about the grail, whom it served" [*P*., ll. 3292-3293][46]; "but he does not know whom it is served to, and yet he would very much like to know" [*P*., ll. 3302-3303][47], a triple omission that may also echo Saint Peter's threefold denial.

His cousin knows the procedure he should have followed, as does the Hideous Maiden, who will later scold him for his failure (*P*., ll. 4651–4664). Finally, the hermit will provide the necessary explanations, filling in the spiritual and narrative gaps left unresolved until then.

2.2.3. The Grail Narrators: The Cousin, the Hideous Maiden, and the Hermit

Chrétien de Troyes presents himself in the prologue to *The Story of the Grail* (*Le Conte du Graal*) as an intermediary, a purveyor of knowledge, transmitting a tale he claims to have discovered in a book belonging to Philippe of Alsace. By invoking this source, he lends ancient legitimacy to the material he handles, anchoring himself within a tradition that he does not claim to invent, but rather to interpret (Vauthier 193). This narrative posture does not position Chrétien as an omniscient author, but as a narrator aware of his limitations, who delegates the revelation of deeper meaning to more knowledgeable secondary characters. This device structures the tale as a gradual unfolding, where

[44] Original verses: "Une si granz clartez i vint / Qu'ausi perdirent les chandoiles / Lor clarté come les estoiles / Quant li solauz lieve, ou la lune" [*P*., ll. 3226-3229]
[45] Original verses: "Et li vaslez les vit passer / Et n'osa mie demander / Del graal cui l'an an servoit" [*P*., ll. 3243-3245]
[46] Original verses: "Et li vaslez ne demanda / Del graal cui l'an an servoit" [*P*., ll. 3292-3293]
[47] Original verses: "Mes il ne set cui l'an sert, / Et si le voldroit mout savoir" [*P*., ll. 3302-3303]

information is never immediate or complete, but builds progressively as both the hero and the reader advance through the initiatory journey (Vauthier 186).

Chrétien, though more intuitively enlightened than Perceval, is not himself the master of the Grail's symbolic knowledge; he orchestrates an indirect transmission of understanding, which may resemble feigned narrative modesty, but is in fact a complex literary strategy. Through three key figures: the cousin, the Hideous Maiden, and the hermit, a gradation in the revelation of truth emerges, mirroring Perceval's spiritual progression.

During Perceval's stay at the Fisher King's castle, both the audience and the hero share a state of ignorance and uncertainty. The narrator, playing only a minimal role in the advancement of the action, shows exclusively what Perceval sees and perceives, limiting the reader to a perspective shared with the protagonist. The narrative provides only the descriptive details necessary to underscore the dissonance between Perceval's lived experience of the world and that of the courtly audience, educated in refinement and luxury. Thus, the narrator's sole contribution is a personal and insistent commentary that haunts the scene: Chrétien disagrees with Perceval's behavior and, as if wishing the character would stop before it is too late, he repeats his advice and regret several times: "[…] for I have heard it said that one can remain silent too much, just as one can speak too much at times" [*P.*, ll. 3248–3251]; "but he remains more silent than he should be." [*P.*, l. 3298][48].

The first figure to reveal the meaning of the Grail and Perceval's transgression is his cousin. She offers Perceval an initial insight into the mystery of the Fisher King and his castle, confirming their magical nature as well as the illusory and deceptive character of the place. A witness to the burial of Perceval's mother, she also keeps vigil over the body of one of the hero's friends, killed by the Proud Knight of the Moors, an opponent mentioned at the very beginning of the tale. She plays the role of a benevolent guide and a familial transmitter of knowledge, while also being the keeper of emotional and ancestral memory. As the last surviving member of Perceval's lineage, she reconnects him to his roots and offers him a first step toward awareness of his past and identity.

[48] Original verses: "Si criem que il n'i et domage / Por ce que j'ai oï retreire / Qu'ausi bien se puet an trop teire / Con trop parler a la foiiee." [*P.*, ll. 3248-3251] ; "Mes plus se test qu'il ne covient" [*P.*, l. 3298]

The second narrator, the Hideous Maiden, appears dramatically at King Arthur's court: she arrives mounted on a tawny mule, a colour traditionally associated with ill omens. Her striking ugliness and her harsh, prophetic language [P., ll. 4621–4637] create a brutal contrast with the otherwise courtly tone of the romance. She does not simply inform Perceval; she unreservedly condemns him, denouncing with vehemence his failure and passivity during the procession of the Grail, which she holds responsible for the desolation of the kingdom. Unlike the cousin, she does not offer an immediate solution, but imposes a moral imperative: Perceval may no longer sleep two nights in the same place until he has atoned for his fault.
Some scholars, such as Jean Marx (272–275), see in her a remnant of the Irish Sovereignty goddess, a mythical, fairy-like figure capable of transformation, of testing heroes, and of revealing hidden truths. Due to her intimate knowledge of the events that occurred in the Fisher King's castle, she is sometimes identified with the maiden who bears the Grail.

Finally, the hermit concludes this cycle of interpretative narrators. Living in seclusion in the forest, he represents the final stage of the hero's inner journey and presides over a scene marked by confession, penance, and spiritual teaching. He reveals unsuspected familial connections to Perceval and explains that the Grail is guarded by a chosen lineage, thus imparting a sacred and genealogical depth to the story. The hermit teaches a prayer containing divine names, proposes a path of purification, and explicitly introduces chivalry in its Christian dimension. Until then, Perceval had only been initiated into worldly knighthood by Gornemant. Now begins a different path, founded on humility, repentance, and service to the divine: the quest for the Grail.

2.3. The Grail quest

Perceval's lack of curiosity or reluctance, influenced by his mentor Gornemant de Gohar's advice to speak little, has grave consequences. Perceval does not break the enchantment afflicting the Fisher King and his land by failing to ask the necessary question. When he wakes the next morning, finding the castle deserted, he realises that had he asked the question, the Fisher King would have been healed and the land redeemed. Perceval's initial failure is not due to a lack of courage or skill, but to his inability to understand the importance of asking the right question at the right moment.

This omission forces him to undertake a subsequent quest to redeem himself and uncover the secret of the Grail.

The quest for the Grail transcends all the previous knightly adventures known until then, even that of Gawain, whom Chrétien de Troyes uses as an example. Perceval and Gawain, two young knights equally fascinated by one another and determined to prove their worth, meet briefly before being sent by the Hideous Maiden on different quests. Nevertheless, there is a clear difference between Gawain's chivalry, purely courtly and stereotypical, worldly, and the one to which Perceval is destined: a spiritual and elevated chivalry. Chrétien de Troyes allows them to coexist for a moment: after narrating Perceval's transformation into a knight, he recounts some of Gawain's adventures before finally revealing that Perceval wandered for five years. The Grail quest appears predestined for Perceval; the Hideous Maiden herself seeks him out to accomplish it, and no one else offers to undertake it. Perceval is the knight who most needs this opportunity for redemption.

Until then, love had been the driving force and framework for Chrétien's works, inextricably linked to chivalry and war. However, the emptiness of feats weakened the court; in *Le Conte du Graal*, the Hideous Maiden proposes perilous quests that could easily lead knights to death. The Grail quest, according to Quéruel (344), fills the knightly horizon, traditionally focused on courtly love; it is also the reason why Perceval fails during his first attempt to accomplish the program he set for himself.

At the psychological level, it is difficult for him to assimilate events and feelings, and even when he is capable, his reactions are delayed. His greatest failure to date was not having asked anything during the Grail quest; his guilty conscience is personified by the Hideous Maiden. Her speech, full of hatred, leads him to refuse his place as a knight in King Arthur's kingdom and to embark on an impossible adventure, taking responsibility for his previous failure and prepared to spend the rest of his life seeking the Grail ("As for Perceval, he speaks very differently: he will not sleep in the same inn two nights in a row for the rest of his life" [*P.*, ll. 4727-4729]; " …until, for the Grail, he knows to whom it is being served, and until he has found the bleeding spear and been revealed with absolute certainty why it bleeds…" [*P.*, ll. 4735-4740][49].

