

DEATH AND REBIRTH IN CHIVALRIC QUEST NARRATIVES

by

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ABSTRACT

The image of the knight in shining armor setting upon a perilous quest is embedded in the popular consciousness as the archetypal conception of the Middle Ages in fiction, and while there is no shortage of scholarship on many aspects of chivalric romance, little so far has been done to define its sub-genres or establish its structures; the quest narrative in particular has not been adequately explored as a sub-genre in its own right. By studying a selection of exemplar texts in Middle English, including *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *Le Morte Darthur*, this thesis will explore chivalric quest narratives as a unique sub-genre of chivalric romance. Based on the literary theory of Dante Alighieri, chivalric quest romances will be examined on an analogical level to discern a basic pattern of death, rebirth, sin, and salvation at the core of these narratives.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1: DEVELOPMENT OF CHIVALRIC ROMANCE	11
CHAPTER 2: <i>SIR ORFEO</i>	30
CHAPTER 3: <i>SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT</i>	49
CHAPTER 4: <i>LE MORTE DARTHUR</i>	71
CONCLUSION	96
WORKS CITED	100

INTRODUCTION

One of the most iconographic images of the Middle Ages is the knight in shining armor setting out upon a quest, an image embedded in the popular consciousness as the archetypal representation of the medieval in fiction. While there is no shortage of scholarship on various aspects of chivalric romance, or on many prominent texts within the genre, little so far has been done to define its sub-genres or establish their major structures. The quest narrative, in particular, has not been extensively explored as a sub-genre in its own right, nor have its structures been adequately established beyond very basic patterns. The quest is often carelessly folded into the larger furniture of medieval romance, lacking any distinct identity. This has made study of the chivalric quest narrative a particularly difficult task, since in order to find any commentaries on the sub-genre, one must sift through a large pile of unrelated material.

Through this study, I will take a step toward filling that critical gap. By looking at the quest narrative as a distinct sub-genre of chivalric romance, we can begin to build a much needed foundation for further study of texts within that mode. This begins with an exploration of the origins of chivalric romance and the quest narrative, along with the literary and cultural influences which shaped them. Then, with that context established, we will look at three prominent quest narratives in Middle English: *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and “The Tale of the Sankgreal” in *Le Morte Darthur*. These texts will act as exemplars to analyze the sub-genre to which they belong, and by studying them within a medieval critical framework, we can arrive at a greater understanding of the philosophical and theological underpinnings of the form.

Before the quest narrative can be properly analyzed, we must first define our basic terms. What is a quest? Jeremy Downes notes that “the similarity of the terms *quest* and *question* are not accidental. Both words take root in the Latin verb *quaerere*, meaning ‘to search’ or ‘to inquire’” (56). Robert Burlin notes that “the quest seems inextricably linked to the romance genre” and outlines the typical pattern of the chivalric quest as “an arrival at the royal court on holiday brings a mission, which one of the knights undertakes and fulfills (usually), then returns with at least his story of what happened, often with prisoners and occasionally a kingdom or a bride or both” (5-6). Stripped down to its most bare essentials, then, a chivalric quest narrative requires (1) a knight who (2) sets out on a journey to (3) achieve a particular end. Anthony Adams notes that the end of the quest need not always be actively sought after or fully understood and realized by the protagonist, writing, “While readers are familiar with knights seeking a longstanding goal, such as the Grail, it is more common to have the adventure insert itself rather abruptly into the life of the hero, coming as it does from an unexpected visitor to court or a chance encounter in a forest or other space equally wild and uncivilized” (152). However, it is fair to say that a quest must have some goal in mind at its outset to qualify for the label: a knight wandering from place to place and having a series of unconnected and unstructured adventures does not constitute a quest, though such a story might otherwise have all of the tertiary elements of a quest narrative.

In comparison to many other genres, such as the novel or the short story or the play or the sonnet, the chivalric romance has received only a handful of serious analyses; and few, if any, of those efforts have significantly delineated the quest narrative from the romance’s general form and structure. The result has been that, despite its popular

familiarity and centrality to chivalric romance as a whole, the quest narrative itself is woefully under-analyzed. Where the sub-genre of the quest is regarded at all, it is considered one among many forms of the “hero’s journey,” as most famously explored by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell’s work seeks to find a common narrative thread running throughout the mythologies of the world, where a hero undergoes a cyclical and highly symbolic journey broken down into distinct stages, including the Departure, Initiation, and Return.

Campbell uses chivalric romance as a source for his theories as much as he does the journey-tales within many other contexts. Interestingly for our purposes, Campbell identifies the hero’s journey with a passage into the underworld and “a transit into the sphere of rebirth” (83). Campbell envisioned the hero’s journey as a basic narrative structure inherent to the human experience, one which dramatized universal truths about life and death. A similar pattern can be found within the chivalric quest narrative, and much of this study will mirror Campbell’s work, but the very strengths of his theory as a broad outline make the model less and less useful the more specific one’s inquiry becomes; analysis of the quest’s structure within the narrower context of medieval romance and medieval English society is still necessary to gain useful insights into that particular form.

Perhaps the only scholar to have attempted a serious monograph on the subject of chivalric romance is Lee Ramsey in *Chivalric Romances: Popular Literature in Medieval England*. The volume takes a broad view of chivalric romance in Middle English and attempts to categorize the genre into distinct types, based on their plot and content, including the child exile, the “superman,” the historical figure, the lover, the fairy

princess, family affairs, etc. Ramsey provides a number of examples corresponding to each of these categories and includes brief plot summaries and basic analyses along with them. But the volume is a strangely idiosyncratic piece of scholarship, going into very little detail on any of the examples used and lingering only briefly on each, making virtually no attempt to dig below a surface-level reading of the text. This brevity may sadly be a result of Ramsey's clear and open distaste for his subject, writing in the book's opening line that "today few people read medieval romances, and even fewer enjoy them" (1), and arguing later:

The typical medieval romance shares the characteristics common to other, later forms of popular literature. The most important of these characteristics is the emphasis on plot and action to the exclusion of everything else—rhetoric, idea, and character development included. The rhetoric of the romances is often poor, the philosophic content meager, and the characters simple and obvious. The emotional effects sought after are likewise obvious, often crudely so. Melodrama and sentimentality are much more common than anything that merits the names comedy or tragedy. (5-6)

If even a scholar who is willing to make the effort to author a monograph on chivalric romance can have so little respect for the genre, it should be no wonder that the academic landscape is as barren as it is. Ramsey never bothers to distinguish quests from other romantic tropes, with quest narratives being scattered randomly throughout several other categories and being given no special attention, illustrating the confusing state of modern scholarship: even when chivalric romance is given the attention it is due, there seems to be very little interest in discussing the chivalric quest narrative as a category in itself.

Even Burlin, Downes, and Adams stopped to define the chivalric quest only as a prerequisite for some other discussion, either of a particular work or of a broader concern such as the “hero’s journey.” The groundwork for exploring the quest still needs to be laid.

Many of the critical frameworks used in modern analysis, such as psychoanalytic, new historical, structural, or post-structural, emphasize elements of a text which medieval authors themselves did not consider relevant to their work. While those theoretical frameworks did not take shape until the modern era, that is not to say that medieval scholars were not concerned with literary analysis. Quite the opposite was true, in fact, as medieval writers were exceptionally conscious of and concerned with the structures and meaning of literary texts. Contrary to popular belief, the medieval life was not an unexamined one. As C. S. Lewis writes:

At his most characteristic, medieval man was not a dreamer nor a wanderer. He was an organizer, a codifier, a builder of systems. He wanted 'a place for everything and everything in the right place'. Distinction, definition, tabulation were his delight. Though full of turbulent activities, he was equally full of the impulse to formalise them. War was (in intention) formalised by the art of heraldry and the rules of chivalry; sexual passion (in intention), by an elaborate code of love. Highly original and soaring philosophical speculation squeezes itself into a rigid dialectical pattern copied from Aristotle. Studies like Law and Moral Theology, which demand the ordering of very diverse particulars, especially flourish. Every way in which a poet can write (including some in which he had much better not) is classified in the arts of Rhetoric. There was nothing that

medieval people liked better, or did better, than sorting out and tidying up. Of all our modern inventions I suspect they would most have admired the card index.

(10)

The medieval mind was frequently concerned with systems, structures, and hierarchies, from everyday life to medieval conceptions of planets and stars. The medieval “Model” of the universe that Lewis refers to in his writing left little room for randomness or disorder. So, naturally, commitment to ordering, structuring, and building systems extends into the literary realm as well.

As outlined by Dante Alighieri in *Il Convivio* (The Banquet), medieval poetics divides the study of literature into four distinct layers: the literal, which constitutes the most surface-level reading of the text; the allegorical, which is an element of truth hidden beneath the narrative; the moral, which is the didactic element of the text corresponding to upright behavior; and finally the anagogical, which is described by Dante as:

When a scripture is expounded in a spiritual sense which, although it is true also in the literal sense, signifies by means of the things signified a part of the supernal things of eternal glory, as may be seen in the song of the Prophet which says that when the people of Israel went out of Egypt, Judea was made whole and free. For although it is manifestly true according to the letter, that which is spiritually intended is no less true, namely, that when the soul departs from sin it is made whole and free in its power. (Lansing 41)

The anagogical level is akin to the allegorical in that both suggest a hidden narrative below a literal reading of the text, but while the allegorical may cover any particular or general truths in the mundane sphere, the anagogical level refers to the spiritual truths of

Christianity related to humanity, God, Christ, sin, and salvation. While the first three layers of the medieval system are still used today in both scholarly and casual literary discussion, the anagogical level has fallen out of favor, though not completely.

Northrop Frye, with perhaps less success than he would have liked, tried to revive the old categories of meaning put forward by medieval scholars, and not just for the study of medieval texts but as a framework for the study of all literature. He writes:

The longer one has been familiar with a great work of literature, the more one's understanding of it grows. It would be hard to formulate a more elementary principle of literary experience. Its plain implication, that literature has different levels of meaning, was made the basis of a systematic development of criticism in the Middle Ages, and a precise scheme of four levels of meaning—the literal, the allegorical, the tropological or moral, and the anagogic—was worked out and adopted by many great medieval writers, notably Dante. Modern criticism has not only ignored this, but seems to regard the problem of meaning in literature as merely an offshoot of the corresponding semantic problem in current philosophy. In offering a few suggestions about the possibility of a modern restatement of the medieval theory, I propose to by-pass the philosophical questions involved, on the ground that the obvious place to start looking for a theory of literary meaning is in literature. (“Levels of Meaning” 246)

On the whole, Frye's formulation follows Dante's rather closely, at least in the first three levels of meaning. At the fourth level, Frye tries to secularize, or at least universalize, the anagogical sphere so that it no longer applies to the uniquely Christian religious truths referred to by Dante, but to a secularized form of philosophical truths, tapping into

something like the collective unconscious, or the power of language to form the conceptual universe in which we live (261). In a later volume, Frye would break the four-layered model down into five distinct “phases” of literary symbolism, only one or two of which could be said to wholly correspond to the medieval categories from which they derived (*Anatomy* 115-17). Frye’s work has had a significant influence upon the theoretical framework for this project, but the medieval, spiritual understanding of the analogical as communicated by Dante will form the foundation of this analysis.

In the following chapters, I will unpack the quest narrative as a sub-genre of the chivalric romance and establish its themes on what Dante would have called the analogical level. We will be looking at the quest narrative as a symbolic representation of the most fundamental truths the authors held about the universe, and we will see how the quest narrative engaged profound religious and philosophical questions about mortality, rebirth, sin, and salvation. Chapter 1 will explore the historical and literary origins of chivalric romance as a genre in medieval England, discussing the French and Germanic traditions of the epic and the *chanson de geste*. The chapter will also outline the historical phenomena of pilgrimage and crusade, and discuss how those movements affected English cultural perspectives. Finally, the chapter discusses contemporary religious literature with strong parallels to the chivalric quest narrative.

Chapter 2 will cover *Sir Orfeo*, a Middle English adaptation of the ancient Greek myth of Orpheus. In the myth, Orpheus is a king whose wife is killed, and he travels into the Underworld to confront Hades and bring her back. Orpheus ultimately fails the test given to him by Hades and loses his wife forever. In *Sir Orfeo*, the story is transferred from ancient Greece into a then-contemporary medieval setting, and it concerns the wife of a

king named Orfeo being abducted by fairies and taken to their kingdom, seemingly never to be seen again. Orfeo then wanders far and wide, eventually finding his way into the fae world and convincing the Fairy King to return his bride to him. Unlike Orpheus, Orfeo succeeds in his task, bringing his wife home from her captivity. The chapter will explore the particulars of the adaptation from Greek myth to medieval romance, showing how the basic spiritual framework of the Middle Ages is reflected in how the tale is restructured into a chivalric quest narrative.

Chapter 3 will cover *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which concerns an Arthurian knight, Sir Gawain, participating in a “beheading game,” which requires him to undergo a journey to meet the mysterious Green Knight and submit to being decapitated by him. Along the way, he is faced with temptation in the house of Sir Bertilak, whose wife offers him the chance to save himself from the Green Knight’s axe by means of a magical girdle. Gawain accepts the offer and meets the knight, only to discover that this temptation was itself a test of Gawain’s honor, which he failed. Nevertheless, the Green Knight graciously absolves Gawain of any fault for the theft and allows him to live. In the story, Gawain is required to face both his own death and the imperfections of his soul, both represented here in the figure of the Green Knight.

Chapter 4 will examine “The Tale of the Sankgreal,” one of the later sections of Sir Thomas Malory’s *Arthuriad Le Morte Darthur*, in which we are presented with both the most iconographic quest narrative in Middle English literature and the one most clearly possessed of anagogical themes. The Grail Quest begins when it is initiated by the young Galahad’s arrival at Arthur’s court, where it is undertaken by several knights of the Round Table, including Galahad, Percival, Bors, Lancelot, and Gawain. Each of these

knights has a unique experience of the quest and a unique relationship with the Grail which readily symbolizes the different paths open to the human soul. The Holy Grail, as the cup of Christ which contains his Blood, serves as both a symbol and a literal object of salvation within the narrative, making explicit many of the hidden meanings uncovered in the other quest narratives.

When examining the basic themes and structures of these romances, they point us toward an analogical pattern corresponding to the narrative arc of a human life: the chivalric quest narrative dramatizes the life and death of every person. The knight taking up the quest symbolizes a person's birth, or his coming of age and subsequent entrance into the moral and religious world; the journey itself symbolizes life, with all of its challenges and temptations threatening to turn the knight from his intended path; the quest concludes with a symbolic encounter with death, which takes on many forms and guises; and finally, there is the return, which offers the reader hope that the human soul can escape death and attain eternal life through grace. This pattern can be observed throughout quest narratives within the Middle English canon, and it carries with it a distinctly Christian concern with sin and salvation, theologically linked as they are to death and life. We will see that, ultimately, the chivalric quest narrative exists not merely to entertain its readers or to instruct them on some minor point of moral piety, but to demonstrate what were to the medieval mind profound, universal truths about the nature of humanity and the fate of one's immortal soul.

CHAPTER 1: DEVELOPMENT OF CHIVALRIC ROMANCE

Chivalric quest narratives contain three distinct elements: a knight as the story's protagonist, the knight undertaking a journey of significant length, and the knight having a concrete objective in mind for that journey. So defined, one may parse the quest narrative as a distinct type, or sub-genre, belonging to Middle English romance. Few scholars look at quests specifically for any distinctive patterns inherent to their nature, or consider the quest as a distinct category of narrative. Quests are instead more often discussed as part of the collective corpus of chivalric romance, but chivalric romance as a genre can only be said occasionally to feature any clear or distinct quest narratives. Romances may be written on subjects concerning many knightly activities such as tournaments and battles, they may involve fantastic elements such as fairies, ogres, or demons, or they may concern themselves with love affairs (licit and otherwise); but these stories do not necessarily revolve around quests. And it is the pattern inherent to the quest narrative that we are concerned with exploring here, because it is within that framework that we can find the distinctive themes of death and rebirth which underlie its structure. However, the quest narrative as a literary form still developed within the confines of the larger genre of chivalric romance, so we must trace their historical origins together.

Defining chivalric romance as a genre is not as easy a task as it might at first appear. Lee Manion writes pointedly, "The English medieval romance has vexed literary scholars seeking to impose some meaningful order on it as a genre for some time. Scholars have debated its major characteristics, subject matter, and intended audience, as well as its relationship to French romances, epic, religious writing, and folk material," as well as noting that some scholars have gone so far as to argue that romance simply cannot

be considered a genre in the first place (6). Similarly, when Fredric Jameson sets out to discuss romance as a genre in “Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre,” he traces the work of other scholars and their attempts to define romance, but never settles on a single definition he himself can endorse. Yin Liu writes, “The definition of English medieval romance is difficult for a number of reasons. The first is that the word *romance* itself has had a complex history of polysemy, so that Latin *romanus*, pertaining to Rome, eventually generated the English ‘romantic,’ with its association of magic, escapist nostalgia, sexual adventure, and emotional intensity” (337), and Liu points out that this was by no means a smooth transition, with the word often simultaneously describing any works written in a Romance language (or even any vernacular) and works covering a specific range of subjects, depending on who you ask.

