

**From Water to Wine: Understanding the Concept of the Holy Grail in Light of the  
Crusader Ethos of the Middle Ages**

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## Introduction

Many scholars have undergone the challenge of writing comprehensive histories about the Holy Grail, exploring the legends and conspiracies surrounding the relic and revealing both the facts and fictions. Some of the more referenced scholars who do an excellent job presenting the history of and evidence for the Holy Grail include Richard Barber in his book *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief* (2004). Barber focuses primarily on the development of the Arthurian legends in literature, charting the significant changes to the story over time. In her book *The Holy Grail* (1992), Norma Lorre Goodrich also surveys the Arthurian literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in an effort to present the evidence for the Holy Grail. However, just as she claims that the medieval writers like Chrétien de Troyes and Robert de Boron wrote their legends “for the purpose of analysis and conclusion by the reader,” Goodrich too leaves the final judgments up to her reader.<sup>1</sup> This open ended approach is almost necessary in writing on the Holy Grail because of the many ambiguities in the legend. No scholar educated on the subject should feel comfortable making a definite conclusion. There are some scholars who have chosen to explore specific facets of the Grail legends in an effort to assess their plausibility. For example, in *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (1982), Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln argue that the Holy Grail refers to the bloodline of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene; a conspiracy that made its way into popular culture in the past years with the publication of and subsequent movie deal for Dan Brown’s *The da Vinci Code*. Similarly, after reading *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, Margaret Starbird was appalled at the notions put forth and undertook the task of repudiating the conclusion. Yet in her book, *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar*, Starbird’s research forced her to make the same conclusion. No one can ever prove for certain that ‘Holy

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<sup>1</sup> Norma L. Goodrich, *The Holy Grail*, (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), xxiii.

Grail' refers to the holy bloodline between Jesus and Mary Magdalene or that Jesus and Mary were even married. At least not with the evidence available to us today could such suppositions be proven true, but then again, it is also impossible to prove this theory false. The lack of evidence necessary to prove any conspiracy involving the Grail true or false riddles any scholar's attempt at writing on the subject.

In my opinion, and for the purpose of this paper, there is only one certain and relevant truth: the concept of a holy grail existed within the minds of most people living in Western Europe in the Middle Ages due to the prominence of the Arthurian literature that popularized its legend. With this assertion I am neither claiming that the Holy Grail existed as a physical object, nor that it did not. After all the research that I have done on the subject, I still do not know the answer to that question. What I do know is that the Holy Grail existed enough to leave its mark on the visual and literary culture of the Middle Ages and, as I will argue in this paper, it existed as an abstract manifestation of the historical context that it was built in.

Looking at the Holy Grail in this paper, I will focus on how it reflects the ideals and values of the Christian European society during the crusades. Many scholars conclude that the concept of a holy grail originated in the Arthurian literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Richard Barber states on the very first page of his book that the first author to mention the Holy Grail, Chrétien de Troyes, "probably invented the idea."<sup>2</sup> However, I will begin by exploring some of the evidence that supports the presence of a Christian understanding of a holy grail prior to the publication of Chrétien's *Le Conte du Graal* (1170-1190). Having established a pre-existing Christian notion of a holy grail, I will then begin outline the religious implications of

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Barber, *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 1.

Chrétien's Holy Grail in the context of the crusades by analyzing *Le Conte du Graal* alongside Bernard of Clairvaux's *De Laude Novae Militiae*. In short, the Holy Grail of Arthurian literature symbolized the same eternal salvation that the crusaders were being promised for their endeavors. Therefore, rather than obsess over whether or not the Grail existed as a tangible object, I will simply prove that the Holy Grail existed as a concept and what that concept meant within its historical context. Like *De Laude Novae Militiae*, *Le Conte du Graal* was meant as an instruction manual for the crusaders where Perceval represents a successful Christian knight worthy of attaining the Grail, and Gawain represents the secular knight obsessed with worldly glory who fails to focus on the greater purpose. By demonstrating the similar teachings in *De Laude Novae Militiae* and *Le Conte du Graal*, I am able to layout the ways in which Perceval comes to resemble a Bernardine knight of God. Additionally, this approach allows me to highlight the reward of eternal salvation that St. Bernard promised the crusaders if they were to die in service to God. Building off of those exhibitions, I will then anchor my argument into the context of the crusades, analyzing additional primary sources in order to further prove Perceval's relation to the Christian crusaders. Once I have sufficiently proved this semblance on multiple levels, I will argue that the end reward for crusaders is the same as that for Perceval, thus the Holy Grail symbolizes eternal salvation.