[49] Original verses: **"**Et Percevaus redit tot el, / Qu'il ne girra an un ostel / Deus nuiz an trestot son aage**"** [*P.*, ll. 4727-4729] ; **"**Tant que il del graal savra / Cui l'an an sert, et qu'il avra / La lance qui sainne

By choosing to return to the quest for the Grail, Perceval embarks on a path where he must learn a form of knighthood never before seen, one that forces him to rely solely on himself and on God, a presence continuous throughout the narrative, which Perceval tends to forget or fail to comprehend ("Perceval, the story tells us, had so thoroughly lost his memory that he no longer remembered God." [*P*., ll. 6217-6219])[50]. On Good Friday, after finding some penitents, he reconnects with God by relearning the Passion stories his mother had once told him, now from the mouth of his uncle the hermit, who urges him to do penance for his greatest sin: allowing his mother to die of sorrow[51]. The sin of which he "knows no word" and which he committed unknowingly, the result of youthful impatience and egocentrism, has influenced his adventures in the same way his mother's love had. This love had freed his soul from prison and protected him from death ("But his prayer had such virtue that God, for her, saved you from death and kept you from prison" [*P*., ll. 6406-6408])[52]. This opens the way to redemption and gives him a second opportunity with the Fisher King. Furthermore, during his confession, Perceval admits, for the first time, his faults and negligence towards God, acknowledging them as sins. He describes his emotions in a very vulnerable and humble way: « And since then, I have been so distressed by it that I would have preferred to be dead. I had forgotten God to the point that I never again implored His mercy, and I did nothing that, to my knowledge, would have earned His mercy." [*P*., ll. 6381-6386][53].

This decisive moment in the story becomes a mirror image of the beginning of the romance: where Perceval was first introduced to courtly knighthood, he is now introduced to pity and remorse, to a spiritual form of knighthood. Upon seeing drops of blood on the snow, he begins to reflect (*P*., ll. 4194-4215) and acknowledges his sin; before the hermit, he weeps for the first time over his mother's death**.** Chrétien presents a hero who, still marked by his innocence, attains a profound spiritual awareness:

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trovee / Et que la veritez prove / Li iert dite por qu'ele sainne ; / Ja nel leira por nule painne**"** [*P*., ll. 4735-4740]

[50] Original verses: **"**Percevaus, ce contre l'estoire, / A si perdue la mémoire / Que de Dieu ni li soviet mes**"**. [*P*., ll. 6217-6219]

[51] Perceval leaves his home ; his mother collapses dead, and he doesn't even turn back to look [*P*., ll. 599-601]. When he later learns of his mother's death, he sees no reason to go back for her and decides instead to continue on hi spath [*P*., ll. 3618-3625].

[52] Original verses: **"**Mes sa prière ot telle vertu/ Que Dieu por li t'a regardé/ De mort et de prison gardé.**"** [*P*., ll. 6406-6408]

[53] Original verses: **"**S'an ai puis eü si grant duel / Que morz eüsse esté mon vuel, / Et Damedeu an obliai, / Qu'ainz puis merci ne li criai, / Ne ne fis rien que je seüsse / Par quoi ja mes merci eüsse.**"** [*P*., ll. 6381-6386]

"Believe in God, love God, worship God" [*P*., l. 6459][54]. In understanding his sins, he comes to grasp the weight of his actions. Under the guidance of his uncle the hermit, he learns lessons that, it is worth noting, had already been taught to him by his mother and Gornemant, as they relate to protecting young women and stopping at churches. He also learns how to behave during Mass and in the presence of a priest. Thus, the adventure continues, this time with a guiding light on his path: that of God.

Perceval remains a man amid transformation, refusing to be confined by his past or his present. His journey of personal growth, begun when he left his mother's manor, continues through an unending quest, with no clearly defined ending or completed story. It is implied that Perceval will ultimately succeed in his quest and that, once he has acquired all the necessary knowledge, he will return to marry Blanchefleur. God has been a vital and protective presence in Perceval's life, acting through his mother and Blanchefleur's court, both of whom prayed for his well-being and success. Chrétien de Troyes has also woven this divine presence into various characters' speeches and into the narration itself.

Clearly, Perceval is not yet ready to face the quest, as shown by his impatience and his blasphemous invocation of God's name in a curse ("May God bring shame on the one who sent me here!" [*P*., ll. 3042-3043])[55]. His true readiness will only come when he stops privileging action over penance, embracing instead the spiritual path that repeatedly presents itself to him**.** Previously, the maiden in the tent had suffered the consequences of the hero's faults; Perceval's mother had died because of him, though he only learns of it after his stay with the Fisher King. While the maiden's suffering is tangible and visible to both Perceval and the reader in a later episode, his mother's suffering is more imagined and only revealed through its consequences at the Grail Castle. The harm done can be partially repaired, and Chrétien de Troyes already shows that Perceval is capable of redemption: he will aid the tent maiden, wronged by her lover, and the Grail quest will be completed (or is meant to be) even though his mother's death remains irreversible. Although Chrétien de Troyes' work is unfinished and Perceval never returns to the Fisher King in the surviving version of the story, it is

[54] Original verses: **"** Deu croi, Deu aime, Deu adore" [*P*., l. 6459]
[55] Original verses: **"**Deus li doint hui male vergogne/ Celui qui ça m'a envoïé !" [*P*., ll. 3042-3043]

strongly implied that he would ultimately triumph in his quest after completing his spiritual journey.

3. The Arthurian Revival in Victorian England and The Grail Quest

The resurgence of interest in the Arthurian legend during the nineteenth century, often referred to as the Arthurian Revival, represented a significant cultural phenomenon in Victorian England. This renewed fascination, not witnessed at such a scale since the publication of *Le Morte D'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory in 1485, permeated literature, visual arts, and historiography. The revival was driven by two main forces: the rise of Romanticism in the late eighteenth century, with its emphasis on emotion, the medieval past, and spiritual depth; and the expanding availability of medieval texts, made possible by the editorial work of antiquarians such as Joseph Ritson (1752-1803)**,** David Laing (1793-1878)**,** and George Ellis (1753-1815)**.**

These figures were not only interested in preserving medieval literature but also in making it accessible to a modern readership. Ritson, for instance, edited collections such as *Ancient English Metrical Romances* (1802), demonstrating a rigorous, historically informed approach that contrasted with more romanticised views of the Middle Ages. Laing focused on Scottish and Northern British texts, contributing to the preservation of Arthurian-related material in regional traditions. George Ellis's *Specimens of Early English Metrical Romances* (1805) offered readable versions and summaries of major medieval romances, including those influenced by Chrétien de Troyes, thus playing a vital role in reintroducing the French author's work to an English literary context.

While many philologists and historians like George Lyttelton in *The History of the Life of King Henry the Second* (1771) remained sceptical of Arthur's historical existence, others like John Whitaker in *History of Manchester* (1771-1775) or Robert Henry in *History of Great Britain* (1771) were more willing to accept the possibility of a historical figure at the core of the legend (Simpson 7). This academic debate unfolded, according to Roger Simpson, alongside a Romantic poetic engagement with landscape and myth: the era's fascination with the sublime, coupled with Rousseauian primitivism, transformed Arthurian settings such as Avalon, Glastonbury, and Mount Badon into

spaces that were not only mythic but emotionally and symbolically charged (Simpson 75).

At the same time, Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, after a long period of neglect following its last edition in 1634, was republished in three separate editions between 1816 and 1817. This rediscovery marked a turning point: Malory's text re-emerged as the principal reference for the Arthurian legend in English, profoundly shaping the mythos that would captivate the Victorian imagination (Lacy and Ashe 174-175). However, an exclusive focus on Malory risks obscuring the broader textual landscape available to Victorian writers. During the centuries when *Le Morte d'Arthur* remained out of print, other Arthurian sources continued to circulate. Most notably, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1136), a foundational Latin chronicle portraying Arthur as a pan-European conqueror, remained accessible, particularly through Aaron Thompson's English translation, published in 1718 (Simpson 6). Geoffrey's version of Arthur provided Victorian antiquarians and poets with an alternate, often more expansive vision of the legendary king, one that complemented or even competed with Malory's chivalric framework.