Early attempts at defining chivalric romance often did so by contrasting the form to the epic, with the two often being discussed together. At the turn of the 20th century, W. P. Ker distinguished romance from epic not by concrete attributes but—perhaps wisely—by a set of general impressions, calling romance “the name for the sort of imagination that possesses the mystery and the spell of everything remote and unattainable” and associating the genre with “the magical touch and the sense of mystery” which can be found in a number of seemingly unrelated traditions, from Icelandic sagas to Tennyson (321, 325). Nathaniel Griffin would later write:

So far as formal or material tests are concerned, it is impossible to discover any infallible criterion by means of which [epic and romance] may be distinguished. In form both are metrical narratives and in subject-matter fictions dealing with heroic adventure and achievement. Such are the *Iliad*, the *Beowulf*, the

Nibelungenlied, and the *Chanson de Roland* as representing the epic and *Fierebras*, the metrical *Morte d'Arthur*, the *Roman de Troie*, and the *Roman de Thèbes* as representing the romance. (50)

But while Griffin cannot identify any formal, concrete definitions, he does, like Ker, offer some qualitative guides to the distinction, writing that “by romance we commonly mean a tale of an improbable or, better, of an incredible character. In this respect the romance differs from the epic, which was once, though now, of course, to the modern reader no longer, a credible tale” (55-6). He notes that “the romance always succeeds the epic in point of time,” and argues that, based on that timeline, “The epic is an indigenous, the romance an exotic creation” and the romance is “the characteristic product of a people that has come into contact with an alien civilization and that has allowed its ancestral traditions to be contaminated, if not altogether undermined, by the infiltration of new ideas” (57). Frye, taking a page from the writings of both Jung and Freud, writes that “the quest-romance is the search for the libido or desiring self for a fulfilment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality” (*Anatomy* 193). These perspectives focus on aesthetic or psychological qualities over the actual content of the narratives, as the authors seem unable or uninterested in drawing distinct lines between the chivalric romance and other genres by any other means.

One confounding element of studying Middle English romance is that when scholars do manage to arrive at a more concrete definition, it is often at odds with the best available examples of that genre. Liu remarks that the most common exemplars of the genre, “if we accept the evidence of student anthologies and academic publication,” are *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur* (344), but

often these exemplary texts do not fit in with the definitions we are given of the genre. John Finlayson, without pointing directly to any examples that support the assertion, writes that the definition of romance is “a tale in which a knight achieves great feats of arms, almost solely for his own *los et pris* in a series of adventures which have no social, political, or religious motivation and little or no connection with medieval actuality” (55). But, in fact, many prominent examples of romance, including *Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, do not primarily concern feats of arms, and a number of the stories in *Le Morte Darthur* concern knights participating in battles and other activities for very clearly defined social, political, and religious motivations, as we will discover later on. Thus Finlayson’s definition seems at least as far removed from the corpus of Middle English romance as the romances themselves are from “medieval actuality.” Unfortunately, modern definitions which attempt to form a general description of romance based on specific plot elements or other standardized conventions fail to account for many of the most prominent texts within the genre.

In a situation like this, a natural instinct is to turn to the medieval authors themselves for guidance, but this is not without its own difficulties. Liu writes that, “Not every medieval English text that calls itself a romance is what a modern scholar would like to call a romance, and not every medieval text that a modern scholar would like to call a romance actually calls itself a romance” (336). Unfortunately, the definitions of these terms were just as shaky in the Middle Ages as they have become today. Paul Strohm notes:

Middle English writers lacked any truly neutral terminology for describing narrative genres—*narratioun* emerged only at the end of the period, and the

nearly synonymous *proces* was never widely popular. As a result, Middle English writers classify their narratives with a number of different terms, reflecting such criteria as relationship to actual events (*storie, fable*), mode of narration (*spelle, tale*), language (*romaunce*), literary tradition (*romaunce, legend, lyf*), proportion of represented action to argument (*geste, treatise*), and movement of the fortunes of the protagonist (*tragedie, comedie*). These criteria were not mutually exclusive, and several different terms could be applied to a single work. In the case of Chaucer's *Monk's Tale*, for example, an oral account (*tale*) is comprised of a collection of narratives, each historical or quasi-historical (*storie*) and each dealing with a downward turn in the fortunes of its protagonist (*tragedie*). (348)

The term romance is particularly elusive within the shifting framework, with Strohm going on to write that “While modern critics have a fairly tidy sense of the mediaeval romance as a narrative poem dealing with the adventures of a chivalric hero, the mediaeval understanding of *romaunce* and of its sources in [Old French] *romanz* and *roman* was considerably less circumscribed” (354). It is clear that, for a medieval audience, these categories carried broad expectations and a romance was not confined to any particular subject. But taking romance as a broad category does not necessarily mean it is a useless one. We may find that if we allow the borders of these genres—the epic, the romance, the lay, the fable—to remain somewhat permeable, we will have an easier time navigating this textual landscape.

Manion maintains that “most academics today agree that romance did function as a meaningful category” within medieval literature (6). The problem seems to be less that the genre is impossible to define, and more that these complex, prescriptive definitions

simply do not reflect the actual texts we have before us. As entertaining as it might be to minutely parse what is and is not a genuine romance, we can perhaps avoid much of these problems by arriving at a more broad and forgiving definition of romance akin to how we define many modern genres, such as the ever-elusive “novel.” So considered, a romance is, fundamentally, a popular narrative work written in the vernacular, and a chivalric romance is a romance that focuses primarily upon knights and their exploits. Little else can be said of the genre that is universally true, but we may offer some gestures towards the more general conventions of this genre, distinguishing it from other influential genres of the Middle Ages. As Liu argues, it is most fruitful to define romance not so much as a set of strictly bound conventions, but rather to define it primarily by its best examples. Those texts which occupy a central place within the genre—texts like *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *Le Morte Darthur*—can be used to define the genre as a whole, and it is within that context that we can see observations like those of Ker, Griffin, and Frye find some purchase. The further you go from those exemplar texts, the more romance begins to overlap with other genres; and at the further extremities, the lines between this genre and others, such as epics or lays, may become very fuzzy. But perhaps that fuzziness is to be expected from a genre that occupies such a unique and central place within European history and the development of western literature.

In concord with those exemplar texts, the romance can perhaps best be defined by placing it within its historical and cultural context. According to Ramsey, the chivalric romance began in France during the late twelfth century, developing out of the *chanson de geste* (2-3), a genre primarily concerned with historically significant persons and important battles, and exemplified by *The Song of Roland*. The *chanson de geste* was

itself derived from the Germanic epic tradition, of which *Beowulf* is likely the most familiar example for a modern reader (3). These earlier forms were, in a sense, more cold and exacting than the later romances, exemplifying as they did a warrior culture defined by opposition to foreign invaders. In both *Roland* and *Beowulf*, there is no attempt at romance (in the modern sense), they both eulogize the tragic and violent death of a great hero, and strong emphasis is placed on the warrior culture occupied by the heroes. J. R. R. Tolkien famously identified *Beowulf* as an heroic “elegy,” writing that “all its first 3,136 lines are the prelude to a dirge” (31). The romance tradition holds on to many of these earlier themes, but reshapes them to fit an evolving cultural context, as Ramsey notes:

In form, length, and even subject matter, the romances are similar to the *chansons de geste*, but their attention shifts away from the military society and military virtues, their battles tending to be stylized into the form of jousts and single combats. Instead of the defense of Christendom, their subject is the search for individual identity within an already established society. When the romance’s hero is a king, his usual task is to restore just rule to a nation that has lost it as a result of assaults either from within or without; other heroes of the romance are engaged in making places for themselves within their society, in finding lords or families, in giving purpose to their lives, in getting married. (3)

The romance tradition built on these earlier forms to create highly stylized narratives that, while trading on the older warrior ethos, built into it a sense of courtly optimism. In this form, the chivalric romance spread from France to the British Isles, where it became a vibrant local tradition in its own right.

The fact that romance is a form which comes down to English speakers from French sources is often explicitly noted in the English texts themselves. The title page provided by Caxton for Malory's quest for the Holy Grail identifies it as "The Tale of the Sankgreal Briefly Drawn Out of French," seemingly using the French origin of the story as a selling point for readers (513). Malory's work is well known for being based upon prominent French sources (despite many of the liberties taken in the adaptation), but the origins are somewhat murkier for other Middle English texts. Liu, discussing the Middle English poem *Richard Coer de Lyon*, notes that its introductory lines identify a French source for the story, but this may be more a reference to the romance genre as a whole than to this specific poem (340-1). While it is not impossible that the poet was referring to a genuine French source, no viable candidate has yet emerged, and Liu argues, "The suggestion that the English poem is a translation of a French source is very possibly not to be taken literally, but instead serves as a generic marker, a conventional formula for identifying the poem as a romance" (341). Passages such as this suggest that romance writers were highly conscious of both the literary conventions and cultural origins of their chosen genre.

Chivalric romance was more than merely a literary tradition. The conventions of the genre were ultimately rooted in traditions of knighthood in the real world. In medieval England, knighthood was not just a literary convention but a profession and social position maintained by actual, flesh-and-blood men who served real lords and kings, fought in real tournaments, and left their homes to engage in real warfare. To gain a picture of knighthood as it was understood in Europe during the High Middle Ages, and what conception of knighthood was being referenced within chivalric romance, we must

look at major historical events that shaped the knightly identity. Toward that end, we will look at one of the longest-running and widespread military movements in medieval Europe: The Crusades.

The Crusades were initially launched when Pope Urban II, motivated in part by the conquest of the Holy Land by the Seljuk Turks and their growing encroachment upon the borders of the Byzantine Empire, called for Europe's able-bodied men to take up the cross and depart for Jerusalem to liberate the city from Muslim control. According to Thomas Madden, a prominent historian of the Crusades, approximately 40,000 men marched east to answer Urban's call (12). The First Crusade was an apparently miraculous success, and it succeeded in establishing European crusader kingdoms within the Holy Land, returning Jerusalem and the surrounding territories to Christian control. Retaliation by the Arab leader Saladin's forces in the following decades would return Jerusalem to Muslim control and lead to many additional Crusades being called over the next two centuries, including the iconographic Third Crusade, or the King's Crusade, co-led by England's own King Richard I and King Philip II of France. It is no coincidence that this movement, begun at the end of the eleventh century and continuing to the end of the thirteenth, would also coincide with the formative period for chivalric romance.

The major crusades ended during the late thirteenth century, with King Louis IX of France carrying out not one, but two attempted conquests of Egypt and the Holy Land, the second of which was abetted by forces led by then-Prince Edward of England, and both of which ended in abject failure (Madden 167-86). Interestingly, though his efforts in the East were spectacularly unsuccessful, this did not seem to significantly tarnish the French king's popular image. As Madden explains:

Despite very high casualties, the French had failed to achieve anything, or even reach their final destination. But the reputation of Louis the IX did not suffer in the slightest. After a life of exemplary piety and Christian kingship, he died as he lived, in the service of the faith. A mere twenty-seven years later, the church honored her defender by canonizing him as a saint. (185)

And despite being defeated, Christendom did not give up the idea of crusade. Madden writes:

One might expect that disillusionment and despair would be the natural result, yet despite these failures and a century of similar ones the Christians of Europe remained steadfast in their commitment to the Holy Land. The crusade remained a central part of life and the restoration of the Holy Land a constant prayer of all the faithful. The fire of crusading zeal still burned brightly, and, despite his failures, St. Louis became the model of the selfless warrior of Christ. (186)

While the major crusades into the Holy Land came to an end, and Christians would never reconquer Jerusalem, the *idea* of crusading persisted throughout Europe and influenced how military discourse would be framed from then on.

Historians and literary critics generally discuss the Crusades primarily with continental Europe in mind, but it would be a mistake to think that England was isolated from the campaigns to retake the Holy Land or that the movement had no effect upon the popular consciousness in Britain. After the Norman Conquest of 1066, the Anglo-Saxon nobility was killed and replaced by Norman lords, linking the aristocracy of France and England by blood and land, so while the bulk of the crusading force came from continental Europe, and particularly France, England was an active participant in the call

from the very beginning. There are a number of texts from the period suggesting that, despite major preaching taking place almost exclusively in France, the English were well aware of what was going on across the channel, and according to Christopher Tyerman, “It was later described by one English chronicler as the greatest event since the Resurrection” (15). During the First Crusade, Robert Curthose, duke of Normandy and brother of King William I of England, led an army into the Holy Land, among whom were soldiers from England, and which was both participated in and funded by the Norman gentry in England (15-16). Along with the major participation of English kings in the Third Crusade and the crusades of Louis IX, crusading had a strong grip on the English aristocracy throughout the High Middle Ages.

Timothy Guard notes that, as the Crusades themselves faded, the idea of crusade clearly continued to offer some ideological appeal to the English. Crusades of different sorts were still being called in England as late as 1382, when Henry Despenser, bishop of Norwich, began to recruit soldiers for a crusade against the Flemish supporters of Clement VII and in support of Urban VI’s claim to the papacy. While, like many later crusades, the object of the campaign was not to reach the Holy Land, it was accompanied by the same iconography as the earlier campaigns and was supported by the offer of indulgences from Urban VI in 1383 (1319). As Guard writes, “Contrary to what some historical narratives have suggested, crusading still played an important role in England” (1320), and he argues that while the great Crusades of earlier centuries had disappeared, the crusade continued to be a common homiletic theme into and throughout the fourteenth century:

Transmission of the crusade idea through preaching remained a dynamic force during the period. Sermon bellicosity could easily work as a stimulus, prompting wider reactions in society, and communicating not only core messages of support for “wars of the Cross,” but also a wide range of normative Christian values and standards. It could provide basic instruction on Christian civility, good manners, orthodoxy, confession and penance, as well as matters of pressing national interest and papal policy. (1322)

So while the great crusades had ended, the idea of crusade still had power as a tool of preaching well into the 14th century, and its impact upon the consciousness of the time can be seen reflected in the chivalric romance tradition, both explicitly and implicitly.

In the fourteenth century, the strength of the crusade ideal led to earlier, grander, and more successful campaigns becoming the subject of some nostalgia. The bygone era when crusades were waged by English kings contributed to the English cultural identity, such that chivalric romances of the period often explicitly dealt with crusading as a major theme. As Manion writes, the most prominent example is likely *Richard Coeur de Lyon*, the archetypal “crusading romance,” which recounts a mostly fictionalized Third Crusade as waged by Richard I of England (19-20). With the origins of the chivalric romance coming from Germanic epic and the *chanson de geste*, we can see how the Crusades fit nicely into the narrative mold indicated by those genres. Like Roland, Richard I and other crusaders were portrayed as having fought valiantly against enemies of Christendom, in defense of their own lands, to restore Christian rule to the Holy Land, and to achieve personal salvation. Lee Manion argues that the Crusades, even as they were taking place, embodied a romantic, narrative quality that spoke to concerns

particular to those of medieval and early modern Christianity: “From the beginning, crusading had a narrative component that addressed the medieval or early modern person on the individual and collective level: it told a highly compelling yet adaptable story of vengeance and rightful possession, of personal failure and possible expiation, and of loss and recovery” (2). While these themes are explicitly explored within the crusading romance, we will see as we study chivalric quest narratives that echoes of this dynamic continued even within texts that did not address crusading directly. Loss and recovery, death and resurrection, and sin and salvation are themes woven into quest narratives throughout the romance tradition.

Crusading culture represented not only collective religious and national interests, but also an individual, penitential element which was very near its core. The Crusades were not just a series of military campaigns, but religious pilgrimages meant to win absolution for the individual crusader’s soul. Each man who took up arms during a crusade first participated in a special ceremony of anointing:

During the “taking of the cross,” or “crossing,” a crusader swore to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulcher, the tomb in which Christ was placed and from which he rose. Because of the great expense and difficulties of such a journey, a crusader received a remission from sins, just as would a pilgrim who travelled to a holy shrine. As a pilgrim, a crusader’s lands and properties were placed under the protection of the church until his return. The crusader’s vow was frequently accompanied by other vows of fasting or abstention from sex or by special devotions to be performed during the course of the pilgrimage. Finally, a simple

cross was sewn onto the shoulder of the crusader's garment to signify his status as a pilgrim. (Madden 9-10)

This is not merely to say that a crusade bore some resemblance to pilgrimage or that pilgrimage ideas were transplanted into the crusade. No, "crusade" is in large part a modern term to refer to this particular phenomenon, but it would not have been referred to as a crusade by those who actually participated in them. Madden tells us that "crusaders usually referred to themselves as 'pilgrims' or 'cross bearers'" (10). This is confirmed by Jonathan Riley-Smith, whose work on the Crusades has largely been focused on foregrounding the elements of religious devotion inherent in these campaigns:

The fact that the crusade was a pilgrimage was well understood by those taking the cross, as their charters to religious houses demonstrate. [. . .] The crusaders on the march regarded themselves as pilgrims and observed the liturgical exercises traditionally associated with pilgrimages. They were, however, taking part in an odd sort of pilgrimage, because they were engaged in a military campaign and, more importantly, because the needs of war meant that this pilgrimage was preached as one only for healthy young men. (23-4)

As a result of this dynamic, the Crusades functioned on two distinct levels: they were military campaigns designed to retake lands lost to Christendom over several centuries, but they were also personal quests undertaken out of individual piety and the desire for spiritual absolution. Indeed, crusading activity was often not confined to the officially sanctioned holy wars undertaken by large armies, but as Manion writes:

Historians have begun to study the crusading activity of individuals or small groups, particularly in the eastern Mediterranean, Iberia, or the Baltic, who

sometimes acted outside of ecclesiastical authority. Therefore, as research has shown, for a medieval or early modern audience crusading could mean either a large military campaign or the journey of a solitary pilgrim or small group. (5)

The Crusades were, in a sense, the ultimate penance: an opportunity to cleanse the Holy Land of sinful pagans and in so doing cleanse the self of sin, and to potentially gain eternal life by undergoing a martyr's death.