These editorial and scholarly efforts laid the groundwork for the Arthurian legend to be understood not merely as folklore or fantasy but as a cornerstone of national literary heritage, ripe for reinterpretation. The Arthurian Revival might not have achieved the cultural prominence it ultimately did without Alfred Lord Tennyson's (1809-1892) *Idylls of the King*, published in instalments between 1859 and 1885. Tennyson's poetic reworking of Arthurian material not only defined Victorian interpretations of the Grail myth but also helped shape broader narratives of national identity through the figure of a noble yet doomed king.

Before Tennyson's intervention, representations of King Arthur in English literature were fragmented and varied in tone and purpose, often lacking the heroic and even messianic character that would later define him in the Victorian era. Authors such as Thomas Love Peacock, in works like *The Misfortunes of Elphin* (1829), used Welsh Arthurian motifs for literary satire and political critique, particularly targeting contemporary British society.

However, Tennyson's vision emphasised the tragic dimensions of Arthurian myth and consolidated the legend within Victorian ideals of morality, putting an emphasis on the need for a spiritual quest, a theme resonant with the era's widespread spiritual uncertainties and moral anxieties, as seen in contemporary fascination with both religion and Spiritualism[56]. This reshaping of the myth was unique for the time and culturally sanctioned. As Lambdin and Lambdin observe:

> Queen Victoria and Prince Consort Albert especially adored Arthurian subjects; from 1849 to 1862 William Dyce painted frescoes in the Queen's Robing Room at the Palace of Westminster that represented men of the Round Table as personified qualities of mercy, hospitality, generosity, religion, courtesy, fidelity, and courage (Lambdin and Lambdin xi).

Arthur's relevance as a national hero lies in both his mythic characterisation and his prophesied return. The idea of endurance through the continually shifting times has allowed many interpretations of his story[57]. Moreover, Arthurian legends, inherently episodic and flexible, are not bound to a single geography or fixed narrative; they incorporate a range of heroes, each with their own distinct quests, which enriches the legend and accommodates diverse genres and themes, from Galahad's spiritual asceticism to Lancelot's adulterous love. The period's heightened interest in the

[56] Victorian Britain experienced a profound moral and theological crisis shaped by scientific, religious, and cultural shifts. The rise of natural sciences, particularly after Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859), challenged traditional religious authority and led to a marked decline in the popularity of organised religion. Philosophers like Auguste Comte advanced Positivism, which asserted that humanity was progressing by relying on science rather than "superstition" (see *The Victorian Web*, "Science and Religion"). Simultaneously, Spiritualism emerged as a widespread cultural phenomenon, practices such as séances, table rapping, automatic writing, and spirit communication became common throughout Britain and America by the 1850s and 1860s, even drawing participation from figures such as Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, as described on *The Victorian Web* ("Spiritualism"). This reflected an enduring Victorian desire to reconcile the rational advances of science with a metaphysical yearning for connection beyond material reality. Up until the 1860s, many intellectuals maintained a "theology of nature" that sought to harmonise scientific inquiry with religious belief. Yet, materialist interpretations of science challenged the role of God and the Anglican religious establishment, provoking broader cultural anxieties about morality, authority, and spiritual meaning (see *The Victorian Web*, "The Crisis of Organized Religion"). These overlapping tensions between scientific progress, religious doubt, and supernatural fascination underpin the Victorian era's preoccupation with purity, corruption, and redemption.

[57] The Arthurian Revival is often considered a subset of the broader Medieval Revival, a nineteenth-century movement marked by fascination with medieval aesthetics, values, and spirituality. This broader revival encompassed architecture (notably the Gothic Revival), literature, visual arts, and historical imagination. While the Gothic Revival emphasised ecclesiastical architecture and romanticised medieval forms, and the Medieval Revival idealised the Middle Ages as a whole, the Arthurian Revival focused more narrowly on the reinterpretation of Arthurian legend, often reshaped to reflect Victorian moral, spiritual, and national ideals.

supernatural and the irrational found a natural expression in figures like Merlin, whose ambiguous nature resonated with contemporary explorations of the mystical. As Lambdin and Lambdin point out, "no other medieval literature could reflect feelings of contemporary unrest as well as the tragic legends of Arthur, Guinevere, Lancelot, Merlin, Tristram, Iseult, and the whole host of Arthurian characters whose lives were shattered by a failed ideal" (xi). By the 1830s, this convergence of historical, literary, and folkloric sources had revitalised the Arthurian material across British culture, guaranteeing its survival (Simpson 220).

According to Staines (*Tennyson's Camelot* 65-67), interest in the Grail legend began to re-emerge in the late 1850s, with particular emphasis on the figure of Sir Galahad as the embodiment of moral purity. William Morris notably contributed to this revival with two poems published in 1858, "Sir Galahad: A Christmas Mystery" and "The Chapel of Lyoness", both centred on his quest. That same year saw the anonymous release of "Arthur's Knights: An Adventure of the Legend of the Sangrale", a poem in blank verse set against a pastoral backdrop which incorporated Grail motifs. For Tennyson, whose *Idylls of the King* transformed the Arthurian legend into a moral and spiritual epic, the inclusion of the Holy Grail was a necessary component in shaping a cohesive national mythos. His influence reverberated in George MacDonald's *The Sangreal* (1863), an introspective poem in six parts chronicling Galahad's successful vision and death, which echoed Tennyson's "Sir Galahad" (1842)[58]. In 1864, the Vicar of Morwenstow, Robert Stephen Hawker, an associate of Tennyson, published *The Quest of the Sangraal*, which details the initiation and early progress of Tristan, Perceval, Galahad, and Lancelot in their search for the Grail, blending Arthurian lore with symbolism and highlighting a preoccupation with moral struggle and purpose. Additionally, Thomas Westwood's *The Quest of the Sancgreall* appeared in 1868, divided into six sections and focused on the vows taken by the knights and their respective experiences of the Grail vision, reinterpreting rather than faithfully reproducing the tales.

Tennyson's eventual composition of "The Holy Grail" was influenced by the accessibility of medieval texts through F. J. Furnivall's editions, who published a two-volume edition of Henry Lovelich's fifteenth-century Grail poem alongside its French

[58] Tennyson's depiction of the character in "Sir Galahad", published in Tennyson's *Poems* (1842), differs from the one seen in the *Idylls of the King*, where he takes a more symbolic role. Despite their differences, both deal with Galahad's vision of the Holy Grail.

prose source, sending copies directly to Tennyson. In 1864, he also released a version of the *Queste del Saint Graal*, the French prose narrative that served as a primary source for Malory's own Grail section in *Le Morte d'Arthur*. These publications provided Tennyson with both textual material and the scholarly context needed to shape his own artistic vision.

3.1. Tennyson's *Idylls*: shaping the English Nineteenth Century

Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* stands undeniably as the most significant Arthurian narrative of nineteenth-century England, not merely for its literary merit but for its transformative reimagining of the medieval myth to reflect the moral and cultural concerns of Victorian society. Avoiding retelling, Tennyson's approach demonstrates a nuanced reconstruction of Camelot as well as a social commentary on both the greatness and the fragility of civilisation.

The form of the idyll[59] afforded Tennyson both the flexibility of a discontinuous narrative and the existence of independent episodes which share the court of Arthur as a setting. As a literary strategy, it allows a more symbolic and allegorical exploration of the myths; Tennyson had been interested in Arthurian legends since childhood, and he represented Victorian anxieties and ideals through his lifelong fascination. Liberating himself from the original sources without completely discarding them, he reshaped the legends and made them relevant for contemporary dilemmas of spiritual uncertainty, social decay, and the desire for moral clarity. His Camelot does not offer escapism but a mirror in which to observe the contrasting lights and darks of civilisation (Staines xv). As Laura Hibbard Lambdin and Robert T. Lambdin note, "Each of the nineteenth-century English poets who studied and then rewrote the ancient Arthurian legends left his feelings about his own society just under the surface of poetry extolling the medieval period" (Lambdin and Lambdin xi). Early works like *The Lady of Shalott*, inspired by Malory and especially by the Italian novella *Donna di Scalotta*, or "Sir Galahad", demonstrate a tendency to distance his narratives from original sources and toward symbolic reinterpretation.