Pilgrimage was a widespread phenomenon throughout the ancient and medieval world, and still continues to this day. It was particularly popular in medieval Europe as a devotional and penitential practice for devout Christians, and England was no exception. Not only did English Christians travel overseas to visit holy sites such as Jerusalem and Rome, but they often found holy places much closer to home, such as the shrine to Saint Thomas Becket at Canterbury, which became a popular pilgrimage site almost immediately following the archbishop's murder in 1170, and which was the object of the framing narrative in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Pilgrimage in England was an important part of religious devotion throughout the Middle Ages. Diana Webb writes, "For much of the medieval period, the radical dissimilarity of *peregrinatio* from all that normal people considered most comfortable and desirable gave it power not merely as a form of asceticism, a means to a greater spiritual perfection, but as a form of penance, a way of purging the soul of the dross of sin" (xiv). These qualities of pilgrimage, of stripping away the trappings of social and material comforts, of truly *dying to the self* so that the pilgrim could return to his or her community cleansed and reborn, have made it an excellent subject for both secular and devotional writings.

Sociologist Anne Osterrieth has argued that the concept of pilgrimage and “individual quest” are directly linked, with the activity serving both societal and individual concerns. She writes that “Pilgrimage qualifies as being both social institution and individual quest. For example, great medieval pilgrimages were a particular response to the feudal order, both religious and secular, yet in essence expressed individual concern for salvation” (145). Osterrieth’s analysis takes into consideration an understanding that medieval society, along with ancient and early modern society, placed less emphasis in general upon the individual than we in the present day are used to, but that pilgrimage offered an essential outlet for individual fulfillment and temporary freedom from societal pressure. She argues that pilgrimage, in a sense, followed a narrative framework akin to Joseph Campbell’s “hero’s journey,” characterized by the departure, the journey, and then finally the encounter and return, mirroring the narrative of a heroic quest. She concludes:

The great pilgrimages were a medieval institution which offered social recognition to individual quest. [. . .] Most pilgrims did not take to the road because of obligations, social pressure or external benefits in the traditional sense (money or status). They took considerable money, time and risks for an adventure which was in a way very private. However, for the temporary freedom and time out granted to them by their society, the pilgrims were grateful. The community benefited from their enterprising spirit and the objects they brought home. Pilgrimages were thus an integrative force in medieval society.

From this short analysis of pilgrimage, a second conclusion may be drawn. The journey plays an essential role in the quest. It is the long travel into foreign

parts that prepares the pilgrim for the religious transformation. In addition, enlarged consciousness of self and the world stemming from the mundane experience amplifies the spiritual imprint. (155)

Osterrieth's argument both draws a direct line between pilgrimage and quest narratives and also hints at a narrative-based, symbolic element of pilgrimage which the participants were at least somewhat aware of themselves. This narrative pattern was apparently a major part of the appeal, allowing the pilgrim to enact his or her faith in an active, compelling way which should be reflective of the pilgrim's life as a whole.

It is no accident that, like Becket's tomb, many of the most popular pilgrimage destinations were the graves of saints, often martyrs for their faith. Visiting these sites allowed the pilgrims to seek guidance and intercession from those who had lived a successful Christian life and had passed on to their final reward, and the narrative quality of the journey allowed the pilgrim to enact that pattern for themselves. There are a number of examples in medieval literature where pilgrimage is used as an allegorical framework for the Christian life. As Priscila Martin writes, "Much religious literature—sermons, poems, morality plays—presented life allegorically: for example, as a pilgrimage towards true Jerusalem" (315). John Shinnars writes that Guillaume de Deguileville's *Pilgrimage of Human Life* was one of the most popular devotional works in the Middle Ages, being widely distributed and translated into several languages by the end of the fifteenth century (312). In this work, Guillaume likens human life to a pilgrimage, suggesting that each person is merely a traveler in this world, away from his true home. This point is illustrated through a dream which the narrator recounts of himself as a pilgrim travelling to Jerusalem (313). As the narrator prepares for this journey, he happens to meet a woman named Grace

who introduces herself as the daughter of the Emperor (God), and offers to help the narrator find Jerusalem (314-16). The pilgrim is baptized (316-17), and sets out with his staff, scrip, and armor, all forged from Christian virtues like St. Paul's Armor of God (317-18). In this work, a pilgrim's journey to Jerusalem is identified with the Christian's journey to heaven, during which the protagonist is met with a number of tests against his virtue and meets with a number of tempters or helpers on his path, including departed saints. This pattern is reflected in chivalric quest narratives, where there is commonly a sequence where the knight is armed for his journey, sets out, and must face tests of his character.

In some cases, these homiletic narratives come very close to chivalric quests. "The Knight Owein's Journey Through St. Patrick's Purgatory" recounts the exploits of a knight who, seeking penance for his sins, undergoes a pilgrimage into Saint Patrick's Purgatory, a cavern which leads to a place of supernatural temptation and torment (Shinners 504-5). Upon entering the cavern, Owein finds himself in a field where stands a magnificent structure, and inside he meets with fifteen beings who appear as monks and warn him of the demonic spirits which will arrive soon to confront him (505-6). After the monks depart, a horde of demons appear to torture the knight with flames and iron hooks before dragging him deeper into purgatory, where they show him all of the human souls suffering intense tortures there, on each level; and at every stage the demons offer to leave Owein alone if he merely agrees to turn back, but each time he refuses, invoking the name of Christ for protection (507-11). After seeing several other horrors, the knight is brought to a bridge over a flaming river which he is told leads to hell, and he is directed to cross the bridge amidst heavy winds and storms conjured by the demons (512-13). On the other side of the bridge, Owein is able to visit Paradise, where he sees the reward of those who persevere

against sin, but he must return the way he came to his mortal life, cleansed of his sin through the penance of purgatory and hopefully changed for the better (513-17). Here a familiar pattern emerges: the knight sets out on a journey, he is tempted along the way, he passes through death, and is absolved of his sins.

While it would be impossible to recount all of the relevant historical and literary influences upon the romance genre, some of the most direct and obvious influences upon the formation of the genre as a whole, and upon the quest narrative in particular, have been outlined here, including the development of the genre out of the *chanson de geste* and the historical background of crusade and pilgrimage which undergirds the quest's narrative structure. With the Crusades, we see a widespread call of knights to travel far and confront enemies who, being heathen, are as much a spiritual and eternal threat as they are a physical and temporal one. We also see from the Crusades' connection to pilgrimage that this religious and martial fervor was not confined entirely to the warrior class, but was shared by the wider society, a fact exploited for religious instruction. Now that we have some foundation of historical and literary background within which to consider them, we can review some of the more prominent examples of quest narratives within medieval English romance and draw out the symbolic power of their stories.

CHAPTER 2: *SIR ORFEO*

Sir Orfeo is both one of the simplest and one of the most fascinating chivalric quest narratives in Middle English. The story is, on the surface, straightforward, being a Middle English adaptation of the Greco-Roman myth of Orpheus, transplanting the action from Thrace in ancient Greece to Winchester in medieval England. A prominent example of what has come to be known as a Breton lay, *Sir Orfeo* is part of a larger tradition of lays on the subject of Orpheus, which have otherwise been lost. The Middle English text comes to us in three major manuscripts: the Auchinleck Manuscript, Harley 3810, and Ashmole 61, all of which date from the late 13th to mid-14th centuries and are included in a definitive edition published by A.J. Bliss in 1966—due to its completeness and consistent popularity with commentators, all quotations and references here will refer to the Auchinleck manuscript.

The romance generates interest on multiple fronts: as an adaptation of the Orpheus myth, as a window into folk beliefs about fairies, and as a particularly strong example of chivalric romance. As far as that first consideration goes, the most notable change from the classical Orpheus myth is the altered ending: while the two stories differ only in setting and some details for the majority of the narrative, the Orpheus myth ends in loss while *Sir Orfeo* ends with a triumphant restoration. In the Greek myth, Orpheus wins the concession of Hades to take his deceased wife Eurydice with him out of the Underworld but fails to meet the condition that had been set by the god of the dead, losing his wife to the Underworld forever. By contrast, *Sir Orfeo* concludes with the knight rescuing his wife Heurodis from the land of Faerie and the two successfully returning to their kingdom. While the happier ending of *Sir Orfeo* can be dismissed as a

cynical bowdlerization of the original in order to meet the lighter conventions of chivalric romance and the presumed lack of sophistication in the medieval audience, further study of the story's adaptation and narrative structure suggests that the change represents a deliberate, thoughtful commentary upon the themes of the original narrative, and one which reveals the structure of mortality and rebirth in chivalric quest narratives.

According to J. Burke Severs, *Sir Orfeo* comes down to us through a clearly defined but somewhat convoluted textual tradition. The Greek myth of Orpheus itself naturally defies any attempt to trace its true origin, but for the purpose of tracing the story's introduction to the English-speaking world, we can follow the provenance of the romance from its early Roman texts by Virgil and Ovid, through the later writings of Boethius, through Alfred the Great, to the tradition of Breton lays, and finally coming to rest in the Middle English text we have before us. Severs writes:

The most obvious classical influence is in the title and the names: Sir Orfeo, Heurodis, Traciens. In broad outlines the story is like its ultimate origin in Ovid and Virgil: Orfeo's loss of his wife to the Otherworld, his inconsolable grief at the loss, his visit to the Otherworld to seek her, the description of the Otherworld as a place of the dead, Orfeo's captivation of all those below by his harping, his request that she be returned to him and his winning her back through his music.

(187)

There are very few significant deviations between the classical myth of Orpheus and the Middle English *Sir Orfeo* in terms of basic plot or narrative structure, such that it may be tempting to assume that, besides the ending, the only serious deviation between the Roman poets and the English bards is cosmetic: Greece becomes England, Hades

becomes Faerie, etc. But there is more at work. As Severs points out, the account by Boethius in the *Consolation of Philosophy* is a fairly bare-bones affair when compared to his antecedents, only relating the basic outline of the story to the reader, with little flourish. But Alfred, when he set out to create a translation of this influential work into English, added a few embellishments to the narrative which appear to have been picked up by the later versions of the story and carried forward into the romance (188-92). To begin with, although Boethius jumps straight in by telling us of Eurydice's death, Alfred adds a substantial introduction which discusses the lives of Orpheus and Eurydice before their tragedy (190). Alfred also emphasizes Orpheus's power to charm animals with his music to a degree that none of the earlier sources—Virgil, Ovid, or Boethius—ever bothered to do (190-91). Perhaps most tellingly, Alfred also takes pains to detail Orpheus's grief by sending him into a lengthy, self-imposed exile before resolving to enter the Underworld and retrieve Eurydice (191-92). These Alfredian embellishments are not found in any extant classical sources, but they can be found preserved in *Sir Orfeo*, suggesting that the Breton lays from which the poem descended owe something to Alfred's Old English translation.

From those early origins, as A. J. Bliss explains, the provenance of the story becomes muddier as it approaches Brittany and gets caught up in the opaque tradition of Breton lays. The Breton lay of Orpheus, though mentioned by some contemporary sources, is no longer extant (xxxix), so it would be difficult to say how much of *Sir Orfeo* took shape in this context, though it is here that the story properly enters into the medieval romantic tradition. Severs concludes that, beyond the Alfredian innovations upon the Boethius narrative, "Celtic influences account for most of the remaining

differences between the classical versions and *Sir Orfeo*; indeed, these influences are so strong that the dominant mood of the whole is Celtic” (192). Much of the discussion surrounding the story’s Celtic influence revolves around the representation of the fairy king and his court, which draws from a Celtic tradition typically referred to as the Otherworld. Bliss makes a point of the fact that in the Celtic tradition, the Otherworld is rarely if ever associated with death, and most or all stories which involve mortals travelling there have them doing so while alive; but a tale recounted by Walter Map in the late twelfth century work *De Nugis Curialium* recounts a tale similar to that of Orfeo, where a man encounters his long dead wife among the fairies and returns home with her. Constance Davies makes particular note of the Map story, writing:

[The story] bears a curious resemblance to *Orfeo* in this mingling of the kingdom of the Dead with the kingdom of Fairy. The wife, in this story, was dead and buried and yet her husband found her ‘in magno feminarum cetu de nocte’ and snatched her away and brought her back home to human life once more. Whether this old Breton tale had already been contaminated with the classical legend of Orpheus and Eurydice we cannot say, but the strange oscillation between contrary concepts is characteristic of *Orfeo* as well. (162)

Severs confirms that the Map story is an example of classical and Celtic syncretism, similarly noting that “the Celtic Otherworld was the land of the living and characteristically the human visitant was alive” (193), and Bliss insists that the Otherworld only became associated with death by association with the Orpheus myth (xxxiii). So the development from Greek myth into Breton lay was not without some tension, with Celtic and classical elements each being remolded in each other’s image to

become the story we have now, placing the poem in a unique position with regards to the subject of death.

Bliss notes that the action of the story, both in the classical and in the Middle English version, begins in earnest only with the loss of Eurydice/Heurodis. While in the original Eurydice is struck in the heel by a viper and dies, in *Sir Orfeo* Heurodis is instead carried off by the Fairy King while resting beneath an “ympe-tree” (185-92). Referencing other narrative poems like *Tydorel* and *Sir Gowther*, Bliss suggests that “it is a commonplace in the narrative *lais* that those who sleep, or even lie down, under a tree place themselves in the power of fairies” (xxxv). Davies assigns particular symbolic weight to the role of the tree in the poem, writing, “The *ympe tre*, together with the *undertide* [sic], the *comessing of May* and the fairy king’s threat that Heurodis would be torn to pieces if she failed to return to the same place at the same hour the following day, are reminiscent of the ritual sacrifice demanded of those who, in older times, had committed sacrilege by entering the sacred grove at forbidden times” (161). When Heurodis is brought to Orfeo after her dream, she has the appearance of one who is dead, as Orfeo himself states:

Allas! þi rode, þat was so red,

Is al wan, as þou were ded;

& al-so þine fingres smale

Beþ al blodi & al pale.

Allas! þi loueson eyzen to

Lokeþ so man doþ on his fo! (107-12)

The death-like appearance of Heurodis lends support to the idea that at this point in the poem she is undergoing a kind of ritual sacrifice, initiated by her repose under the tree. Then the same ympe-tree under which Heurodis met the Fairy King appears again within his own courtyard, and there Orfeo finds Heurodis beneath the tree in a charmed sleep, surrounded by the twisted forms of many who had previously been thought dead (387-410), giving the fairy court the distinct character of the Underworld. Here we can see that Heurodis' passage into Faerie carries with it associations of sacrifice and death beyond merely their associations with the death of Eurydice.

Even putting aside its connection to the Orpheus myth, many of the story's medieval innovations can be read as symbols associated with mortality, including the King of Faerie himself, and while the Otherworld and Hades may appear to have only a tenuous connection on the surface, some elements of the two mythologies suggest a closer association than one might expect, as Davies writes:

In a vague, imperceptible way, the fairy king, who was also the god of an underworld, since Orfeo had to go "In at a roche" to reach him, seems here to have taken on some of the attributes of Dis, who stole Proserpina away as she was gathering spring flowers in the meadow; and Heurodis also seems to take the place of Proserpina, for Eurydice was not abducted, but killed by the poisonous fangs of a snake. In classical legend, Dis or Pluto was king of the underworld and the dead; but, according to Caesar, the Celts also had a god of the underworld similar to Dis, [. . .] and in later fairy lore he or the classical Dis or both became identified with the king of Fairy, if Chaucer is to be believed: "Pluto that is the kyng of fairye" (*Merchant's Tale*, 983). (162)

So the Fairy King himself, at least in one form, bears up quite well as a parallel to Hades even outside of *Sir Orfeo*, but this begs the question whether other elements of Celtic mythology present within the poem fit into the narrative much more naturally than one might at first think.

Dorena Allen points to the hideously maimed individuals which Orfeo encounters in the courtyard of the Fairy King alongside Heurodis as a prime example of the association between death and Faerie. While one might assume these are merely holdovers from the classical Underworld, there may be a more local tradition worth considering. Allen writes:

Against the glittering magnificence of the background nothing could be more hideously unexpected than this assembly of maimed and suffering figures. Their presence is usually dismissed as a distorted and incongruous reminiscence of classical Hades, but this temptingly obvious explanation ignores one inconvenient fact [. . .] the poem states explicitly that they are *not* dead. (103-4)

From there, Allen explains that in British folklore surrounding the *sidhe*, an analogue to fairies, a belief was held “that many, perhaps most, of those who were thought to die were in reality no more dead than Orfeo’s stolen Heurodis. In their last agony they too had been carried off, body and soul, by the triumphant *sidhe*, and a lifeless changeling, a cunningly fashioned image of wood or straw, left in the place of each” (104). Thus, for a British audience, there was often little genuine distinction to draw between abduction into Faerie and death, two similarly tragic and insurmountable outcomes that could be exchanged with one another in the popular consciousness with relative ease.

We also cannot forget that the context of the story exists not only within a classical and Celtic framework, but also a Christian one, which brought with it its own considerations about the nature of fairies and Faerie. As noted by C. S. Lewis, while people in the Middle Ages by and large believed in the existence of beings such as fairies, that belief did present some tension with a Christian worldview that needed to be reconciled. Lewis writes:

They are marginal, fugitive creatures. They are perhaps the only creatures to whom the [medieval Model of the universe] does not assign, as it were, an official status. Herein lies their imaginative value. They soften the classic severity of the huge design. They intrude a welcome hint of wildness and uncertainty into a universe that is in danger of being a little too self-explanatory, too luminous.