[59] The word "idyll", "a very happy, peaceful, and simple situation or period of time, especially in the countryside, or a piece of music, literature, etc. that describes this" , according to the Cambridge dictionary (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/idyll).

In 1833, Samuel Taylor Coleridge questioned the value of the Arthurian myth: "As to Arthur, you could not by any means make a poem national to Englishmen. What have we to do with him?" (Coleridge in Staines 1 *Tennyson's Camelot*). Milton had already discarded the subject and the idea of an Arthurian epic seemed impossible; *Idylls of the King,* developed over more than half a century, beginning with early explorations of Arthurian themes and culminating in a twelve-part poetic cycle that reimagined the rise and fall of King Arthur as a Victorian moral allegory[60], proves against it.

Tennyson's engagement with Arthurian legend began shortly after the death of his close friend Arthur Hallam, when he composed *Morte d'Arthur* (1833), a standalone elegiac poem that would later become the foundation for "The Passing of Arthur". The poem was published in 1842 as part of the *Poems* collection, but at that stage, Tennyson had not yet conceived of a unified Arthurian narrative. It was not until 1859 that he released the first set of what would become the *Idylls of the King*, including "Enid", "Vivien", "Elaine" and "Guinevere", which were later revised and retitled to fit within a larger narrative arc ("Enid" was divided into "The Marriage of Geraint" and "Geraint and Enid", "Vivien" became "Merlin and Vivien", "Elaine" became "Lancelot and Elaine", and "Guinevere" retained its title). In 1869, Tennyson published *The Holy Grail and Other Poems*, which expanded the cycle and helped establish its epic scope with "The Coming of Arthur", "The Holy Grail", "Pelleas and Ettarre" and "The Passing of Arthur" (a revision of "Morte d'Arthur"). A year later, in 1870, these poems were brought together with the 1859 set in a collected edition of eight *Idylls*, offering a more cohesive sequence that illustrated the glory and gradual disintegration of Arthur's court. In 1872, Tennyson added two more idylls to it: "The Last Tournament" and "Gareth and Lynette", which increased the sense of a court in moral decline and expanded the focus to include more knights of the Round Table. In 1885, "Balin and Balan" was added, exploring the tragic consequences of inner conflict and foreshadowing the collapse of Arthur's vision. Finally, in 1889, Tennyson published the complete *Idylls of the King* as a unified cycle of twelve poems, now arranged to tell the entire story of Arthur's mythic reign from hopeful beginning to tragic end (Shepherd).

[60] Tennyson drew inspiration from New Testament parables, valuing how their meanings emerge through the interplay of multiple symbols rather than fixed explanations, and crafted *Idylls of the King* as a parable inviting readers to explore diverse interpretations instead of offering a straightforward allegory (Sylvia 298).

Contemporary critics often failed to appreciate this modern approach, seeing only a nostalgic link to medievalism. According to Staines (*Tennyson's Camelot* 160), three significant literary contemporaries to Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, William Morris, and Algernon Charles Swinburne, engaged with Arthurian legend while sharing a critical stance toward Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls*. On the one hand, Arnold, who ironically failed to gain any relevance with his *Tristam and Iseult* (1852 and 1853), dismissed Tennyson's work as lacking both "the peculiar charm and aroma of the Middle Age" and genuine intellectual substance. William Morris opened his *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* (1858) with four Arthurian-inspired pieces based on Malory's oeuvre. Although he envisioned composing a full Arthurian cycle, the project was never realised. Morris considered writing a full Arthurian cycle that was never realised, and his main criticism of Tennyson was his imposition of modern sensibilities onto medieval legends. On the other hand, Swinburne's Arthurian poems, *Queen Yseult*, *Joyeuse Garde*, *King Ban*, *The Day Before the Trial*, and *Lancelot* among them, formed an attempted Arthurian cycle. He wrote *Tristram of Lyonesse* and *The Tale of Balen* as direct responses to Tennyson's *Idylls*, with the latter so closely echoing Malory's original that it borders on a paraphrase.

Among those profoundly influenced by medieval themes were Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, who held Galahad as their patron, drew substantial inspiration from the Middle Ages and from Tennyson's vision of it. In fact, the Pre-Raphaelites were aware of Tennyson's intention to compose an Arthurian epic well before the publication of the initial *Idylls of the King*. Although Rossetti had engaged with Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, when he provided three illustrations for Arthurian episodes in the 1857 edition of *Poems* by Tennyson, he based his imagery on Tennyson's poetic vision rather than Malory's prose. In 1858, Rossetti began composing his own Arthurian poem, *God's Graal*, which remained unfinished. Moreover, the Pre-Raphaelites frequently illustrated Tennyson's poetry, thereby disseminating his vision of Camelot through visual art. Tennyson's version of Arthurian legends effectively became their primary reference point, serving both as source

material and artistic stimulus. Just as Malory influenced Tennyson, so too did Tennyson become a defining influence for the Pre-Raphaelites' medievalism. [61]

Tennyson's impact on the revival of Arthurian literature is undeniable; his innovative approach and the extent of his cultural influence can be seen in the dramatic resurgence during the second half of the century of reprintings of medieval works like Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, one of Tennyson's main sources for *Idylls of the King*. In 1862, James Knowles published a modernised retelling, *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table*, which he dedicated to Tennyson "as a tribute of the sincerest and warmest respect" and, by the end of the century, at least five similar works had appeared, all of them acknowledging Tennyson's influence. However, Tennyson seemed not to grasp his influence, according to his son's biography:

> I am old and I may be wrong, for this generation has assuredly some spirit of chivalry. We see it in acts of heroism by land and sea, in fights against the slave trade, in our Arctic voyages, in philanthropy, etc. The truth is that the wave advances and recedes. I tried in my 'Idylls' to teach men these things, and the need of the Ideal. But I feel sometimes as if my life had been a very useless life (Tennyson 337).

Having established Tennyson's central role in the Arthurian revival of the nineteenth century, the focus now turns to those *Idylls* in which the poet most directly engages with the medieval Grail tradition established by Chrétien de Troyes in *Perceval*. As Alan Lupack observes, "Tennyson did not believe in the mystic experience of the Grail, and he saw the quest for it as a distraction from the practical duties to which knights should attend" (150). "The Holy Grail" and "Balin and Balan" represent Tennyson's most sustained efforts to reinterpret the Grail myth through the moral and spiritual lens of Victorian culture, offering a fertile ground for comparison between medieval and modern visions of the quest.

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[61] G. F. Watts painted *Sir Galahad* and *Enid and Geraint*; Arthur Hughes produced illustrations and paintings including *The Lady of Shalott*, *Sir Galahad*, and *Enid and Geraint*; while F. G. Stephens's 1849 unfinished painting *Morte d'Arthur* depicted a lone knight aiding the king, diverging from Malory's depiction of two. Holman Hunt contributed an illustration for *The Lady of Shalott* in the 1857 edition, which later informed his larger painting on the same subject. Daniel Maclise also created two illustrations for Tennyson's *Morte d'Arthur* in that edition. John Everett Millais, in 1854, produced a pen-and-ink drawing based on four stanzas from the fourth section of *The Lady of Shalott*. For Edward Burne-Jones, Tennyson's early Arthurian poetry was a transformative encounter, leading to a lifelong engagement with the legend. Though he left a series of Arthurian paintings and cartoons for stained glass unfinished, he ultimately completed ten major works centred on Arthurian themes.

In this reinterpretation, Perceval, here renamed ‘Percivale’, is transformed from Chrétien’s naïve yet promising hero into both a retrospective narrator and a failed Grail knight. His sister, absent from Chrétien’s account, takes on the role of prophetic catalyst, announcing the Grail vision and inspiring the knights of the Round Table to undertake the quest. This contrasts sharply with the narrators in *Perceval*, the cousin, the Hideous Maiden, and the hermit, who guide and contextualise the hero’s journey only after having failed the quest.

In Tennyson’s version, the Grail procession within the castle, so central to Chrétien’s *Perceval*, is entirely absent. Without the ritual presentation of symbolic objects, there is likewise no pivotal question for the questing knight to ask, and thus no moment of failure to serve as the narrative turning point. As a result, the quest is no longer structured around personal agency or error, but becomes a visionary experience, reserved for those deemed spiritually worthy. The Grail appears as an ephemeral apparition; the Spear, now detached from its ceremonial context, is reduced to a relic in Pellam’s possession; and the Sword once bestowed upon Perceval has disappeared from the tradition entirely.

Likewise, the Fisher King figure is divided between King Pellam, who represents what remains of the medieval tradition, shaped by Malory’s reinterpretation, and King Arthur, who assumes the role of the Fisher King archetype as the symbolic embodiment of national and moral decline. This análisis prioritises Pellam, as he more directly preserves the medieval motifs, albeit in a diminished and somewhat parodic form.

From the twelve compositions Tennyson’s *Idylls* consists of, only those which present themes particularly linked to the myth will be studied: “The Holy Grail” and “Balin and Balan”.

3.2. “The Holy Grail”

3.2.1. A Brief Summary

“The Holy Grail” idyll[62] is framed as a retrospective narrative, told by Sir Percivale, now retired to the life of prayer, to a fellow monk, Ambrosius, in the April before the summer Percivale died. To tell the story of the Grail quest, he starts by recalling the vision of it experienced by her sister, a nun of exceptional piety who inspires Percivale to aim for it. When Percivale conveys the vision at Camelot, a number of Arthur’s knights interpret it as a divine call. However, their motivations are varied: some are driven by sincere religious aspiration, others by vanity or ambition. Galahad sits on the Siege Perilous[63], and Arthur’s hall shakes with thunder as a vision of the veiled Grail passes the knights, pushing them to swear to the quest, as only Galahad saw it. King Arthur, who was absent at that moment and, therefore, unable to stop them, argues that the Grail is not meant to be found by all, and that the pursuit of such a transcendent object requires exceptional spiritual purity. He celebrates a tourney and bids them goodbye.

Sir Galahad, portrayed as a paragon of spiritual purity, is ultimately the sole knight to attain a full vision of the Grail and to ascend to Heaven, to rule in a kingdom there, leaving the earthly realm behind. His success is attributed to his chastity, innocence, and divine favour, equal to Percivale’s sister. While Sir Percivale undertakes the quest with fervent devotion, he encounters numerous trials and temptations, traversing a land of thorns and sand and a terrible thirst among them, that do not allow him but a glimpse of the Grail, from afar and in the company of Galahad. He comes to realise his own spiritual inadequacy and withdraws from the world, adopting a monastic life, prioritising humility over heroism. On the one hand, Sir Bors approaches the quest with a balanced spirit and experiences a partial vision and is one of the few who returns to Camelot relatively unscathed. Sir Lancelot, the mightiest of Arthur’s knights, is spiritually hindered by his adulterous relationship with Queen Guinevere, and, although he seeks the Grail earnestly, he is only granted a fleeting and painful vision of it. On the other hand, Sir Gawain embarks upon the quest motivated more by chivalric bravado

[62] For quotes taken from Alfred Lord Tennyson's "The Holy Grail" and "Balin and Balan", we will use the edition by Penguin Classics (1989) with an introduction of J.M. Gray referenced in the final bibliography. The abbreviations are: "THG." for "The Holy Grail" and "BAB." for "Balin and Balan".

[63] A seat at the Round Table reserved for the knight meant for the Holy Grail quest, said to kill anyone else who occupied it. According to the legend, it was created by Merlin.

than spiritual discipline, resulting in a frivolous and self-indulgent approach to the quest. As a result, he becomes distracted by earthly pleasures and fails to make any meaningful progress, ultimately returning to Camelot with nothing gained.

The quest, though inspired by a divine vision, yields predominantly disastrous consequences. Most of the knights fail in their endeavours, several do not return at all, and the spiritual and martial cohesion of the Round Table is irreparably damaged. King Arthur, left with only a handful of his knights, laments the dissolution of his once-unified fellowship. and recognises that, even if the Grail was a noble symbol of divine grace, its pursuit by unworthy hands has undermined the worldly mission of his reign, based on earthly virtue. Perceval confesses that he cannot understand Arthur's words, as the king claims that he would have never wandered away to pursue the quest as many would have thought.

3.2.2. The Grail in "The Holy Grail"

Tennyson's Grail idyll offers many descriptions of the Grail through different characters' eyes, which is ironic since it is, in theory, a difficult sight to witness. Before Percivale's story, he describes the vision of the Holy Grail to Ambrosius as both "sweet" and the reason why he was driven away from the Round Table and the vainglories linked to it, such as jousts or women, which "waste the spiritual strength" that should be directed towards God. Ambrosious knows the Grail as "the phantom of a cup that comes and goes" [THG, l. 44] and has only half-heard of it through Bors. Besides, he knows of Joseph of Arimathea, who came to Glastonbury and built his church. Percivale completes the story for him:

> " […] and if a man
> Could touch or see it, he was healed at once,
> By faith, of all his ills. But then the times
> Grew to such evil that the holy cup
> Was caught away to Heaven, and disappeared." ([THG, ll. 54-58])

Percivale's sister learns from a hundred-year-old man about the Holy Grail, which he thought would come back when Arthur made the Round Table because it cleansed the world and the hearts; the presence of sin however, prevents it. Through her eyes, the Grail comes with a "slender", supernatural, musical sound, "as of a silver horn from o'er the hills" [THG, l. 109] blown. It is accompanied by light, "a cold and silver beam", and it dyes the wall of her cell with "rosy colours", she sees it beating, "rose-

red", "as if alive". In Arthur's hall, it comes with thunder and lightning, sound and light; while most knights see a cloud or are blinded by the light, Galahad hears the Holy Grail speak to him. Later, already in the quest, Galahad would explain his vision:

> "The Holy Grail, descend upon the shrine:
> I saw the fiery face as of a child
> That smote itself into the bread, and went;" [THG., ll. 465-467]

> "Blood-red. And in the strength of this I rode,
> Shattering all evil customs everywhere,
> And past through Pagan realms, and made them mine,
> And clashed with Pagan hordes, and bore them down,
> And broke through all, and in the strength of this
> Come victor. But my time is hard at hand,
> And hence I go; and one will crown me king
> Far in the spiritual city; and come thou, too,
> For thou shalt see the vision when I go." [THG., ll. 475-484]

The Grail is for Galahad a living force that follows him; it brings to him the image of Christ's innocence, as a child, and the bread of the sacrament. Unlike other recollections of the Grail, this vision is not fleeting, but a constant presence in Galahad's life. It is blood-red, a deep colour in comparison to the rose-red seen by Percivale's sister that brings the image of Christ's blood and his divine sacrifice, which aligns both Christ and Galahad as saviours, holy men with a mission. The vision does not isolate Galahad from the world; rather, it empowers his worldly action; spiritual insight fuels moral reform and conquest. His passage through "Pagan realms" and his triumphs over "Pagan hordes" depict him as a Christian crusader in a mythic framework, eradicating corruption through divine aid. This moral clarity sets him apart from other knights of the Round Table and crowns him in a heavenly realm, different from Arthur's worldly Camelot. This ideal mystic knight meets the Grail in heaven, through Percivale's eyes we learn that it was "clothed in white samite or a luminous cloud" [THG., l. 513] and then, "redder than any rose". According to Percivale, it would never be seen again on earth. To Bors, the Grail appeared "in colour like the fingers of a hand", [THG., l. 690], a rosy colour, and passed with a thunder, and to Lancelot, "all pall'd in crimson samite", veiled and surrounded by biblically accurate angels.