(122)

According to Lewis, there were nevertheless attempts to sort fairies into categories that made sense within the medieval Christian worldview—attempts that met with varying degrees of success. Lewis mentions four of the most popular: “That they were a third rational species distinct from angels and men” (134), “That they are angels, but a special class of angels that have been, in our jargon, ‘demoted’” (135), “That they are the dead, or some special class of the dead” (136), or “That they are fallen angels; in other words, devils” (137). Lewis suggests throughout that these four distinct beliefs and more could be held simultaneously, and a medieval and early modern audience might be relied upon to recognize when an author was making one association or the other (123-4). So, a medieval writer might well expect his audience to respond to fairies both as keepers of the dead and as fallen angels simultaneously.

In reconciling the original Orpheus myth within a Christian paradigm, medieval commentators were quick to apply an analogical framework to the narrative, such that the classical narrative could helpfully serve Christian virtue and lead to a greater understanding of Christ. This reframing of classical texts as prefiguring Christian doctrine was not unusual during the Middle Ages, when Christian scholars routinely embraced classical myths as instructive tools for Christians, while rejecting the literal truth of their cosmology. Dante himself, when choosing an example of the allegorical level of interpretation, used Orpheus:

Ovid says that with his lyre Orpheus tamed wild beasts and made trees and rocks move toward him, which is to say that the wise man with the instrument of his voice makes cruel hearts grow tender and humble and moves to his will those who do not devote their lives to knowledge and art; and those who have no rational life whatsoever are almost like stones. (Lansing 40)

As noted by John Block Friedman, several medieval commentators upon the Orpheus myth were quick to point out the Christian symbolism that could be gleaned from the story. William of Conches connected the character of Eurydice with human desire, or “concupiscence,” the inclination toward sin and worldly pleasure (Friedman 23).

Arnulphus of Orleans and Pierre Bersuire both similarly identify Orpheus as a representation of Christ in raising Eurydice out of the Underworld, and Bersuire makes special note of the fact that Eurydice, like Eve, owes her death to a serpent (24).

Medieval art often depicts Eurydice as being attacked not by a common snake, but a winged dragon-like serpent, or even a devil proper, further emphasizing the association of Eurydice with Eve and Eurydice’s death with humanity’s fall into sin (24-5). Friedman

concludes that “It seems most probable, then, on the basis of both commentaries on and illustrations of Eurydice, that the *Orfeo* poet had a conception of her which *required* her to be attacked by Satan” (26). So, even before the myth was adapted into a Breton lay and the Middle English *Sir Orfeo*, the anagogical potential of the myth was being considered and established, and this was the framework within which the *Orfeo* poet was working, giving the poet’s changed ending a strong thematic justification.

From these examples, it is clear that the themes of death and mortality in *Sir Orfeo* are as comfortable within the story’s new context as they were in the classical original, and that those themes remained at the forefront even within the Middle English text itself. Rather than adopting it merely as a convenient mythical replacement for the Underworld, Faerie was chosen quite deliberately because it filled for a British audience the same mythological role that the Underworld did for a Greek one, and the monarch of Faerie functioned as the same irresistible force of entropy and decay represented by Hades, Dis, or Pluto in the classical canon. While it can be tempting to assume that the changes made to the narrative were merely made to fit the conventions of the romance genre, in providing a familiar cultural context and a happy ending, each of the changes made to the content of the story were thought-out and deliberate—the result of a genuine understanding of the classical myth and a strong desire to remake it with similar force for a contemporary British audience.

Indeed, even if we set aside momentarily the origin of the story in the myth of Orpheus and the parallels that can be found in fairy lore, the story still presents clear themes relating to mortality and loss. Even while making only minimal reference to its origins and cultural context, Rebekah Fowler writes that “the story of *Sir Orfeo* can be

read as an allegory for the process of grief” and that the plot of the poem tracks remarkably well with modern theories of the grieving process (101). She writes that Heurodis and Orfeo behave in a manner which strongly recalls the typical process of a terminally ill patient receiving the news of their imminent death:

The literal reading of the Fairy King’s warning to Heurodis of her future abduction, her sharing of the news with Orfeo, the abduction itself, and Orfeo’s response at each stage provide the foundation for us to interpret allegorically a tale of the patient learning of her terminal illness, her sharing the news with her husband, her death, and the spouse’s reaction, respectively. (103)

Fowler goes on to argue that the rescue of Heurodis from the Otherworld constitutes an allegorical representation of Orfeo coming to terms with his loss and learning to move on as he allows Heurodis to live on in his memory (112), and she concludes that “*Sir Orfeo* thus provides a fascinating window into how medieval writers represented the process of grief and hold up a mirror that reflects our own grief processes” (112). This represents a valuable insight into interpreting the poem on an allegorical level, but as an explanation for why Heurodis is rescued rather than left in Faerie, it remains unsatisfying. The psychological process of coming to terms with a loved one’s death is not in any way similar to having that person returned to you, but Orfeo is able to retrieve Heurodis and return to their kingdom with no indication of having permanently lost anything but time. So why does the story end on this triumphant note rather than upon the sorrow of the myth?

Romances, and particularly chivalric quest narratives, rarely end in abject failure, but it is not enough to say that a happy ending is a common element of the genre; we

must also consider what purpose the happy ending serves in the quest narrative in general and within this particular romance. For insight on the purpose of happy endings in medieval romance, we can look to one of the foremost scholars on the happy ending, J. R. R. Tolkien. In “On Fairy Stories,” he outlines the basic elements necessary for a fairy story, including Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, and Consolation. In Fantasy a person learns to peer into a world outside his own mundane experience, in Recovery his vision of the real world is renewed, in Escape he is freed from slavery to the “real,” and in Consolation he is offered a kind of grace. Tolkien connected this structure with “the oldest and deepest human desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death” (153). In speaking of the happy ending, Tolkien wrote:

The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous “turn” (for there was no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially ‘escapist’, nor ‘fugitive’. In its fairy-tale—or otherworld—setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of the *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief. (153)

Here we see that in the “fairy story,” a category often encompassing the best examples of chivalric romance, a happy ending might have been expected by the poet’s medieval

audience, but it was also necessary for the story to achieve its fundamental aims of redemptive consolation.

Thomas Honegger argues, when discussing *Sir Orfeo*'s influence upon Tolkien's work, that the poem embodies much of the author's particular tastes in literature, fulfilling all of the basic functions of the fairy story which Tolkien so admired. He notes that the lay occupied much of Tolkien's study, and students of Tolkien's, such as A. J. Bliss, would go on to make significant contributions to the poem's study. Honegger writes:

The "consolation of the happy ending" goes deeper than meets the eye at first reading. *Sir Orfeo* is not simply the "classical myth" of Orpheus and Eurydice with a "new" ending, but a different story altogether. Tolkien's comment (MS B, *OFS* 219) on the different versions of Red Riding Hood is equally true for *Sir Orfeo*: "The really important thing is that this version is a story with a happy ending, and that Perrault's was not. There is a world of difference They are different stories." The "Consolation of the Happy Ending", which Tolkien considered essential for all true fairy-stories, transforms the classical tragic myth of loss and despair into a fairy-story of recovery and hope. (123-4)

Tolkien was writing from a Christian perspective, the *eucatastrophe* being tied directly into the redemptive model of grace in Christian doctrine, and that is a basic worldview shared by the *Orfeo* poet and his contemporaries. Tolkien's model of the ideal fairy story is easily applied to the most prominent examples of chivalric quest narrative in medieval literature, including *Sir Orfeo*, which exemplifies the redemptive structure that quest narratives embody.

There was a fundamental flaw in medieval attempts to frame the Orpheus myth as symbolic of Christian salvation: the story does not easily lend itself to such a model, at least not completely. While the symbolism is there from the beginning—Eurydice is killed by a snake, followed by her husband, in an easily drawn parallel to Adam and Eve and the Fall of Man—the story ends in despair—Orpheus heroically descends into the Underworld and confronts death, only to be defeated by his own human weakness. There is ultimately no redemption for Orpheus, proving that death is final and insurmountable; which is a perfectly reasonable lesson for an ancient Greek audience, who had no concept of mankind being freed from the bonds of human weakness and mortality, but it is antithetical to a worldview steeped in the philosophy of Christian Salvation from sin and death. The *Orfeo* poet ultimately did what medieval commentators like Arnulphus of Orleans and Pierre Bersuire could not: he Christianized the myth. By rebuilding the story in the mode of a chivalric quest narrative and allowing his Sir Orfeo to rescue Heurodis from the clutches of the demonic Fairy King, the poet created an anagogical representation of Christian redemption, where those who descend into death are ultimately returned to life.

If we consider an anagogical reading of the text, that stories can ultimately point to the redemption of the soul and the rescue from death of humanity, the events of the poem take on a whole new character beyond what is on the surface. When the poem describes the noble Orfeo who loves music and can charm all the beasts of the field and birds of the air with his harp, and his fair lady Heurodis who is beautiful, graceful, and good (25-56), it is ultimately describing a prelapsarian state of grace, before death is introduced into the world of the poem. When Heurodis goes walking with her

handmaidens in an orchard, where she is left alone beneath a tree (57-72), she is echoing Eve's encounter with that ancient Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. When the Fairy King states his intention to carry Heurodis away to his kingdom (131-74), he acts out two important roles: that of death, come to take a young woman away before her time, and of Satan, who tempted Eve and carries mortals away in excesses of sin. It is no coincidence that the Fairy King of *Sir Orfeo* replaces not only Hades who kept Eurydice prisoner in the Underworld in the original myth, but also the serpent who bit her. With a more complete understanding of the mythological framework the poem is operating within and that the poem's audience would have understood, these scenes become clear analogical representations of the Fall of Man.

Orfeo's struggle to retrieve his abducted bride places him in three distinct theological frameworks. He is first, insofar as Heurodis undergoes the trials of Eve, the Adam of Genesis, being exiled from Paradise upon the intervention of a malevolent supernatural force, the Fairy King, here enacting the role of the Serpent. But Orfeo is not only the first Adam, but also the second one: Christ. Orfeo, a king, throws off the trappings of his royalty to humble himself and take on the role of a simple commoner, where his humility and self-sacrifice allow him to win back Heurodis from the Fairy King, a representation of sin and death. Here, with Heurodis taking on the role of fallen humanity, this narrative echoes the common symbolic representation of the Church as the bride of Christ. Finally, Orfeo can himself be read as the fallen human soul which faces death but is redeemed by his love and loyalty toward Heurodis, to whom he is bound in the sacramental union of marriage, through which Orfeo and Heurodis receive saving

grace. All three of these associations can exist simultaneously within the poem, in many places complementing each other and introducing complexity and depth to all three.

Throughout this narrative, Orfeo is a fellow sufferer with Heurodis. When he sees the terror and death-like pallor of his wife, he cries out, “A! dame, ich biseche merci” (113), begging that the two of them might be shown mercy. When Heurodis tells Orfeo that she must depart, Orfeo emphasizes their shared fate in the bond of marriage, saying:

For-lorn icham!

Whider wiltow go, & to wham?

Whider þou gost ichil wiþ þe,

& whider y go þou schalt wiþ me. (127-30)

Thus Orfeo is presented as a type of Adam, falling with his Eve, Heurodis, and when Orfeo abdicates his throne and enters the wilderness (212-18), he is willingly subjecting himself to loneliness and exile, a fate that mirrors hers. As she was claimed by the Fairy King away from the protection of her home, so too does Orfeo abandon those things in his grief. Orfeo’s ten-year exile (264-5) thus also serves as a kind of penance, or a test of Orfeo’s loyalty and commitment to that vow he made when he was still by his wife’s side. Through his self-denial, Orfeo demonstrates a form of ascetic recommitment which prepares him for his quest.

Orfeo’s rescue of Heurodis begins when he spots her with the Fairy King as part of a fae hunt in the forest, where she is identified as “his owen quen, Dam Heurodis” (322), reminding us of the close personal and sacramental bond shared by the couple, which is emphasized further by Heurodis’ own reaction to seeing her husband:

Ȝern he beheld her, & sche *him* eke,

Ac noiþer to oþer a word no speke,
 For messais þat sche on *him* seiþe,
 Pat had ben so riche & so heiþe.
 Þe teres fel out of her eiþe:
 Þe oþer leuedis þis y-seiþe
 & maked hir oway to ride
 — Sche most wiþ him no lenger abide. (323-30)

This moment is perhaps the most powerful passage in the poem, as the husband and wife, separated from each other for a decade, are unable to speak to one another for fear of the Fairy King's wrath. It also serves to emphasize the heights from which the two have fallen into this degradation, illustrating the stakes of the poem's conflict, and providing the emotional force to carry Orfeo into his quest to journey into Faerie and rescue his wife (347-86).

When Orfeo enters Faerie, he enters the courtyard of the Fairy King, where he finds the souls of people thought dead:

Þan he gan behold about al
 & seiþe liggeand wiþ-*in* þe wal
 Of folk þat were þider y-brouzt,
 & þouzt dede, & nare nouzt.
 Sum stod wiþ-*outen* hade,
 & sum non armes nade,
 & sum þurth þe bodi hadde wounde,
 & sum lay wode, y-bounde,

& sum armed on hors sete,
 & sum astrangled as þai ete;
 & sum were in water adreynt,
 & sum wiþ fire al for-shreynt. (387-98)

These souls are not merely dead, but apparently suspended in a grotesque display of their perpetual suffering, the unfortunate means of their final ends being used to decorate the courtyard of the Fairy King. It is difficult to imagine a more potent representation of Hell outside of the works of Dante, and here Sir Orfeo's traversing of this terrain puts him in the company of Sir Owain as he journeyed into Saint Patrick's Purgatory.

When Orfeo finally enters the Fairy King's hall, he presents himself as "bot a pouer menstrel" (430) instead of a knight or a king, humbling himself before the fairy court and, in essence, dying to the self in order to achieve a greater aim. Similarly, instead of demanding the return of his wife, which he has every right to do, Orfeo plays his harp and waits to be offered a gift according to the Fairy King's magnanimity, such as it is (449-52). And finally, once Heurodis is restored to Orfeo, the two are able to return to their kingdom, which has been held for them by a faithful steward (553-4), presenting a strong parallel to the restoration of the human soul to its rightful place in the Kingdom of Heaven or of the ascension of Christ to His heavenly throne. Orfeo's story thus plays out in symbolic fashion all of the major elements of the Christian view of human history and of the progress of the individual soul.

Sir Orfeo's greatest contribution to an anagogical reading of chivalric quest narratives is its saturation in the imagery of death, an aspect which it owes in equal parts to its classical roots, its use of Celtic folklore, and its adoption of romantic convention.

As a reflection on mortality, *Sir Orfeo* is unparalleled within the romance tradition, presenting a complex and effective illustration of loss and grief, but also the possibility of recovery and reconciliation. While the original myth of Orpheus offered a sobering look at the finality of death, *Sir Orfeo* loses none of that melancholic power while still offering a profound and uplifting hope for the future. But in these regards, *Sir Orfeo* is also far from unique. These themes are embedded throughout the romance tradition in quest narratives from many disparate Middle English sources, each emphasizing a different aspect of this anagogic structure. To illustrate this thread, we will look at two more chivalric quest narratives in the upcoming chapters and show how they too make use of the themes of mortality and rebirth.

CHAPTER 3: *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is one of the most widely read and discussed chivalric romances in Middle English. *Sir Gawain* has earned its vast popularity, presenting a complex narrative full of exciting fantastical elements, vivid descriptive language, compelling poetic structure, complex and interesting characters, and a moral depth rarely credited to romance. It survives in only one late 14th century manuscript, Cotton Nero A.x, which also features the poems *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, and *Patience*, all of which have generally been believed by scholars to share a common author, typically referred to either as the Gawain Poet or the Pearl Poet. The other poems are of a more overtly didactic nature than *Sir Gawain*, offering as they do explicit discussions of Christian doctrine and principles of moral virtue such as purity, obedience, and faith. By comparison, *Sir Gawain* is a more “secular” work, containing relatively few overt references to God, sin, salvation, or other theological subjects, but it nevertheless follows a strong anagogical pattern which can be discovered if we carefully peel back the surface of its story.

While *Sir Gawain*, like all medieval romances, draws heavily upon literary and folkloric traditions to establish many pieces of its story, the poem is nonetheless a unique work of art which carries the mark of an authorial hand. Unlike *Sir Orfeo*, there is no single mythological tradition, classical or otherwise, which provides a clear source for the story as a whole, but rather several parallels and antecedents have been suggested by scholars over the decades. By far the most popular mythological lens through which to view the poem, going almost all the way back to the manuscript’s rediscovery in the 19th century, is what has sometimes been termed the theory of the “vegetation myth.” In this

view, *Sir Gawain* dramatizes an ancient, and now lost, myth involving a Celtic deity of life and fertility represented by the Green Knight. The poem, as the theory goes, preserves a tradition which was born out of the annual death and rebirth of nature in the coming of winter and spring, trading in part on the belief that the fairies and enchantments of medieval romance are ultimately degraded versions of pre-Christian gods and mythical cycles. William A. Nitzze writes, “The origin (even when unknown) of a story may be quite distinct from its later interpretations [. . .] What is enchantment in the latter case may have been myth, or indeed ritual, in the former; and it is often but too true that only a careful study of surviving constituent elements of a tale or ceremony can be a guide as to its ultimate origin” (351-2). So the operation of identifying the poem with an ancient seasonal myth is built upon unearthing clues from the text itself in hopes of recalling an earlier version of the story.