Tennyson reimagines the medieval legend to reflect nineteenth-century spiritual uncertainty; the vision does not enlighten Percivale, who embodies "the tension

between doubt and faith, appearance and reality" more than any other character, making of his quest "a reflection of the Victorian age" (Lupack 151). As David Staines argues, ""The Holy Grail" unites indebtedness with originality to create a new version of the Grail story, a quest specifically suited to the nineteenth century" ("Tennyson's 'The Holy Grail'" 748). While the idyll draws on Malory's source material, it ultimately reshapes the quest to question the very ideals it appears to honour. For Arthur, the Grail quest signals the dissolution of the Round Table: his knights, once sworn to uphold his earthly order, redirect their allegiance to a higher, ineffable ideal, and their spiritual vow becomes, then, a form of political betrayal. The Grail becomes not merely a sacred object, but a transcendent state of being, epitomised by Galahad, whose purity places him beyond the human realm. Galahad is not a character the reader can access in any psychological or emotional depth; rather, he functions as a distant ideal, "unattainable" and removed from earthly concerns. In this way, Tennyson constructs a vision that alienates the court, a divine object of pursuit that ultimately destabilises the human world that seeks it. By showing us the side of the unsuccessful questers, the reader is presented with the consequences of an unattainable ideal.

3.2.3. The Grail Narrators: Percivale and His Sister

In medieval Arthurian literature, the figure of Perceval, variously rendered as Peredur, Parzival, Parceval, Perlesvaus, or Percyvelle, serves as a uniquely flexible narrative construct as his evolving identity is tied to the ideas of lineage and spiritual development. Unlike more genealogically fixed knights, Perceval is characterised by an initial lack of self-knowledge in general, but especially regarding his name and noble origin. This feature becomes a key to his literary role across multiple cultural traditions.

As we have discussed previously, in Chrétien de Troyes's *Conte du Graal*, Perceval first appears as an unnamed youth, ignorant of the world of chivalry and of his own ancestry. His eventual naming, *Perceval li Galois*, occurs as an intuitive guess on the hero's part. The designation *li Galois* (the Welshman) likely functions more as a literary trope than an ethnic marker (Lacy and Groos 2-3), embedding the character within the imagined Celtic periphery of Arthurian geography. Perceval emerges not as a static character but as the perfect candidate for exploring identity formation. His onomastic indeterminacy allows authors to create him anew within differing ideological

frameworks. This open-endedness is arguably a key factor in the hero's enduring resonance and his prominence in both French and German literary traditions[64].

Like the authors before him, Tennyson struggles with what to make of his Percivale, who becomes in the Idylls both the narrator and the main character of his failed quest. Unlike in other older traditions, where Gawain swears first to the quest, Percivale starts it in Tennyson and gets an incomplete vision of the Grail despite his rank as a knight of Arthur's court. Tennyson indeed struggled with how to approach the Grail Quest in his idylls and, by distancing himself as a narrator and using Percivale, a dead man by the beginning of the idyll (Lacy and Groos 21), and his sister, a woman who does not partake in the quest as a quester but as a prophet, instead, he constructs an extra layer of narrative distance.

Both Chrétien de Troyes and Tennyson use intermediary narrators to tell both the story of the Grail and of the Grail quest, relieving themselves from the pressure of sharing stories that, at the end of the day, were lived and known by their narrator characters, who chose to share which parts were relevant to them. By not presenting the quest as direct action but as recollected experience, the inaccessibility of divine truth and the impossibility of capturing spiritual reality in worldly terms are enhanced. The frame narrative becomes a symbol of the very elusiveness that defines the Grail itself.

Percivale's unnamed sister, who evokes the figure of his cousin in Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval*, plays a markedly different role in Tennyson's version of the Grail narrative. Described by her brother as a "holy maid", who "wore the stone" by praying on her knees and who very early in her youth chose to dedicate herself "only to holy things; to prayer and praise", "to fast and alms". The Grail story is passed down to her through "a man wellnight a hundred winter old" ([THG, l. 85]), which was passed to him "thro' five or six", "and each of these a hundred winters old" ([THG, l.88]). She is determined to see the vision of the Grail and, through fasting and prayer and because her heart is "pure as snow", she achieves it and informs Percivale about it. Her eyes seem changed, "beautiful", "wonderful", "beautiful in the light of holiness" as if transformed after the vision.

[64] While in French prose cycles his role is eventually eclipsed by Galahad, the archetypal Grail knight, Wolfram's *Parzival* ensures his lasting centrality in the German context.

In the idyll, Percivale's sister is described as "pale", "sweet", "clean", "holy", attributes linked to the religious purity she embodies, qualities that rightly evoke a nun. These attributes are mirrored in the depiction of Galahad, the "knight of heaven" and the "bright-boy knight," positioning the two as spiritual counterparts. Rather than a conventional gender inversion, the sister and Galahad function as complementary figures, expressions of the same divine vocation ("O thou, my love, whose love is one with mine" [THG, l.158]; "She sent the deathless passion in her eyes / Thro' him and made him hers, and laid her mind / On him, and he believed in her belief." [THG, ll. 163-165] ; "His eyes became so like her own, they seem'd / Hers, and himself her brother more than I" [THG, ll. 141-142]). Percivale's sister prophesies Galahad's role in the quest and his destiny as a celestial ruler, she also hands him a beautiful belt, an object reminiscent of other enchanted tokens in medieval literature, such as the girdle[65] in *Gawain and The Green Knight.*

Regarding Percivale's role as narrator, Staines argues that "the original hero is relegated to something less, and that is useful for him, as it is easier to understand a normal man than a supernatural figure" (Staines "Tennyson's 'The Holy Grail' 747). By choosing to frame the story through Percivale's retrospective narration of a failed quest, Tennyson shifts focus from divine attainment to human limitation. This decision foregrounds the psychological and spiritual costs of the Grail journey for those who are unworthy or unprepared. In the Victorian period, heroism itself became a contested concept: who qualified as a hero, and what constituted greatness, were subjects of cultural debate in periodicals, lectures, and sermons. As Atkinson notes, the line between goodness and greatness increasingly blurred during the period, expanding the semantic field of the term "hero". Transforming the hero into a "mediator between man and god" enabled Victorian writers to promote moral emulation through figures like Jesus, Galahad, or Arthur. Percivale, however, resists this idealisation (Atkinson 49-50). His narrative of failure presents a more tragic and humanised model, marked by limitation, loss, and insight gained only after defeat.

[65] On the symbolic role of girdles and belts in medieval literature and culture, see William Frankle, *Late Medieval Birthing Girdles as Amulets: A Story of Female Agency and Power*, which explores the devotional and protective functions of birthing girdles in late medieval England. For a comparative discussion of the multiple interpretations of Gawain's girdle—as a love token, protective amulet, or magical object—see Albert B. Friedman and Richard H. Osberg, "Gawain's Girdle as Traditional Symbol," *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 90, no. 357, 1977, pp. 301–315. https://doi.org/10.2307/539521.

For Percivale to tell the story, he needs an interlocutor, a foil, a friend, and that role is fulfilled by a fellow monk, Ambrosius, who has never left the abbey and whose knowledge of the world and the Grail Quest comes from books and from what he heard from Bors' quiet confession. The deep bond between the two men, similar to that between knights, works as a justification for Percivale's tale:

> And one, a fellow-monk among the rest,
> Ambrosius, loved him much beyond the rest,
> And honour'd him, and wrought into his heart
> A way by love that waken'd love within" [THG, ll. 8-11])

This narrative strategy that complicates the structural form of the idyll, is not merely a structural choice, but one that enriches the poem's thematic depth and creates a reflective frame that places the Grail Quest as an event removed from the immediate action of Arthur's court, enabling the story to be filtered through the perspective of one who has renounced that world and who now speaks from a position of spiritual introspection. As a monk, Percivale is invested with a kind of religious authority that evolves from his having been known as "The Pure" in Arthur's court, a quality that seems to run in the family if we also consider his sister's religious authority and role as a narrator.

While Ambrosious prompts Percivale's recollection, he also serves as a more sceptical viewpoint of the Grail that contrasts with the mysticism of Percivale's vision. In this way, Tennyson dramatises the epistemological tension of his time, where the truth of spiritual experiences is both deeply felt and profoundly questioned. Moreover, the choice to have Percivale narrate his memories from a monastery, in a time when Arthurian chivalry is waning and the Grail itself has vanished from the world, is read almost as an elegy for the lost idealism that Arthur's realm represented.