The more common elements of the poem marshaled in support of this theory are the Green Knight’s strange appearance and the story’s seasonal setting. When he first enters King Arthur’s hall, the Green Knight dramatically arrests the Christmas festivities by his appearance. He is described by the poet as being “On þe most on þe molde on mesure hyghe” (“Sir Gawain” 137), “half etayn” (140), “þe myriest in his muckel þat miȝt ride” (142), and—most strikingly— “ouerall enker-grene” (150). Of the Green Knight’s attire, the poet goes on at length about its richness and attractiveness, with a liberal adornment of gold and precious jewels throughout, which even carries over to the attire of his gigantic green horse (151-202). Other details given to us about the green man are that he has a large beard which hangs down “as a busk” over his chest (182), and that he has fierce red eyes (304). Finally, the knight enters the court of Arthur carrying in one

hand a holly bob, which the poet tells us is “grattest in grene when greuez ar bare” (207), and in the other a huge axe, as imposing, well-shaped, and adorned as its owner (208-20). While, at the end of the poem, it is revealed that the Green Knight is in fact a human man only temporarily transformed into that strange shape by the powers of Morgan le Fay (2444-66), scholars of Nitzze’s school see under the surface of that description a god of the forest: a wild, untamed spirit of fertility and life come bursting into the civilized domesticity of Arthur’s court.

Nitze points out a number of objects and plot elements within the narrative that he argues correspond to the poem’s mythological origins. He lays out the core of his argument, revolving around the Green Knight himself and, importantly, the conclusion of the story:

The challenge is given on New Year’s Day; the challenger’s face on that occasion—his hair and beard, his coat and mantle, his horse and its accoutrements, are all green, and in one hand he carries a holly bough [. . .].

Barer still is the scene when Gawain, a year later, journeys to the green chapel:

Clowdes kesten kenly þe colde to þe erþe, (2001)

Wyth nyze innoghe of þe norþe, þe naked to tene;

Þe snawe snitered ful snart, þat snayped þe wylde;

And as he finally approaches the Chapel, he beholds by the side of a roaring stream a mound, overgrown with turf, having a hole at the end on either side, so that he is reminded of

An olde caue, (2182)

Or a creuisse of an old cragge;

Thence issues the challenger or Green Knight. With this testimony before him, how can any one deny, as Kittredge did, the possibility that the Green Knight here represents “the annual death and rebirth of the embodied vital principle”?

Personally I can think of no explanation that fits the case as well. (357-358)

The structure described in the poem bears a strong resemblance to burial mounds erected by pre-Christian Celtic and Germanic peoples, so as Nitze and others of his school see it, these images carry powerful symbolic weight. Nitze frames the story, where the Green Knight first appears at the beginning, disappears during the intervening year, and reemerges from a tomb-like structure at the end, as an allegory for the death and rebirth of the “vital principle” during the yearly cycle of seasons.

It is an attractive perspective on the poem, and one many scholars have returned to over the years. As A. V. C. Schmidt writes, “There seems to be life inexhaustible at the roots of this type of approach to the poem” (146), even as the salient details of the interpretation change from scholar to scholar. Still, scholars have poked several holes into the theory, and some have gone so far as to dismiss the idea entirely as a fantasy invented by those looking for a pagan god hiding behind every tree or stone in medieval romance. Regarding the Green Knight’s strange hue, Derek Brewer writes:

Essentially the conception of the vegetation-god was a projection of that wider cult of “nature” and neo-paganism common in English literary circles in the earlier part of the twentieth century, as seen in D.H. Lawrence, E. M. Forster, Kenneth Graham (in the chapter “The Piper at the Gate of Dawn” in *The Wind in the Willows*), A. E. Waite, and many others. It was often combined by a taste for the occult, for discovering ancient myths and mysteries driven underground by the

oppressive rationality of medieval Christianity; as in Jessie Weston, for whom all surviving Arthurian story was but the pathetic detritus of much greater pagan works now lost. (181-2)

The effort to connect the story with an earlier pagan myth also runs contrary to placing any emphasis upon the Green Knight's appearance, because while the poet himself does seem to be drawing an intentional association between the Green Knight's flesh and the greenness of the holly he carries, none of the poem's well-recognized antecedents offer much support.

While scholars of this school are interested in an antecedent narrative buried somewhere deep in Celtic myth, the still extant versions of earlier sources are not terribly promising for such a theory. Elisabeth Brewer traces the origins of the "beheading game" plot to an Irish tradition involving the mythical hero Cuchulainn, writing:

To go back to the origins of the story itself, the earliest surviving example of the Beheading-game seems to be in the Middle Irish *Fled Bricrend* (*Bricriu's Feast*), of which there are two separate versions. At a great feast in hall Cuchulainn, the hero, accepts the challenge of the huge, shape-shifting Terror who descends on the company and beheads him, whereupon Terror departs, carrying his head. Next day Cuchulainn keeps his promise to submit to a return blow, but Terror spares him, after giving him three strokes of the axe with the blade reversed. He then praises Cuchulainn as the best of warriors.

In the second version, the shape-shifting Curoi in the form of a churl challenges the warriors of the court to behead him with a huge axe. As in the other version he then departs carrying his head. Though they succeed in

beheading him, they do not present themselves the next night when he comes back, but Cuchulainn subsequently beheads him again, smashing his head with a second blow. When he returns the next night, Cuchulainn prepares to keep the covenant, but the churl then spares him and declares him the champion. (245)

The similarities are enough that scholars are confident in drawing a line between *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and these Middle Irish stories, but most of the story elements meant to support the tale as a vegetation myth are conspicuously missing: the challenger is not green, there is no year-long cycle between the two parts of the game, there is no tomb, and there is no emphasis upon a winter setting. While, as A. H. Krappe writes, it is possible that “the English poem has preserved a feature suppressed by the others as unimportant or incomprehensible” (207), that is not much to hang a theory on; and with the evidence before us, it seems far more likely that the Green Knight’s color is an innovation of the poet, either to draw an association between the knight and the season, simply for the striking nature of the image, or for some other symbolic purpose.

These symbols hold more than simply one potential meaning for the medieval audience. As Dale Randall writes, the color Green in the Middle Ages was “variously associated with life, rebirth, youth, love, faithfulness, and chastity,” but was also associated with fairies, the Celtic Otherworld, and with death (479). In contrast to the prevailing reading of the Green Knight as a fertility god, A. H. Krappe argues that the Green Knight is actually not a representation of life or fertility, but rather a representation of death. This association has the advantage of not relying entirely upon speculation surrounding a proposed mythological origin, being grounded in the character’s role

within the poem itself. Towards the end of the poem, the man accompanying Sir Gawain to the Green Chapel tells him that the Green Knight has killed many men with pleasure:

He chevez that chaunce at þe Chapel Grene,
 Þer passes non bi þat place so proude in his armes
 Pat he ne dynggez hym to deþe with dynt of his honde;
 For he is a mon methles, and mercy non vses,
 For be hit chorle oþer chaplayn þat bi the chapel rydes,
 Monk oþer masseprest, oþer any mon ells,
 Hym þynk as queme hym to quelle as quyk go hymseluen. (2103-9)

We see him appear only in the dead of winter, when all of nature is in a death-like repose, rather than during summer or spring, when one would expect to see a fertility god at his most active, and his own stated purpose for challenging Arthur's court in the first place was to "have greued Gaynour and gart her to dyȝe / With glopnyng of þat ilke gome þat gostlych speked / With his hede in his honde bifore þe hyȝe table" (2460-62). Let us not forget, either, that the Green Knight's most striking attribute, after his appearance, is that he carries a giant axe, suggesting the role of an executioner. Krappe writes:

The Green Knight is, however, a very peculiar executioner: He gallantly suffers himself to be beheaded first, unfortunately, after having bound his victim to submit to a like operation at the end of a stipulated term, then picks up his head and walks off with it. It is thus clear that he is not an ordinary executioner but a supernatural, an immortal one, in fact, the only deathless executioner known, namely Death itself. (208)

This seems punctuated by the clear association which is drawn between the Green Chapel at the end of the poem and an ancient burial mound: a far more appropriate setting for a revenant or a psychopomp than a creature embodying life and fertility. Most importantly, if the Green Knight is indeed meant to symbolize life, he appears woefully miscast in the narrative as written. Gawain's challenge is not to face life, but to bravely and willingly go to his death—if the Green Knight is meant to represent a recurring “vital principle,” the triumph of life over the bleakness and cold of winter, his relationship to Gawain becomes thematically nonsensical. A supporter of the vegetation myth theory is forced to conclude that either the poet had no real symbolic or moral purpose for Gawain's role within the story, or that he plucked the seasonal myth out of the folkloric tradition completely ignorant of its allegorical meaning while still carefully preserving the all-important pagan imagery excised by many of his predecessors and contemporaries. Both of those conclusions strain the literary imagination beyond the breaking point.

As we saw when examining *Sir Orfeo*, any association made between a character and Faerie carried at least some potential stain of the demonic, and the transformation we examined there of the Celtic Otherworld and the realm of Faerie being syncretized with both the Greek Underworld and Hell had long been in place by the time the Gawain poet began his career. Many of the attributes of the Green Knight used to claim him as a fertility god or a fairy are just as easily applied to a demonic creature. Elisabeth Brewer argues, for instance, that the Green Knight's greenness is “a feature probably deriving from the tradition in which the devil appeared in that colour” (243). Randall writes that throughout medieval Europe, fiends are often depicted as being dressed in green, a color which identifies them with hunters, but hunters whose game is men's souls (481).

Geoffrey Chaucer, a contemporary of the Gawain poet, wrote of such an encounter with a devil in “The Friar’s Tale.” Here the demon appears to his prey as a forester:

A gay yeman, under a forest syde.
 A bowe he bar, and arwes brighte and kene.
 He hadde upon a courtepy of grene,
 An hat upon his heed with frenges blake. (1380-1383)

The green color of the devil’s attire, along with the bow and arrows which he carries, signals to the reader that the character is a hunter, which makes sense for a person employed as a forester, but which may also be a subtle hint to Chaucer’s audience about his true nature. In *Sir Gawain*, the Green Knight is similarly outfitted as a hunter even in his human form, since Bertilak is shown hunting in the forest on each day of Gawain’s stay with him, first catching deer (1126-77), then a boar (1421-75), and finally a fox (1690-1732), which each correspond to the three visits Bertilak’s wife makes to Gawain’s chamber (1178-1318, 1476-1557, 1733-1870). The hunting scenes are set up to parallel Gawain’s temptation by the lady of Hautdesert, trading on familiar images associated with demonic entities within medieval folklore.

Similar weight is placed upon the location of the fiend’s home, as geographical positions played an interesting role in the folklore surrounding devils. In “The Friar’s Tale,” when the fiend and the summoner exchange pleasantries, the devil describes his home as such:

“Brother,” quod he, “fer in the north contree,
 Wher as I hope som tyme I shal thee see.
 Er we departe, I shal thee so wel wise

That of myn hous ne shaltow never misse.” (1413-1416)

Here, as the reader eventually learns, the “north country” referred to by the demon is in fact Hell, and he tells the summoner that he hopes to see him there someday, in an ironically friendly gesture which carries with it ominous connotations. Locating Hell in the north was a common trope in the Middle Ages, and it is also used in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Randall writes of the Green Knight:

Just what his nature may be is intimated by the location of his home the green chapel. Although the poem is not specific with regard to the route which Gawain pursues in his search for the green chapel, it seems clear that he is travelling northward. He begins, of course, at Camelot, which presumably would have been associated with Windsor after the re-establishment of the Round Table by Edward III in 1344, and is in any event conjecturally located in southern England. From Camelot he progresses northward to Wales, then on into the wicked wilderness of Wirral, and, possibly, still farther northward. The fact is, of course, we cannot know the location of the green chapel with certainty. We do know, however, that the places which the poet names are far north of Camelot’s probable location. (Randall 487)

While not everyone who wears green and lives to the north must necessarily be a devil, it is nevertheless intriguing that the Green Knight and Chaucer’s devil share these two particular attributes, considering that they were written during the same period.

The poet himself associates the Green Knight with the devil late in the poem, when Gawain encounters the Green Chapel for the first time:

‘We! Lorde,’ quop þe gentyle knyzt,

‘Wheþer þis be þe Grene Chapelle?

Here myȝt aboute mydnyȝt

Pe Dele his matynnes telle!’ (2185-8)

Here Gawain sees the Green Chapel and immediately suspects it to be the dwelling place of a devil where he would perform his infernal rituals. Gawain’s comment punctuates the sense that, even though the Green Knight is, diegetically, a man transformed into a monstrous shape by Morgan La Fae, the imagery evoked by that shape would likely have conjured associations of the demonic within the mind of the original audience. And as we discussed with *Sir Orfeo*, identifying the Green Knight as a fiend is not mutually exclusive with an ancient Celtic god or even a fairy. And indeed, one could see these interpretations as strongly complimentary of one another: many pagan deities were adopted into medieval and early modern demonology, under the paradigm that demonic entities had an interest in spreading false belief and would pose as false gods to do so. However, this interpretation would run contrary to any suggestion that the Green Knight’s reemergence at the end of the poem is a hopeful reference to the return of spring.

Nor does the Green Knight’s genial disposition preclude any demonic associations. As Coree Newman notes, medieval literature often featured demons—otherwise framed as enemies of God and resentful of humanity—who would serve a positive role in driving people toward salvation. As we see with Chaucer, fiends could serve multiple roles within a narrative, including as a more-or-less positive force employed to test the virtue of Christian souls, or as cautionary mirrors of the human condition. Newman writes:

Accounts of demons expressing sadness and regret for their loss appear often in exempla collections between the late twelfth and early fifteenth centuries. Despite the prevalence of such ambivalent demons in medieval exempla, demons who express regret for their fall and who long to return to God are rarely, if ever, mentioned in the modern scholarship on demons and the devil. Indeed, the words and actions of these demons hardly seem consistent with the picture of the universally evil and threatening demons often painted by modern scholars. (47-8)

As we saw with our discussion of Sir Owain's journey through purgatory, *exempla* literature and hagiography often bore strong parallels to chivalric quest narratives, with there being significant overlap between those genres. During Owain's journey, demonic creatures serve as both his adversaries and his guides, leading him through the purgatorial wastes and carrying out the penance which is necessary to purge his soul of sin so that he can attain salvation.

The argument that the poem represents a degradation of a pagan myth surrounding the rebirth of spring makes a number of assumptions about the world in which the poet operates, chief among which is the dismissal of the idea that these elements were chosen deliberately by the poet or a near contemporary source for the symbolic meaning which they held to themselves, rather than to their ancient ancestors. It is common for modern readers to assume that any reference to the significance of the changing seasons is necessarily pagan, but the seasonal cycle was an important reality to everyone who lived in the pre-modern world. As members of an agrarian society, the people of medieval England depended upon the predictability of the seasonal cycle for their day-to-day livelihoods. Far more than in our modern, first world society, the

changing of the seasons was a daily lived reality: it determined what sort of food was available, whether travel was possible, how long you worked per day and in what task, whether you could go to war, and what sort of prayers you said at night. This concern with the natural world would by no means be diminished by the Christian worldview which medieval Europeans professed, and the seasons were as meticulously marked by the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages as they were by any pagan society.

The holly bob with which the Green Knight enters the hall reminds the reader of the yuletide setting of the story, the Green Knight himself mirroring the appearance of the undying branch with his green skin and red eyes like ripe berries. The feast which the knight interrupts takes place on New Year, and this fact is referred to multiple times by the poet, who mentions the date no less than fifteen times throughout the poem (60, 66, 105, 284, 404, 453, 1054, 1062, 1075, 1669, 1675, 1968, 1998, 2244, 2400), while terms to the effect of “Christmas” or “Yule” appear an additional twelve times (37, 65, 283, 284, 471, 500, 502, 683, 734, 907, 985, 1655), so it is safe to say that the seasonal setting of the tale is an important theme to the poet. In one such instance, after the Green Knight has left Arthur’s hall, Arthur reassures the queen by saying “Wel bycommes such craft upon Cristmasse” (471), suggesting that Christmas is the appropriate time for such strange wonders to occur. In another place, the poet recounts the changing of the seasons while Gawain awaits the time he must seek out the Green Knight:

Forþi this 3ol oueryede, and þe 3ere after,

And vche sesoun serlepes sued after oþer:

After Crystenmasse com þe crabbed Lentoun

Pat fraystез flesch wyth þe fysche and fode more symple. (500-3)

And so the passage continues, describing each season in turn between when the Green Knight challenged Gawain and when Gawain is obliged to go to him, including the coming of spring (504-15), “þe sesoun of somer wyth þe soft wyndez” (516), and then the autumn (523-7), signaled by the “Mezelmas mone” (532), until All Saints’ Day, when Arthur’s court bids Gawain farewell (536). When Gawain does finally depart, the poet lingers for a considerable time upon the hardships that Gawain must endure on his journey, including, most vividly, the harsh winter weather (691-739). According to the vegetation myth theory, all of these elements dramatize an ancient mythological cycle of death and rebirth indicative of the changing seasons.

But the poet does not only account for the changing of the seasons or yearly cycle of the rebirth of spring, but makes pointed references to the church calendar: first and most prominently to Christmas, then to Lent (502), Michaelmas (532), and All Saints’ Day (536), the day that Christians set aside to commemorate the saints who have attained heaven. As Richard Newhauser writes:

Liturgical elements frame the events of the romance and add their own implications to these actions: the wounding of the Green Knight at Arthur’s court and that of Gawain in the Green Chapel occur on New Years’ Day, when the Feast of the Circumcision was celebrated, and these wounds suggest the action of circumcision [. . .] Furthermore, when Gawain sets out to find the Green Knight, it is on All Souls’ Day after having attended with ominous suitability a requiem mass, all of which contributes an especially solemn note to the reminders of death which begin to accumulate at this point in the narrative. (270)

These liturgical events have, in themselves, a narrative quality. The church calendar to which the poet refers is meant to follow the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ, beginning with the Christmas season and continuing through to Easter, and these holidays parallel similarly seasonal traditions in Celtic and Germanic paganism, through which there was undoubted syncretism between these traditions. As Priscilla Martin writes:

The time scheme for *Sir Gawain* is structured by the natural and liturgical year. The action of the poem begins on New Years' Day, a symbolic new beginning, with the Green Knight's visit to Camelot and ends exactly a year later with Gawain's promised visit to the Green Chapel. One of the most striking passages of the poem tells the passage of the seasons during the year, which seems to accelerate as Gawain draws nearer to that grim journey. It takes him into the coldest and darkest time of year but also the time which heralds the Nativity. Conversely, the interlude of warmth, leisure and comfort in the castle is the time of real danger. (318)

So, we can say that insofar as the poem dramatizes the cycle of seasons as understood by early pagan societies, it consequently parallels the Christian liturgical cycle just as well. These two associations are by no means mutually exclusive—as we have seen with our discussion of *Sir Orfeo*, authors of medieval romance were happy to synthesize Christian and non-Christian traditions to attain their own symbolic ends. When we examine the poem through that medieval lens, we can see the poet taking Gawain on a symbolic journey through the birth, life, and sacrificial death of Christ for the redemption of his own soul.

Gawain himself is a distinctively ambiguous figure within the Arthurian canon, even by the standards of that already widely varied mythos. The character of Gawain goes through a complex series of revisions throughout his career as a literary figure, beginning—for our purposes—with Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*. As Elisabeth Brewer notes, this Gawain is introduced as Arthur’s loyal nephew and “a heroic and blameless warrior” (244). Geoffrey of Monmouth does not flesh out Gawain’s character much, but as Arthuriana progressed, Gawain began taking on other attributes, as “a British hero,” “an example for young knights to emulate,” “a lover,” and finally a degenerate and unsympathetic figure (244). Many works still apparently popular at the time the poem was composed presented these contradictory elements of Gawain’s character, such that Brewer proposes the possibility that the poet might “have been able to exploit the uncertainty of his audience as to which Gawain they were about to encounter, just as he makes both the lord of the castle and the lady question Gawain’s identity during his stay at Hautdesert” (244-5). While Gawain has generally fared better in English sources than in their French counterparts, members of the poet’s audience familiar with the French tradition and its English translations may have already been questioning Gawain’s character before the story even began, making him a particularly interesting figure to test against principles of Christian virtue.

Like the Green Knight, much of Gawain’s characterization within this poem is embodied in what he wears. The knight’s quest truly begins on All Souls Day, when he dons his armor to set out on his journey and seek the Green Chapel. The poet takes significant pains to describe in detail the elements of Gawain’s armaments and to carefully frame their practical and symbolic purpose, taking up nearly a hundred lines in

the description, pausing only briefly in the middle to describe Gawain's attendance of a requiem mass, as if to solidify in the mind of the audience a parallel between the knight donning his armor and taking the sacrament (567-665). The description of Gawain's richly ornamented armaments and steed also strongly parallel the previous description of the Green Knight's attire and mount, only where the Green Knight was described as being dressed in green and gold, Gawain is described as being dressed in red and gold (136-220, 567-665), causing the two figures to be framed in opposition by even their physical appearance, enhancing the sense of ideological and moral conflict. The religious significance of armaments in the Christian tradition is well known even to modern readers far removed from the religious paradigm of the poet by many centuries and a Protestant Reformation; a soldier's armor was famously compared to the spiritual equipment of Christian virtue by Saint Paul in his letter to the Ephesians:

Therefore take unto you the armour of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day and to stand in all things perfect. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth and having on the breastplate of justice: And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace. In all things taking the shield of faith, wherewith you may be able to extinguish all the fiery darts of the most wicked one. And take unto you the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit (which is the word of God). (*Douay-Rheims*, Eph. 6.13-17)

The poet takes the opportunity to punctuate this association by lingering upon Gawain's arms, and particularly his shield, which has been designed to remind the knight of his virtues and proclaim them to the world.

Gawain's shield is described in detail as having a red field, or "goulez" (619), upon which is inscribed a gold "pentangel," or five-pointed star (620). While some scholars have tried to see Celtic pagan or other occult symbolism in the figure, including in at least one instance the Kabbalah (Tracy 31-2), the pentangle is a simple and wide-ranging design nearly as ubiquitous as the color of the Green Knight's skin and similarly varied in its potential interpretations, such that the shield can only be relied upon to have the meaning which the poet intentionally assigns to it. The pentangle upon Gawain's shield is said to signify the "five fives" which embody all that Gawain places his faith in: the perfection of his five senses (640), the dexterity of his five fingers (641), the sacrifice of Christ as signified by the five wounds (642-3), the five Joys of Mary (646-7), and the five knightly virtues of generosity, fellowship, purity, courtesy, and compassion (652-4). Martin notes that "Five suggests perfection and occurs in natural and spiritual taxonomies . . . Five is a 'circular' number. The *Gawain*-poet is fascinated by beginnings and endings, sequences, circles, and symmetry" (319). This shield of Gawain's faith accompanies him on his journey and serves as the moral backdrop for all of his actions: these are the ideals which Gawain claims to place his trust in, and these are the terms by which he will be measured.

When Gawain arrives at Hautdesert, he at first is able to maintain his virtues with ease: he is courteous to his host and others at the castle, he is willing to engage in fellowship with Bertilak by participating in his game of winnings (1105-9), and to the extent that he is able he generously abides by the terms of the bargain, giving Bertilak all that he won on the first two days, remaining chaste in his interactions with the lady of Hautdesert, while still being compassionate in maintaining discretion (1178-1557). It is

only on the third day that Gawain's virtue finally falters. The lady of Hautdesert offers him an opportunity to escape death through a magical green girdle, saying:

But whoso knew þe costes þat knit ar þerinne,
 He wolde hit prayse at more prys, paraventure;
 For quat gome so is gorde with þis grene lace,
 While he hit hade hemely halched aboute,
 Þer is no hapel vnder heuen tohewe hym þat miȝt,
 For he miȝt not be slayn for slight vpon erþe. (1849-54)

Gawain takes the belt out of fear for his own life, not turning it over to Bertilak at the end of the day (1936-52), and in doing so breaks the terms of their arrangement, stealing from Bertilak.

The symbolism of the green girdle can once again only be understood in the context of the poem itself: Gawain fastens the belt around his waste along with the rest of his armaments before his final journey to the Green Chapel, the vivid description of his appearance earlier in the poem making the contrast between the green of the belt and the red of the rest of his attire particularly striking and meaningful. The girdle here serves as a subversion of the virtues symbolized by his shield. As Martin writes, "The symbolic contrast between the pentangle and the green girdle is obvious," and that the girdle "proves definitely only not to be what Gawain was told. It does not protect him but causes the slight injury dealt him in the return blow. It is not a 'sygne . . . of trawthe': the lady lied about it and it leads Gawain into telling a lie to her husband (and perhaps 'acting a lie' to the priest)" (326-7). Thus in contrast to the rest of Gawain's "armor of God," he wears in the end not a belt of truth, but a belt of lies, both visually and morally

in conflict with the rest of his appearance. And were this a Greek tragedy, the moral failing of Gawain's decision to hide the girdle would end in him losing his head for the instructive benefit of the poet's audience. But that is not what happens.

The Green Knight instead spared Gawain, giving him two mock blows and then a third, superficial cut on the back of his neck, sufficient to draw blood and prove the protection of the girdle ineffective, but not the fatal blow Gawain might have expected. The Green Knight forgives Gawain of his deception, considering the blow to his neck sufficient repayment for the crime:

Trwe mon trwe restore;
 Penne thar mon drede no wape.
 At þe þrid þou fayled þore,
 And þerfor that tappe ta þe. (2354-7)

The Green Knight considers Gawain's fault a minor one, but the poet does not let Gawain off the hook completely. It is clear that the Green Knight is being merciful to Gawain in not taking his life, as they had agreed the year prior. The Green Knight tells Gawain:

I halde hit hardily hole, þe harme that I hade.
 Pou art confessed so clene, beknowen of þy mysses,
 And hatz þe penaunce apert of the point of myn egge,
 I halde þe polysed of þat plyzt, and pured as clene
 As þou hadez never forfeted syþen þou watz first borne. (2390-4)

The language is here akin to a priest administering the sacrament of confession. Gawain is only truly released from his sin after he taken the blow from the Green Knight's axe as penance for his crime.

Thus Gawain's story concludes with a final judgment of sorts, when he confronts the Green Knight at the Green Chapel. The Green Chapel appears to be an earthen mound like the ancient Britons would have used to bury their dead (2171-4). So, as if to punctuate the air of doom and death, Gawain's final confrontation with the Green Knight takes place in the shadow of a tomb. Here Gawain both literally faces the possibility of his own demise, and he reaches the point in his anagogical arc where he must meet death. Up until this point, Gawain has done nothing to earn the pardon he receives, having sealed his fate initially by beheading the Green Knight and then cheating Bertilak out of the reward for their game at his castle. But despite the seeming inevitability of Gawain's death, compounded by his failure to honor his agreement with Bertilak, the Green Knight offers Gawain mercy. Here the Green Knight takes on one final role, as a Christ-like figure who absolves Gawain of his sin and frees him from death. He is an odd figure to serve in this role, to be sure, with all of the strange connotations his character suggests, but the anagogical arc is, ultimately, buried well beneath the literal elements of the story. What matters is that Gawain faces death and is freed from it; and with his return to Camelot, having been judged and appropriately shrived, he completes the anagogical arc of sin, death, penance, and salvation.

Anthony Adams writes that "The Christian story stressed worldly defeat as necessarily a precursor to spiritual victory; the heroic epic celebrated martial prowess in this world as the best way to ensure a lasting reputation. Arthurian romances, as the preeminent example of chivalric literature, offered then an often attractive comingling of these two disparate ethical realms" (151). We have now established three important points: (1) any arguments offered in support of identifying the Green Knight with an

ancient deity of vegetation and fertility use evidence that can just as easily, and in some cases much more easily, be offered in favor of other interpretations such as a spirit of death or a demonic entity, (2) the poet appears to intentionally pattern the story on a seasonal cycle meant to evoke concepts of life, death, and rebirth, coupled with the liturgical cycle demarcating the major events of the life of Christ and his salvific sacrifice and resurrection, and (3) Gawain's journey is framed as one of moral failure and redemption, dramatizing the struggle of the Christian to maintain virtue but doing so only by the grace of God. It is not in the Green Knight's appearance, disappearance, and triumphal return that the story finds its central meaning, but rather in Gawain rising to meet the Green Knight's challenge, having his honor tested, failing to live up to Christian and chivalric perfection, and then receiving mercy. Like *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* presents an anagogical narrative which illustrates the Christian eschatological arc of sin leading to death and the sacrifice of Christ restoring his followers to life once again.

CHAPTER 4: *LE MORTE DARTHUR*

Easily the most iconographic quest narrative in Middle English literature is the Quest for the Holy Grail, and in particular, the version of the story given to us by Sir Thomas Malory in the Middle English romance of *Le Morte Darthur*. This work, adapted from a number of mostly French sources, but nevertheless given a distinctive English spin in the process, is a compilation of stories set in the world of King Arthur, including stories originating from the chronicle tradition begun by Geoffrey of Monmouth, such as Arthur's rise to power and conquest of Rome, as well as stories taken from the romance tradition, such as the adventures of Sir Lancelot du Lac. The result is a sometimes messy but often entertaining and rich tapestry of stories which has become the definitive conception of Arthurian romance for many readers today. The Grail Quest comes toward the end of a long series of ethical compromises for the principal figures of the work, and just before the consequences come crashing down around them in the following tales. The Grail Quest thus offers a beacon of light within the darkness, paving a path of redemption for many of the characters in the overarching narrative. In this tale, we see many of the anagogical themes expressed in other quest narratives being brought to the surface and made explicit, as the redemptive arc of sin and salvation is expressed not only in the structure of the narrative but in the world of the romance itself.

Of the chivalric quest narratives in Middle English, the Grail Quest is most explicitly an armed pilgrimage undertaken by soldiers for the absolution of their souls, so it should come as no surprise that Grail romances originate in the Crusades. The Grail romance, at least as we know it, begins with *Le Conte du Graal*, composed by the French

poet Chrétien de Troyes shortly before the Third Crusade. Based on Chrétien's own prologue, Antonio Furtado writes:

A complex combination of purposes guided the composition of the unfinished masterpiece of Chrétien de Troyes. First of all, the author was writing by command of Philip of Alsace, count of Flanders, who would have given him a 'book', on which, presumably, the narrative should be based. On the other hand, independently of the book's contents, he would like to please his patron, and what could be more agreeable to Philip than seeing his exploits celebrated in the new work he had ordered? (28)

Furtado argues that many of the details in Chrétien's work mirror the life of Philip of Alsace, who, pointedly, was a participant in the Crusades (28). The Crusades were inextricably linked to the practice of pilgrimage, and there are strong connections between chivalric romance and both of these phenomena. More specifically, Furtado draws a strong connection between the crusader kingdom of Jerusalem, ruled over by King Baldwin IV, and the castle of Corbenic, ruled over by the Fisher King. Both kings were infirm, as Baldwin suffered from severe leprosy which rendered him immobile, and the Fisher King suffers from an injury which limits his movement as well. More importantly, both kings preside over a holy place: Jerusalem, the city where Christ was crucified, and Corbenic, the dwelling place of the Holy Grail, an object which represents Christ's Body and Blood.

According to P. J. C. Field, the Grail is associated from its earliest appearances with the eucharist. The word "grail," an uncommon term that nevertheless predates its use by Chrétien, originally refers to a large dish used for serving meat or fish in broth

(141), rather than the chalice most associated with the image today. While this might suggest that the grail's eucharistic association is a later development, Field notes:

Early Christian iconography used a fish as the symbol for Christ because the Greek word ΙΧΘΥΣ ('fish') was an acronym of 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour'. That produced the tradition of representing the Last Supper with a serving dish in front of Christ that contains a fish, to show that he has changed the bread in the dish into his body. The fish of course is merely a visual code signifying that what would have looked like bread was neither bread nor fish, but the Body of Christ. (142)

So the word "grail," in reference to a dish which serves fish or meat, was more appropriate in the 12th century as a symbol for the eucharist than modern readers might at first expect. Authors who took up the symbol would later refer to it with words for a chalice, dish, stone, and many other objects, Field points out that "medieval artists who portray the Grail do not always follow their authors faithfully. What an author says is a dish, his illustrator may present as a chalice, and what an author says is a chalice, his illustrator may present as a ciborium or pyx, which are vessels used for containing the hosts consecrated at Mass" (142). So even in such wide artistic variation, medieval authors and artists rarely seem to stray too far from the substance of the eucharist.

The eucharist is the most prominent sacrament within the Christian Church, particularly in medieval Catholicism, where it directly connects congregants through Real Presence to their savior Christ, whose Body and Blood was—and is—believed to exist within the accidents of the consecrated Bread and Wine. Far from being an empty artistic motif, then, the Grail-as-eucharist must be at the center of any interpretation of the quest

if we are to take the text seriously. Sometimes the Grail is a chalice containing the wine, and other times a dish containing the bread, but the distinction between the two is more striking to the modern reader than it would have been to the original audience. The doctrine known as *concomitance* requires that “the body and blood of Christ are fully present in each of the consecrated elements, meaning that a communicant receiving only the wafer nevertheless receives both body and blood at once” (Levy et al. 620), so that in an artistic representation of either a chalice or ciborium, the meaning is the same: the knights seeking after the Grail are, in a very literal sense, seeking after Christ Himself.

For Malory, all of the competing visual descriptions of the Grail seem to have little relevance to the narrative; the Grail can simply be described as itself, “the Holy Grayle,” which needs no further introduction (Malory 521). Field argues that the sparse description we are given for Malory’s Grail “suggests that its physical appearance is unimportant” (148). In fact, given the importance of the Grail as both a symbol and as the object of the quest, many of the details that one might expect Malory to obsess over are absent from the narrative, as Field continues:

Similarly, the variety of circumstances in which it appears suggests that its circumstances too are unimportant. In some stories, it appears only in an elaborate procession in the Grail Castle, but in *Morte Darthur* it appears in different places, accompanied by different objects, with or without a bearer, who may or may not be visible. What is constant about Malory’s Grail is that it is holy. (148-9)

Holiness is a complex enough subject in itself, but it does suggest a few important attributes as understood by medieval authors: “Holiness denotes the qualities that constitute the divine nature, and its root meaning suggests that those qualities are

distanced in one way or another from the world of human experience” (149). With its inextricable connection to the eucharist and Christ, along with its singular quality of holiness, it is impossible to see the Grail as anything but an object of religious devotion, and similarly it is impossible to see the Grail Quest as anything but a religious and spiritual journey for the knights who participate in it.