3.2.4. Percivale: An Unsuccessful Knight

Tennyson recasts the traditional Grail quest into a meditation on human spirituality. Percivale's quest is a personal process of self-exploration; though driven by fervent faith, he is blinded by his ambition and pride, mistaking spiritual desire for divine calling. In addition, he is constantly reminded by both his own conscience and the unfolding events that the Grail is not meant for him. As David Staines notes, "For Percivale, the Grail quest is both beneficial and detrimental; it instils humility in him, yet it removes him from the practical affairs of this world. His new self-awareness lacks

proper perspective; he becomes a victim of his own vision" (Staines "Tennyson's 'The Holy Grail' 752). The tragedy of Percivale lies in the contradiction between his spiritual awakening and the fact that it distances him from Camelot and its structured morality, with Arthur as the embodiment of earthly order and divine purpose. By turning away from Arthur's model of leadership, knighthood and worldly engagement, to seek something closer to Galahad's perfection, unreachable in both metaphysical and narrative terms, his failure is perpetuated. Percivale, deeply human, limited to earthly adventures, isolated, and ultimately unfulfilled, seeks a role that was never his, positioned between Lancelot and Galahad, between his sister and Gawain, a place he does not belong in. Even Arthur, in his affection, mistakes him for Galahad ("What are ye? Galahads – no, nor Percivales / (For thus it pleased the King to range me close / After Sir Galahad) [...]" [THG., ll. 305-307]), an error that deepens the pathos of Percivale's failure.

It is not until he finds Galahad that Percivale is able to see the Grail, as if he transferred the ability like his sister had previously done with Galahad ("While thus he spake, his eye, dwelling on mine, / Drew me, with power upon me, till I grew / One with him, to believe as he believed. [THG., ll. 485-487]). Each vision Percivale experiences wandering through sand and thorns before his encounter with Galahad represents a temptation or worldly consolation (natural beauty, domestic love, earthly glory, fame) offered as potential resting places or affirmations of worth. But they all disintegrate, symbolising their illusory nature and his inability to truly accept them. This repeated collapse of reality reveals that the quest is not one of physical endurance, but of interior surrender. His thirst becomes a symbol of spiritual longing, but also spiritual pride, because he desires a reward that has not been earned through genuine humility.

The refrain "This Quest is not for thee" repeats as a haunting reminder that his pursuit is misaligned with his spiritual capacity. The visions collapse not simply because the temptations are evil, but because Percivale's internal state corrupts even the good; the brook and the apple trees, the woman at a door that offers him rest, the man that opens his arms to embrace him, the city, the old man, they all could have had value in another context, but not for someone who seeks them out of pride or desperation rather than love or service. According to Peltason (476), "the source of Percivale's special pain and of his nightmare of destructiveness is that he cannot abide this limitation. To dream of a Grail that does not crumble at touch is to dream of unmediated contact with a world

outside our conceptions of it – to dream of an evidence for belief that cannot be dissolved by analysis"

The hermit diagnoses his failure directly: "O son, thou hast not true humility, / The highest virtue, mother of them all." ([THG., ll. 445-446]). Whereas Galahad achieves the Grail because he has completely renounced the self, Percivale remains fixated on his own worthiness and sins, his self-awareness is real but incomplete because he recognises his flaws but is incapable of abandoning his ego. Galahad does not seek the Grail to affirm his own purity, but receives it because he has "lost" himself entirely to divine will. Tennyson implies that only by transcending the self altogether can the spiritual ideal be realized, an impossibility for Percivale, who remains tragically human, fearing that, even if the goal were achieved, it would be meaningless or corrupted by his own inadequacy ("Lo, if I find the Holy Grail itself / And touch it, it will crumble into dust" [THG., ll. 438-439]).

Percivale's spiritual disappointment blinds him to any alternative to the monastic life, including the love of a woman that considers him "the greatest of all knights" and who would give herself and all her wealth to him so that he would be like Arthur in her land ([THG, ll. 571-610]). Ultimately, the poem becomes a study in the limits of human aspiration; unlike Arthur, who finds the divine in the material, Percivale fails to reconcile his vision with his place in the world: his tragedy is not just his failure, but his inability to grasp the nature of it and to accept another life path or value the goods he is being offered. In the end, he fails at being Galahad and he fails at being Lancelot, but the saddest truth is that he also fails at being Percivale.

3.3. "Balin and Balan"

3.3.1. A Brief Summary

In "Balin and Balan", King Pellam, once an ally of Lot, refuses to pay tribute to King Arthur. In response, Arthur dispatches his treasurer to collect the debt. The treasurer warns of two anonymous knights near Camelot who are defeating all challengers, and Arthur, disguised as one of his own knights, confronts them, easily defeating them and summoning them to court. The knights reveal themselves as Balin the Savage, exiled from Arthur's court three years prior because of his violent nature, and his brother

Balan. Arthur, hearing that the two had resolved to challenge members of the Round Table to prove Balin's worth and regain honour, forgives them and welcomes them back into his court.

The embassy to Pellam returns, informing Arthur that King Pellam has become a deeply religious person who claims to descend from Joseph of Arimathea and to possess the Holy Spear. His heir, Garlon, is in charge of the castle, and the body of a «spear-stricken» knight has recently been discovered in the woods around it. While some say that Garlon toys with dark magic, others attribute the death to a demon that haunts those parts. When Arthur asks for a volunteer to investigate, Balan offers and departs on the quest, urging Balin before leaving to remain calm and resist his impulses.

Balin stays in court and tries to reform himself, emulating Lancelot and honouring Queen Guinevere, and even wearing her crown on his shield. However, he witnesses a secret meeting between Lancelot and Guinevere, which results in confusion and disillusionment with both his ideals of courtesy and purity. Balin runs away, following the path previously taken by Balan, and, after an encounter with a demon, he eventually reaches Pellam's castle. Garlon hosts him, but laughs at the queen's crown on his shield and insinuates her sinful nature. Barlin restrains himself until Garlon teases him again the next day. He attacks Garlon, but his sword shatters.

Attempting to flee Garlon's men, Balin hides in the castle's chapel, where he discovers Pellam's alleged sacred lance. Armed with it, he escapes from the castle and collapses in the forest after discarding the shield, as he feels ashamed for defiling Guinevere's token by succumbing to his anger. Vivien and her squire, on their way to Camelot, find him. She mocks Balin's values and accuses the reign of being corrupt, focusing on Guinevere and Lancelot's affair. Balin remembers the secret encounter he witnessed and, maddened once more, runs deeper into the forest. Balan, still searching for the demon, hears his cries and mistakes him for a demon. Without recognising each other, they fight, mortally wounding the other and dying in each other's arms. Balan confirms to him that Guinevere is a pure woman as they mourn the misunderstanding.

3.3.2. Pellam: a Fisher King with his Own Wasteland

Pellam appears in "Balin and Balan" as a caricature of the Fisher King we met in Chrétien de Troyes, living in a kingdom that has already turned into a wasteland, and in contradiction to what he originally was as a character. While he is constantly compared to Arthur and is presented as an opposition to him, as Pellam means to have the most holy and prosperous reign, this chapter will analyse the character independently and in comparison to only Garlon, his heir, as we aim to compare the inhabitants of the castle to that of the Fisher King and his father in *Perceval*.

Pellam is not physically hurt like the original Fisher King, but he is known for his emotional numbness and apathy. He was on the losing side during the war, as he was one of Lot's supporters. The reader learns about him because he failed to send his tribute to Arthur, and it is through his treasurer that a first depiction of this "gray king" is given:

> [Pellam] Took, as in rival heat, to holy things;
> And finds himself descended from the Saint
> Arimathaean Joseph; him who first
> Brought the great faith to Britain over seas;
> He boasts his life as purer than thine own;
> Eats scarce enow to keep his pulse abeat;
> Hath pushed aside his faithful wife, nor lets
> Or dame or damsel enter at his gates
> Lest he should be polluted [...] ([BAB., ll. 97-105])

His hall is dark and he is now a religious fanatic, one-sidedly competing with Arthur in purity and piety, claiming to descend from Joseph of Arimathea and having become a collector of relics, the Lance of Longinus among them, ignoring his reign and delegating on his heir Garlon, having abandoned his wife and not allowing any woman around the castle, etc. His hall is "lichen-bearded, grayly draped with streaming grass", "ruinous", his battlement covered in ivy, a nest of bats, an owl in every tower: the living picture of decay.