For Malory’s part, his version of the Quest for the Holy Grail is adapted from the French romance of the *Queste del Saint Graal*, but with significant abbreviations to the narrative, a fact which is reflected in Caxton’s indication that it is a tale “Briefly Drawn out of French.” Here, then, the “French book” so often referenced in support of Middle English romances is very much a real text, and one whose adaptation by Malory is naturally the focus of much debate. As Eugène Vinaver indicates in the Notes to his own edition of *Le Morte Darthur*:

Malory’s *Tale of the Sankgreall* is the least obviously original of his works. Apart from omissions and minor alterations, it is to all intents and purposes a translation of the French *Quest del Saint Graal*, the fourth branch of the thirteenth-century Arthurian Prose Cycle. One is tempted to describe Malory’s attitude to this work as that of a man to whom the quest of the Grail was primarily an *Arthurian* adventure and who regarded the intrusion of the Grail upon Arthur’s kingdom not as a means of contrasting earthly and divine chivalry and condemning the former, but as an opportunity offered to the knights of the Round Table to achieve greater glory in this world. (758)

So Vinaver is convinced that Malory’s focus in his adaptation is decidedly areligious in its orientation, and goes on to write that Malory’s primary goal in the adaptation is to

refocus the narrative on “earthly worship” and to “secularize the Grail theme as much as the story will allow” (758). As we will see, though, if we are to take Vinaver’s interpretation at face value, we must consequently conclude that either Malory believed that the story in fact makes very little room for his intended secularization, or that he overlooked large portions of the narrative that could have been otherwise removed or reframed towards that end, since the principles of sin and salvation, of death and rebirth, are woven throughout the narrative and are the overriding themes of the tale as Malory has written it.

Karen Cherewatuk argues that those who frame Malory as a secularizing influence are, at the end of the day, failing to remove themselves from the modern zeitgeist. She writes that such critics lack a “willingness to resist dividing the furnishings of romance into separate rooms called ‘the sacred’ and ‘the secular’” and attempts to “controvert other scholars’ reluctance to see ‘the sacred’ and ‘the secular’ as overlapping domains” (“Christian Rituals” 78). In support of her thesis, Cherewatuk particularly highlights the evidence of religious concern found in how the characters approach death, where concerns for the fate of a person’s soul, his proper place of burial, and the rites associated with his passing are all dutifully regarded by Malory. As Cherewatuk notes, the departure of the soul has tangible effects on its environment based on its condition, where the soul of a righteous man is carried up to heaven while the passing of a wicked pagan poisons the air with its sinful stench (78). Similarly, care is taken to note when a body is buried on consecrated ground and in what manner it is interred, along with all proper funeral rites and prayers for the departed soul (78-9). Malory similarly takes note of last rites administered to those on their deathbed, which would have included

confession and partaking in the eucharist (80). These are all details that even a particularly religious author might have omitted for the sake of brevity, as Malory does with many incidentals of the narrative, but instead these moments are found throughout *Le Morte Darthur*. Indeed, if anything, Malory's work displays a peculiar fixation upon death and the ultimate fate of the soul.

Fiona Tolhurst acknowledges the lack of overt religious language in *Le Morte Darthur* when compared to other Arthurian romances, including many of Malory's sources, but argues that redemption remains a core theme of Malory's narrative. Tolhurst writes:

Although scholars cannot know the depth of Malory's religious conviction, his Arthurian suggests that Malory was an orthodox follower of the Christian church whose daily life as a knight caused him to focus on how God's power had shaped the lives of Arthur and his knights of the Round Table, as well as how God's power could improve Malory's earthly lot. (132)

She argues that Malory's primary goal is not to diminish the theological content of the story, but to frame earthly chivalry as a worthy Christian pursuit and to offer the reader subtler forms of obedience to God than the complete denial of worldly pursuits characterized by Galahad's ascetic isolation. In his reworking of the theological content of his source, Tolhurst concludes that Malory reconciles "chivalric and Christian values by transforming that theological content. By modifying—not eliminating—the spiritual values of his source, Malory achieves two goals: the conflation of earthly and spiritual chivalry and the compression of the hierarchy of Arthurian knights" (139). In his

adaptation of the narrative, Malory essentially divides the quest into five distinct and hierarchical branches that each proceed from the initial root of the narrative.

Many of the elements of the Grail Quest are set up long before it begins, and it is through encounters during this quest that knights learn the hidden history behind Britain, their Round Table, and the Grail. The events are grounded first in the death and resurrection of Jesus; the Grail, a vessel containing the blood of Christ, was brought to Britain by Joseph of Aramathea, who is described by Malory as a “jantyll knyght” (526), with a white shield which is stained with a red cross in Joseph’s own blood (527). Joseph left behind a lineage of guardians to watch over the Grail after his death (518, 527). Percival is told by his aunt that it was Merlin who first created the Round Table and established the whole enterprise of Camelot, making it round

in tokening of rowndnes of the worlde, for men sholde by the Rounde Table undirstonde the rowndenes signyfyed by right. For all the worlde, crystenyd and hethyn, repayryth unto the Rounde Table, and when they are cohyn to be of the felyshyp of the Rounde Table they thynke hemselff more blessed and more in worship than they had gotyn half the worlde. (541)

Then at that table, Merlin places the Siege Perilous, a seat that no man may sit in but one who is foretold to achieve the Holy Grail, a knight who must “passe all other knyghtes” (542). Finally, as recounted by Galahad, two recent events set the wheels of these events in motion: Sir Balin killed his brother Balan with a sword that was placed within the floating stone that was sent down river to Camelot, and then dealt the Dolerous Stroke which wounded King Pelles, such that he could not be healed until Galahad fulfills his

quest. These pieces of the narrative establish the Grail Quest as portentous and inevitable, encompassing a narrative that began in ancient times only to be concluded in the present.

The Grail Quest proper begins in similar fashion to Gawain's quest in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as Arthur and his court prepare for the feast of Pentecost (315), when Sir Kay reminds Arthur of his custom not to begin a feast until he has "sene some adventure" (517), giving us an oft-repeated pattern for Arthurian quest narratives. As with *Sir Gawain*, the custom is soon fulfilled: the writing upon the Siege Perilous changes to reveal that its occupant will arrive on that very day, "the Pentecoste after the four hondred and four and fyffty yere" from Christ's Passion (516-17), a stone is found floating in a nearby river, within which is found "stykyng a swerde" which no man may draw out except "the beste knight of the worlde" (517), and Galahad arrives at the court (518). Galahad enters Arthur's court and sits upon the Siege Perilous, proving himself to be the knight for which it was created (518-19), and draws the sword from the floating stone (520), proving himself to be the greatest knight in the world. Later Galahad would take up the white shield with the red cross (526), which was reserved for him consciously by his ancestor Joseph of Aramathea, who said upon his death bed, "Never shall no man beare thys shyld aboute hys necke but he shall repente hit, unto the tyme that Galahad, the good knyght, bear hit. And laste of my lynayge have hit aboute hys necke, that shall do many mervaylous dedys" (527). These events occur in quick succession, establishing the lofty stakes of the quest within the story's first few pages.

There is, as with much of *Le Morte Darthur*, a strong sense of inevitability in this story, which goes beyond its mere framing and seems to be felt in many places by the characters themselves, who are aware that they play a part in a larger narrative, such that

Galahad, when he comes to Arthur's court, "For surete of thys swerde" brought none of his own, "but here by my syde hangith the scawberte" (520). The setting of Pentecost, which is the time when the knights of the Round Table return annually to renew their chivalric oaths, gives this quest narrative a similarly cyclical underpinning as Gawain's quest in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where the relevant seasonal setting was Christmastide. Here the setting suggests different connotations, Pentecost being the time that the Apostles were indwelt by the Holy Spirit and, functionally, the mission of the Church was begun. So the occasion carries with it both the sense of the knights being imbued with supernatural power, being bathed in the very Spirit of God, and being prepared for a great mission akin to that of the Apostles, the Pentecostal Oath carrying with it a sense of confirmation into the spiritual community or ordination to a holy office.

Galahad's journey to achieve the Holy Grail maintains this sense of inevitability throughout: while many of the other knights wander and make mistakes, Galahad proceeds toward his goal with no doubt or uncertainty, stopping only to perform his duty as a holy knight in ridding the land of evil. At one point in his journey, Galahad happens upon a haunted churchyard and cleanses it by removing the corpse of a man unworthy to rest in holy ground (527-28). Later, Galahad and Sir Melias come upon a fork in a road, the right hand of which will prove a knight's goodness and worth but the left of which will prove his prowess (529). Melias chooses the left-hand path, proving his sin and unworthiness to achieve the Grail, while Galahad chooses the right-hand path without hesitation or doubt (529-31). The most substantial of these episodes is Galahad's encounter with the Castle of the Maidens, where Galahad engages and defeats seven

knights, liberating the locals from their tyrannical sway (532-3). It is later revealed by a hermit that this encounter was symbolic:

The Castell of Maydyns betokenyth the good soulys that were in preson before the Incarnacion of oure Lorde Jesu Cryste. And the seven knyghtes betokenyth the seven dedly synnes that regned that tyme in the worlde. And I may lyckyn the good knight Galahad unto the Sonne of the Hyghe Fadir that light within a maydyn and bought all the soules oute of thralle: so ded sir Galahad delyver all the maydyns oute of the woofull castell. (535)

As part of his quest to obtain the Holy Grail, the cup containing the Presence of Christ, Galahad thus undergoes tests which prove his own Christ-like attributes. In this encounter with the seven brothers, Galahad directly confronts and defeats sin, as Christ did by His sacrifice. In playing the role of Christ in this symbolic, martial drama, he shows himself worthy of Christ.

Percival's quest follows a similarly heightened and symbolic track to that of Galahad, but one which emphasizes his human failures. Percival begins his journey searching for Galahad (540-41), and upon learning about all of the prophecies and import surrounding Galahad and the Grail from his aunt, Percival responds by saying, "So much have I herde of you that be my good wyll I woll never have ado with sir Galahad but by wey of goodnesse" (542). So Percival's Grail quest orients him toward Galahad, attempting to follow in his footsteps as a kind of disciple. On the way, Percival visits the Castle of Corbenic, the traditional dwelling place of the Grail, and there meets the Maimed King. Percival attends mass there, where emphasis is placed upon the consecrated host, which sustains the king in his exceptionally long lifespan as he awaits

the arrival of the one who will attain the Grail (542-3). Like the other knights who attain the Grail, Percival's partaking of a sacrament prepares him for his journey and makes his soul ready to receive Christ at its conclusion. But unlike Galahad, much of Percival's journey is fraught with failures. Immediately after leaving Corbenic, Percival is beset by 20 knights who kill his horse, but he is rescued by Galahad, who does not stay long enough for Percival to thank him (543-4). Percival is then almost immediately defeated by another knight, this time one who had stolen a horse from a passing yeoman, leaving him broken and dejected (544-5). Unlike Galahad, whose faith and fate sustains him through all of his battles so that he might be victorious, Percival's quest is characterized by defeat. Indeed, these encounters make it clear that Percival has not attained the martial or moral perfection of Galahad, emphasized by Galahad rising to a challenge Percival failed to meet himself.

Percival's human fallenness is best emphasized in two key encounters he has while on his quest. In the first, Percival, sleeping beneath a tree, is awakened by a mysterious woman who offers to give him a horse to replace the one he had lost. Percival gratefully accepts it in exchange for a promise to serve the lady, but he discovers later that the horse is in fact "a fynde, the whych wolde have brought hym unto perdition" (545). The demonic horse tries to drown Percival in a river, but he is saved when he makes the sign of the cross. Upon shaking him off, the horse dives into the river, which seems to burn (545). It is interesting to see these images return: becoming imperiled after sleeping beneath a tree and even a flaming, infernal river like the one from Saint Patrick's Purgatory, both of which are escaped by invoking Christ. These images evoke temptation here like they did in *Sir Orfeo* and "The Knight Owein's Journey Through St. Patrick's

Purgatory,” and Percival’s last-minute turn to Christ illustrates his human susceptibility to sin.

The second key encounter for Percival, and perhaps the most striking: he meets a beautiful lady who he immediately lusts after and tries desperately to woo. Percival had been told earlier of the prophecy of the three white bulls representing the three knights who would obtain the Grail, and the prophecy said that two would be virgins—Galahad and Percival—and that the third would be chaste—Bors—so Percival is aware that lying with this woman precludes his attainment of his quest (541), but he succumbs to lust nonetheless. As with the demonic horse, Percival is saved at the last moment, when the cross upon the pommel of his sword reminds him of his oath, at which point the demonic nature of the woman is revealed and all disappears into smoke (550). Percival then takes his sword and stabs himself through the leg, saying “A, good Lord, take thys in recompensacion of that I have myssedone ayenste the Lorde!” (550), and then later confesses the lapse to a priest (551). Percival’s lapse into sin illustrates his fallen nature, but his dramatic repentance and turning toward God ultimately saves him, and this is illustrated by his penitential self-wounding and his later confession. It is only after these tests that Percival is able to board the ship where he will be joined by his companions Galahad and Bors.

Sir Bors’s journey is somewhat more grounded than that of his two companions, revolving as it does around good knightly conduct and simple virtue rather than the heightened import of Galahad’s achievements or the strange symbolism of Percival’s encounters, but his journey is no less indicative of the anagogical structure of the Grail Quest. At the very beginning of his quest, Sir Bors encounters a holy man who tells him

that none can attain the Grail except “by clennes, that ys pure confession” and he follows the holy man to a hermitage where he confesses his sins. Malory notes here that though Bors had a son out of wedlock, he is here absolved of that past indiscretion and made new, preparing him to attain the Grail (564). Before departing the hermitage, Bors dons special garments for his journey and vows not to eat any meat, sleep in a bed, or engage in sexual intercourse during his journey (564). The clothes and the ascetic vows place Bors in the role of a pilgrim who is preparing himself to journey toward a shrine, or, similarly, a knight going on crusade.

On his journey, Bors encounters a lady who is acting as steward for a recently deceased king, but whose lands are being ravaged by knights in the employ of the king’s wicked estranged wife, who, while she was queen, “brought up many evyll custums whereby she put to dethe a grete party of his kynnesmen” and, according to the lady, “hath destroyed many of my men and turned hem ayenste me, that I have well-nyghe no man leffte me, and I have naught ellis but thys hyghe towre that she leffte me” (565). Sir Bors acts as the lady’s champion against the wicked woman and her henchmen, thus securing the lands with which she was entrusted, but he refuses any gifts in return, only continuing on his quest (565-7). This encounter is later said to signify the defense of the Church (572), but the details are remarkable in their grounded nature: Bors is not fighting a monster or supernatural threat here, but rather is settling a dynastic dispute which erupted after the death of a mortal king. This encounter emphasizes Bors’s faithful commitment to the simple virtues of knighthood: strength employed to uphold justice.

In a later encounter, Bors once again shows his commitment to his knightly virtues. Sir Bors is continuing on his journey when he comes upon the scene of his

brother captured and being whipped by two knights, but before he can go to Sir Lionel's rescue, he notices a gentlewoman who is about to be raped in the woods nearby, and it is clear he cannot rescue both the woman and his brother. (568). Here he puts his duty to protect the maiden over his love of his brother, rescuing her and leaving his brother to his fate, that he fears may lead to his death (568). Later, Bors meets Sir Lionel alive, but his brother is angry with him for the choice he made, and vows to kill him when he regains his arms, refusing to forgive Bors (573-4). This escalates to a bloody conflict between Bors and Lionel, during which Lionel slays both a holy man and Sir Colgrevance (574-6). Bors is moments away from slaying Lionel when a voice from heaven stops them, accompanied by a cloud of fire that burns their shields, and after which the chastised Sir Lionel forgives his brother (576). While the circumstances of this episode may be contrived, and the conflict is ended by divine intervention, the conflict itself is a very grounded one: Bors finds himself torn between his loyalty to family and the higher callings of his knightly duty and his religious devotion. These are moral conflicts that would have been very real to Malory and many of his readers.

The one major encounter that Bors faces which seems far less grounded than the others is one which bears a strong parallel to a similar encounter involving Percival. On his journey, Bors comes upon a large gathering where he meets "the fayryst lady that ever he saw, and more richer beseyne than ever was queen Guenyver or any other astate" (570). The lady tempts Bors to break his vow of chastity with her, even going so far as to threaten to throw herself off the battlements of a high tower, along with her twelve ladies in waiting, if he does not acquiesce (570-71). When he refuses for the last time, she makes good on her threat, but then Bors, at that moment, "harde a grete noyse and a grete

cry as all the fyndys of helle had bene aboute hym” (571), revealing that, as with Percival, this was a demonic encounter. Bors’ steadfast commitment to his vows is emphasized in this encounter, and particular how it differs in detail from the similar episode with Percival: while Percival pursued the lady until she eventually relented, Bors is pursued by the lady and does not relent, even under extreme pressure to do so. Bors needs no special reminder of his devotion like the cross upon the pommel of Percival’s sword. He is simply steadfast, and after having endured throughout these trials, he too boards the ship to meet his companions (577).