In contrast, Garlon, his heir, apart from heavily criticising Arthur, his knights and his court, is implied to be the demon that kills in the woods around the castle ("And some do say that our Sir Garlon too / Hath learned black magic, and to ride unseen. [BAB., ll. 299-300]), the one that Balin finds on his way. He is malevolent and drives Balin to madness, continuously mocking his beliefs and accusing Guinevere of being adulterous. Moreover, the text suggests that his magical abilities transcend invisibility ("The scorn

of Garlon, poisoning all his rest, / Stung him in dreams. [...]" [BAB., ll. 378-377]) and that they proceed from Vivien, a sorcerer linked to King Mark, who fought against Arthur in the war ("Told me, that twice a wanton damsel came, / And sought for Garlon at the castle-gates, / Whom Pellam drove away with holy heat. / I well believe this damsel, and the one / Who stood beside thee even now, the same. [BAB., ll. 598-600]).

In Tennyson's reimagining, Pellam's castle is no longer a sanctuary of divine promise but a distorted echo of the Grail castle, inhabited by a king consumed by purity and withdrawal, and an heir embodying unchecked violence. The realm reflects not spiritual transcendence but the collapse that follows when religious aspiration becomes detached from ethical responsibility. As Staines observes, "Pellam becomes another Percivale, who forsakes the world for the shelter and isolation of the cloister; he denies the earthly in order to achieve personal sanctification apart from the world, a sanctification to which he is not summoned" (*Tennyson's Camelot* 141). His retreat signals not holiness, but a misguided attempt at salvation. Tennyson deepens this critique by turning Malory's genealogy of Pellam into fantasy: "a product of Pellam's fertile but dishonest imagination" (Staines *Tennyson's Camelot* 141), exposing the illusion at the heart of his self-construction and the spiritual failure his castle embodies.

3.3.3. The Lance of Longinus or the Holy Spear, a Holy Relic for a Corrupted Man

Arthur's messengers mention the spear when they arrive from Pellam's hall, establishing it as the holy relic belonging to Joseph of Arimathea from whom Pellam allegedly descends ("Rich arks with priceless bones of martyrdom, / Thorns of the crown and shivers of the cross, / and therewithal (for thus he told us) brought / By holy Joseph hither, that same spear / Wherewith the Roman pierced the side of Christ" [BAB., ll. 107-111]; "And finds himself descended from the Saint / Arimathaean Joseph [...]" [BAB., ll. 98-99]). However, it is also the weapon used to kill knights in the middle of the woods ("A knight of thine spear-stricken from behind," [BAB., l. 118]) and the one used by Garlon to attack Balin ("[...] and then the shadow of a spear, / hot from behind him, ran along the ground. / Sideways he started from the path, and saw, / With pointed lance as if to pierce, a shape" [BAB., ll. 317-320]) ; ("[...] Eyes have I / That saw to-day the shadow of a spear,/ Shot from behind me, run along the ground;" [BAB., ll. 366-368]).

Moreover, when Balin attacks Garlon, his men carry “pointed lances”. Inside the chapel, the Holy Lance is before a golden altar, described as the longest Balin had ever seen, “point-painted red”. When he uses it to escape, Pellam shouts that “[...]he defileth heavenly things / with earthly uses [...]” ([BAB., 415-416]). This final image is devastating; the spear, once stained with Christ’s “sinless” blood, is now covered in the blood of brother against brother, with divine sacrifice being replaced by fratricidal violence.

Violent imagery and weaponry pervade the narrative of “Balin and Balan”: shields, swords, and, most prominently, the Spear of Longinus. Among these, the spear emerges as the most symbolically charged and unstable object, undergoing a transformation from a sacred relic to an agent of corruption. Tennyson’s repeated invocation of the spear mirrors Balin’s psychological descent from faith to madness, as what begins as a Christological emblem of grace is gradually recast as a catalyst for inner fragmentation.

Guarded by the hollow figure of King Pellam in a ruined chapel, the spear is no longer an object of sanctity but a vestige of a lost sacred order. The irony of Balan’s “maiden shield”, an icon of purity and knightly virtue, failing to withstand the tainted power of the spear further underscores the collapse of traditional ideals.

This symbolic rewriting reflects a broader ideological impulse in the Victorian period to neutralise or repurpose Catholic religious imagery. As Archibald and Putter note, “the Catholicism of the period and its culture needed exorcising” (6), and Tennyson’s desacralized treatment of the relic serves precisely this function. Pellam is no longer a righteous guardian of divine relics; his land remains desolate, and the object he protects no longer heals but harms. Like Excalibur or the Grail, seen as “an aesthetically pleasing treasure (bound up with cultural debates about relics, display, and the cult of collecting)” which included “an explicit spiritual dimension” (Simpson 663), the spear is both a collector’s pride and a corrupted relic.

In this context, the spear becomes emblematic of the Victorian project of symbolic rewriting: the sacred is not merely lost but redefined as hollow, inert, or even dangerous. Tennyson exposes a world in which relics no longer carry inherent spiritual authority, revealing a deeper moral and theological crisis wherein objects and the ideals they once embodied are shown to be radically unstable.

4. Conclusion

Throughout this essay, the intricate evolution of the Grail myth from its medieval inception in Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval* to its Victorian reimagining in Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* has been explored. Following a close comparative analysis, it has become evident that while Tennyson preserves many of the Grail's foundational motifs, he deliberately fractures and redistributes them, engendering a layered and multifaceted narrative that both honours and interrogates the medieval source material.

The separation of motifs, such as the Grail itself, the Fisher King, the wasteland, and sacred relics, demonstrates Tennyson's nuanced approach to medieval symbolism. These motifs no longer function as cohesive, unambiguous emblems of sanctity and redemption; instead, they are refracted through Victorian cultural anxieties and moral ambivalence. The Lance of Longinus, for example, is recast as a corrupted relic whose sanctity is undermined, symbolising spiritual decline rather than divine grace. This transformation reflects a broader Victorian scepticism toward inherited religious symbols, aligning sacred objects with moral responsibility rather than automatic holiness.

Moreover, the dual figures of Pellam and Percivale encapsulate contrasting dimensions of spiritual engagement, emblematic of the broader tension in Tennyson's work between passive custodianship and obsessive pursuit. Pellam's wounded kingship and his ownership of a tainted relic evoke a paralysis borne from a reverence lacking genuine moral renewal. Percivale's anxious quest for the Grail, conversely, illustrates the peril of absolutist devotion, wherein the spiritual aspiration becomes an isolating obsession that estranges the individual from earthly duties and human relationships. This dialectic exposes the inherent limitations of rigid faith, reinforcing Putter's assertion that Tennyson's *Idylls* portray total commitment as a source of imbalance and loss (47).

The narrative plurality presented in both Chrétien's *Perceval* and Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* serves as a deliberate narrative device that complicates the Grail story's authority, inherently complex in its potential for varied interpretation. Through these

different perspectives of the myth within the stories, the Grail legend is established as an unfixed truth, a dynamic cultural narrative shaped by its storytellers and historical context.

Lupack's observation of the Holy Grail as a cliché with indeterminate origins (213) foregrounds the myth's enigmatic persistence across centuries. Yet, this thesis reveals that its endurance is not a mere recycling of motifs but a dynamic process of cultural negotiation. Tennyson's selective preservation and strategic reconfiguration of Grail elements articulate the contrasts and ambivalences of the Victorian era, offering a profound meditation on faith, morality, and the human condition. Ultimately, the Grail myth's Victorian incarnation underscores its ongoing relevance as a symbolic framework through which successive generations grapple with questions of spiritual meaning and moral complexity.

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