Towards the end, after most of the knights have been proven unworthy of the Grail, Galahad joins Percival and Bors and the three knights complete their quest together. Richard Sévère argues that the companionship between the three Grail Knights rests at the heart of the story. Sévère emphasizes the role of companionship, or “spiritual friendship,” between the three knights as it compares to the typical relationships between knights displayed throughout the *Arthurian*, elevating this particular fellowship above that of kinship, chivalry, or the oath of the Round Table. He writes:

Bors, Percival, and Galahad develop a spiritual bond that further supports their quest for the Grail. Once each knight successfully completes a series of tests on his own, described as ‘theyre harde adventures and of her grete temptacions,’ they all meet and the three are bound by a spiritual relationship seen only in one other instance, where Arthur’s knights first learn of the Grail: ‘Than entird into the halle the Holy Grayle coverede with whyght samyte, but there was none that myght se hit nother whom that bare hit.’ What stands out about this gathering is the rare instance of knightly fellowship based on religious and moral values—an

indiscriminate deviation from the conventional manner in which knights traditionally interact in the Arthurian community. Normally, *aventures* represent a range of violent interactions inspired by the need to assert dominance and uphold the reputation of the Round Table. However, though the Grail knights are themselves members of the Round Table, they have transcended their earthly obligations and instead fight to maintain a higher reputation that has been mandated by Christ. (58)

The fellowship between the three Grail Knights is reflective of the fellowship among members of the Church, who are made one in Christ through their participation in the Blessed Sacrament. In order to achieve the Grail in a proper manner, the knights must approach the altar together, as the taking of the eucharist in the mass is, properly, a collective act.

The three knights are together brought to the mysterious ship by Percival's sister (579), and it is together that they are captured by the Saracen king Estorause and imprisoned for their proclamations about the Grail (605), where they have an encounter with the Grail itself (606). Shortly after this, while the king lies on his deathbed, he sends for the knights to repent and seek forgiveness for having wronged them, and when the king dies, a voice from heaven tells the people of his city to declare Galahad the new king (606). Then a year into his reign, Galahad goes to the altar in his chapel, and finds there the son of Joseph of Arimathea, and the two celebrate mass together, observed by Percival and Bors; then Galahad commits his soul to heaven, which is seen borne up by a legion of angels along with the Grail, and this is the last the Grail is seen in the world (606-607). At the end of his journey, Galahad obtains both the Grail and a kingdom,

redeeming the land of Sarras from its sins. As was established by the hermit at the Castle of the Maidens, Galahad stands as a Christ figure within the narrative of the quest, as much a guide for the other knights as a participant himself.

The three knights who achieve the Grail, while all being successful in their quest, still form a distinct hierarchy of morality and piety. Galahad, the clear leader of the trio once he is joined by Percival and Bors, is the most pure of the three, having his soul carried into heaven by a host of angels at the conclusion of the quest. Here his death is welcome and he knows that he will be returned to the Presence of his Father in heaven. Galahad's quest is one of nearly unattainable perfection, the ideal of Christian virtue that exists only in romance. After Galahad's death, Percival retreats to a hermitage to live out the rest of his days in solitude and religious contemplation, and he dies there at peace (607). Percival's arc is one of redemption: having previously succumbed to temptation, Percival is able to attain the Grail through a commitment to repentance even in the face of his repeated failings. Percival's arc emphasizes the efficacy of the sacraments to bring salvation even to those plagued by sin. Finally, Bors boards a ship to take him back to Logres and to Camelot, where he returns to his duties as a knight of the Round Table, which sets him up to become the loyal and virtuous companion of Lancelot in the later chapters of Malory's work (607). Bors does not die at the conclusion of the quest, but lives on, returning to his duties as a knight, which is befitting of the character of his quest. Bors's quest emphasizes Malory's appreciation of simple, virtuous men steadfastly performing their duty to their God and to their king. Galahad, Percival, and Bors each achieve the Grail, which represents their salvation, but the differences in their characters suggests Malory is interested in conveying a sense that there are a number of equally

valid ways of living a virtuous Christian life, and that the grace of confession, penance, and the eucharist can cover those who are not so near to being completely sinless as Galahad.

Here we will turn to the knights who failed the quest, to whom Malory devotes at least as much attention as those who were successful. Lancelot in particular is the closest thing to a central character that can be found in *Le Morte Darthur*, and is given special depth and attention by Malory throughout the work. While Lancelot is most readily associated with his affair with Guinevere and the subsequent fall of Camelot, he still serves a central role in the Quest for the Holy Grail: not only is he one of the five knights most prominently featured in the quest itself, he serves an important role as the father of Galahad, the quintessential Grail knight, and as instigator of the quest. As a character, Lancelot also serves as a liminal figure between those who achieve the Grail and those who do not, placing him at the center of the quest's central conflict of sin and redemption. Kate Dosanjh notes, "Launcelot's spiritual journey is a theme Malory begins to develop early on in *Le Morte*, and scholars widely accept that it climaxes during his encounter with the Grail in the *Sankgreal*" (63). The Grail Quest is thus a pivotal event for Lancelot's character.

Lancelot's encounter with the Grail is unique in part because of its ambiguity. It takes place immediately after an encounter with his son Galahad, whom he does not recognize at first, and Sir Percival. Lancelot and Percival are riding together when they spot Galahad, who "was new dysgyed," and engage him in battle. Galahad defeats Lancelot and Percival, and rides away just as they realize who he is (536). Lancelot and Percival part ways, with Lancelot making his way into a thick forest, where he discovers

an old chapel by a stone cross, within which is an alter “rychely arayde,” but Lancelot is unable to enter the chapel because the door is broken and impassable (536). Resting near the chapel, Lancelot sees a sick knight arrive with his squire, and the Holy Grail appears from within the chapel and is carried to the sick knight by the stone cross, where it heals him of his illness, but throughout all of this, Lancelot is paralyzed in a kind of enchanted sleep, and the Grail disappears (536-7). So Lancelot is given a kind of encounter with the Grail, though he is unable to fully partake of the Grail, instead only being allowed to witness its power used to heal the ailing knight.

Adherents to Vinaver’s school of thought see Lancelot as an example of Malory’s secular focus, but Karen Cherewatuk points to hagiographic elements in Lancelot’s story, which suggest that religious concerns are at the core of his character. Rather than a deviation from the religious themes of the text, Cherewatuk argues that Lancelot’s story is a strong example of the themes of sin and repentance at the core of the narrative: “Read against the backdrop of hagiography, Lancelot’s death scene is not simply a paean to the lover but a demonstration of Christian conversion. Malory casts Lancelot as an exemplar of repentance, and in so doing, suggests a didactic intent more often associated with Caxton than Malory” (“The Saint’s Life” 62). Lancelot’s arc is focused on his character as a fallen knight who must achieve salvation through contrition and repentance, and his encounter with the Grail is the focal point of that arc. Cherewatuk writes:

Malory’s version of the grail quest foregrounds the sacrament of confession as preparation for the Eucharist, which is literally embodied in the Sankgreal. Many knights seeking the grail have their confessions heard—among them, Melyas, Gawain, and Bors [. . .] The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 required that the

Christian orally confess to a priest at least once a year. The sacrament of confession exacts of the sinner three steps: contrition of the heart, confession of the mouth, and satisfaction of deeds. This tripartite schema appears regularly in Middle English penitential manuals that served to instruct both priest and penitent in basic knowledge of the sacraments and theology. (“Malory’s Lancelot” 68-9)

Lancelot’s failure to achieve the Grail in full is ultimately tied to the sins which still rest on his conscience. As he lies in his enchanted sleep in the presence of the Grail, the squire says of him that “he dwellith in som dedly synne whereof he was never confessed” (537). This is confirmed by Malory’s narration: “So whan the holy vessel had bene there a grete whylle hit went unto the chapelle with the chaundeler and the light, so that sir Lancelot wyst nat where hit was becom; for he was overtakyn with synne, that he had no power to ryse agayne the holy vessell. Wherefore aftir that many men seyde hym shame, but he toke repentaunce aftir that” (537). While Lancelot’s ultimate end in *Le Morte Darthur* is to be a figure of repentance and contrition, he is not yet able to fulfill that role during the Grail Quest, ultimately unable as he is to repent of the sins of the flesh.

At the conclusion of the Grail Quest, Lancelot’s ultimate goal is left unfulfilled and he must return to Camelot and reenter his role as Arthur’s knight, with the old temptations he endured before the quest reasserting themselves. Lancelot’s vision of the Grail represents a moment where he might have left behind the sins of the flesh and attained something higher, but ultimately he is unable or unwilling to completely cast off his worldly concerns. Unlike Bors, who achieved the Grail in its fulness yet was still able to return to his duties as a knight, Lancelot is not fundamentally changed by the quest.

Dosanjh writes, “After the Grail quest, Launcelot’s relationship with Guinevere comes to the forefront of the narrative. Though Malory does exhibit sympathy for their earthly love, he makes it clear that, ultimately, they must bow to truth. Launcelot must break free from his entanglement with Guinevere in order to achieve the spiritual goal Malory seems to have set before him” (65). Lancelot’s full redemption must come later, and only after he and Guinevere have set in motion the tragic events which lead to the fall of Camelot.

In contrast to Lancelot, Gawain fails the quest entirely and is the only one of the five primary knights to have no encounter with the Grail. An important moment in his quest comes when he is on the trail of Sir Galahad and he encounters Sir Melias (534). Gawain briefly expresses regret that he did not join with Galahad, but Melias responds that “he woll nat of youre fellyship . . . for ye be wicked and synfull, and he ys full blyssed” (534). Shortly after this, Melyas departs and Gawain is joined by Gareth and Owain, and the three engage in battle with the seven knights from the Castle of the Maidens, whom Galahad had previously encountered, and the three knights defeat the brothers, with Gawain killing the first of the seven. At the conclusion of the battle, Gawain meets a hermit who explains the significance of the knights, their castle, and Galahad’s encounter with them (534-5). Crucially, after Gawain has just killed a man, the hermit offers him a chance to confess his sins and do penance, but Gawain flatly refuses, saying “I may do no penaunce, for we knyghtes adventures many tymes suffir grete woo and payne” (535). This is the key moment for Sir Gawain, who rejects the opportunity for redemption offered by the sacrament of confession, despite seeking the Grail. This offers an interesting contrast to the character in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Although

there is no reason to think that Malory was responding to or even aware of the earlier poem, it is still an interesting irony that the key moment for Gawain in both comes at the point of confession: in the former, Gawain's confession to the Green Knight is ultimately what allows him to be absolved, and in the latter his rejection of that same sacrament is what prevents him from attaining redemption.

Lack of repentance prevents Gawain from achieving the Grail—and the sacramental grace it represents—even in the partial sense that Lancelot encounters it, as a holy man later explains to him:

The adventure of the Sankgreall whych be in shewynge now, [ye and many other have undertaken the quest of hit and fynde hit not,] for hit apperith nat to no syners (wherefore mervayle ye nat thou[gh] ye fayle thereof and many other, for ye bene an untrew knyght and a grete murtherar), and to good men signifieth othir thynges than murthir. For I dare sey, as synfull as ever sir Launcelot hath byn, sith that he wente into the queste of the Sankgreal he slew never man nother nought shall, tylle that he com to Camelot agayne; for he hath takyn [upon] hym to forsake synne. And nere were that he ys nat stable, but by hys thoughte he ys lyckly to turne agayne, he sholde be nexte to enchev[e] hit sauff sir Galahad, hys sonne; but God knowith hys thought and hys unstableness. And yet shall he dye right an holy man, and no doute he hath no fellow of none erthly synfull man lyving. (563)

And so Malory makes explicit the primary differences between Lancelot and Gawain in the story: while Gawain devoted himself to the Grail Quest as a knightly adventure to prove his earthly glory, he never accepted the task as a moral and religious undertaking,

sinning in his pursuit of the quest's object and failing to repent of his wrongdoing. In contrast, Lancelot achieves the Grail in a limited sense because, while he is a sinful and worldly man, he undertook the quest in good faith and strived toward moral uprightness over the course of his journey. Lancelot's inability to achieve the Grail in full is not because of the insincerity of his motives but because of his unconfessed sin and inevitable lapse into sinful and worldly conduct after the quest has concluded.

Like many of the best-remembered Biblical parables, such as the Parable of the Sower, the Grail Quest is multifaceted and offers distinct paths for each of its characters, each corresponding to a potential final fate within the anagogical narrative. Galahad achieves the Grail and is taken into heaven after living a consistently righteous life of ascetic discipline, fulfilling the purpose for which he was conceived and which was prophesied for him. Percival achieves the Grail, redeeming himself of his previous failure, and lives out the rest of his life as a hermit. Bors achieves the Grail through steadfast commitment and returns to his life as a knight of the Round Table. Lancelot is only afforded a glimpse of the Grail and must return to Arthur's court in failure, but with hope for future redemption. Gawain fails the quest and never encounters the Grail in any capacity. Malory's *Quest for the Holy Grail* has Arthur's knights each facing their own mortality and the ultimate fate of each of their souls, and in doing so makes explicit the anagogical underpinnings found in quest narratives throughout chivalric romance. While quest narratives in the Middle English tradition can all be explored for the anagogical foundation of sin and death, salvation and resurrection, Malory's narrative is one of the very few to bring those themes to the forefront of the story and to emphasize the spiritual

dimension of the narrative in such great detail. In so doing, Malory has constructed one of the most complex examples of death and rebirth in Middle English chivalric romance.

CONCLUSION

Each of the works discussed here offer unique insights into the anagogical foundations of chivalric quest narratives, revealing a complex symbolic pattern. While the details of each of these romances vary significantly, at the anagogical level each of these chivalric quest narratives tells one story: that of fallen humanity, subject to sin and death, being rescued by the intervention of grace to righteousness and eternal life. This is a pattern which repeats itself time and again within chivalric romance, and if we are going to be serious about studying medieval literature on its own terms, it cannot be ignored. It is difficult to see any explanation for this consistent pattern beyond the conscious effort of romance poets to focus their writing around these subjects, and this effort is strongly indicative of a deep religious concern being present even in seemingly secular contexts.

With each of the romances studied here, we see elements of the basic anagogical structure which underlies the chivalric quest narrative. Each contains elements of sin, death, salvation, and rebirth which correspond to the central narrative of the Christian faith. In *Sir Orfeo*, sin is represented by Heurodis's encounter with the Fairy King under the tree; in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* we see temptation in the form of the Green Knight himself, his wife, and the green girdle; and in "The Tale of the Sankgreal," the knights upon the Grail Quest face a variety of temptations that threaten to turn them from their path—with varying levels of success. Tied directly to that confrontation with temptation and sin is the threat of death, either symbolic or literal. Death comes to Orfeo again in the form of the Fairy King and the Arcadian underworld in which he dwells; it comes to Sir Gawain in the form of the Green Knight's beheading game and the grave-

like structure of the Green Chapel; and during the Grail Quest many knights face the possibility of death at the hands of fiends, or—in the case of Galahad and Percival—encounter death after the conclusion of their journey. This arc mirrors the progress of a human life from beginning to end, with the final destination of the knights being the same as that of all men.

But the chivalric quest narrative also raises its heroes back to life, representing the salvific grace offered by Christ to His Church. Sir Orfeo is able to enter Faerie and retrieve his bride from the clutches of death, serving in the role of Christ by pulling Heurodis from the ashes and defying the finality of his mythical origins. Gawain is offered grace by the Green Knight himself and escapes the fate he had so long thought inevitable, entering into a new life after he believed his old one was coming to a final end. The Grail knights seek after the literal Cup of Christ which offers eternal life: Galahad achieves it through achieving moral perfection and his soul is taken into heaven, Percival achieves it through repentance and contrition and lives out the rest of his days in monastic solitude, and Bors achieves it through solid devotion to simple virtues and his earthly duty. Lancelot is unable to truly achieve the Grail because, while in some sense he is repentant, he will not fully abandon his sinful nature, and Gawain fails completely because of his sin and complete lack of repentance. The Grail Quest offers hope to those who abandon the cares of the mortal world and struggle to stay on the path toward righteousness, but it condemns those who are unwilling to repent of their sins and let go of their worldly concerns. The object of the Grail Quest embodies the hope of Christ's sacrifice and the escape from eternal death that the eucharist offers to those who are faithful to His call.

The anagogical reading lies at the bottom of the medieval structure of literary theory: it is the terminal point of a scholar's study. As Dante suggests, one cannot arrive at the "inside" of a work until one has already passed through the outside: the anagogical lies at the core of a narrative, so that it is impossible to reach without first passing through the literal, the allegorical, and the moral (Lansing 41). But if I could deviate from that mindset somewhat, the discovery of a work's anagogical core may in fact help to better inform one's study of those exterior layers; if we have finally grasped the deeper spiritual meaning of a text, can we not now see the other elements of that text within the confines of their purpose in supporting the deeper concern? Will not consideration of the anagogical underpinnings of a text recolor our initial interpretations of the moral, allegorical, and literal levels? The anagogical reading of these chivalric quest narratives builds a greater and more complete understanding of the sub-genre, one which can be used to shine a new light onto further studies of that form.

It is my hope that the work begun here can lead to even more extensive studies of the chivalric quest narrative in medieval literature. This study was confined to prominent texts in the Middle English tradition, but there are many more corners of this topic that can be explored by future scholars who take an interest in it. There is a wealth of Middle English material yet to explore, some equally as emblematic of the genre as the works discussed here, some occupying the extremities of the genre, but all worthy of further study. Beyond the Anglosphere, there are countless chivalric romances and chivalric quest narratives in the French, German, and Spanish languages, no doubt each possessing unique attributes worth consideration. Scholars with better theological and historical credentials could examine the quest narrative to discover more minute concerns of

ecclesiology or doctrinal variation hidden within a quest narrative's anagogical themes, scholars concerned with gender in medieval romance might be able to explore more thoroughly the roles that women play in this otherwise male-centric redemptive arc, or others may explore how elements of this anagogical framework might be found in romances not concerned with quests. If we open up the doors to this form of critical analysis, a whole world of untapped insight may await.

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