## The Origins of the Holy Grail

Here Commences the Reading Concerning The Holy Grail...

Here Commences Terror<sup>3</sup>

### *The Visual Tradition*

As with everything else concerning the Holy Grail, the origins of the legend are frustratingly obscure. However, there is sufficient evidence to make the argument that the Holy Grail was conceptualized before the publication of any Arthurian text, specifically in the visual culture of the time. The early Christian art that illustrates the religious backing for a holy grail that was used to collect the blood of Christ allows for a Christian reading of Chrétien's romance by proving that there were already stories, at the very least, circulating about such a relic. One example of such an image, which pre-dates the publications of all the Arthurian texts that we know of, can be found in the Utrecht Psalter. Dating to the mid-ninth century, this visual depiction is likely the earliest known of its kind and clearly shows the blood of Christ being caught in a chalice like vessel [fig. 1].

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<sup>3</sup> *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances* vol. 1 ed. Oskar Sommer (Washington: The Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1916), 4.



1. Illustration from the Utrecht Psalter (mid 9<sup>th</sup> c.) showing an unidentified man collecting the blood of Christ in a chalice. (Utrecht, Universiteitsbibliotheek MS. 32, pg. 141)

Not only does this image prove that there was a belief that the blood of Christ was collected in a chalice at his Crucifixion, it also visually associates the said chalice to the Crown of Thorns and the Lance of Longinus – arguably the two most prominent relics of the *Arma Christi*. When dealing with images like this one, scholars have typically been inclined to identify this chalice as the one which contained the vinegar and gall that was fed to Christ. Although this cup never contained nor touched the blood of Christ, so it would not hold the same power as the Lance or the Crown, whenever there is a chalice like vessel included in illustrations of the relics of the *Arma Christi* scholars generally identify it as the cup of vinegar and gall. However, the grail in the illustration above is clearly being used to collect the blood of Christ with the man holding it extending his arm under the steady stream flowing out of Christ's side. That is not to say that the cup which held the vinegar and gall could not have been the same cup used to collect his blood. It very easily could have been; a possibility that no one seems to discuss probably because it would be impossible to prove. Moreover, the fact that this image predates Chrétien de Troyes's

*Le Conte de Graal* supports the argument for a Christian understanding of Chrétien's grail and lance because it demonstrates an established visual tradition in which the Lance is linked to a chalice that was used to collect Christ's blood.

It makes sense that the blood of Christ would have been collected and safeguarded because it was often thought to be the source of His miracles. It was believed that Christ's divinity came from his blood. The most prominent medieval writer on this belief was Thomas Aquinas (b. 1225- d. 1274) who wrote that "the life of the flesh was in the blood," contending that the flesh was but a container.<sup>4</sup> When Christ's corporeal body died on the cross, his blood remained alive with power. In fact, in the apocryphal text the Gospel of Nicodemus, an important blood miracle is recorded to have occurred after Christ's death:

After this, our Lord cried with a loud voice, and said, Father into thy hands I commend my spirit, and he bowed his head, and yielded up his soul to his father. The Jews commanded that a Knight should be brought forth, whose name was Longinus, and ordered him to thrust [thrust?] a spear in the side of Jesus. Now Longinus was blind, which occasioned the Princes of the Law to make him do it; and as soon as he had, there came out of his side both blood and water, (*John xix*) and the blood ran down by the spear's shaft unto Longinus's hand, who by adventure wiped his eyes with it, and presently he did see.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the spear that Longinus thrust into Christ's side became a relic of the *Arma Christi* because it had been in contact with the blood of Christ; just as the Crown of Thorns, the shroud, and the nails that were used to pierce Christ's hands had. Therefore, it seems logical that the witnesses of Christ's crucifixion would have collected this precious blood in some container, which would then also become a relic due to its contact with the blood of Christ. Also, along this line of

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<sup>4</sup> Carolyn Bynum, *Wonderful Blood, Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 13-14, 40, 174, 182, 201.

<sup>5</sup> *The Gospel of Nicodemus*. (Newcastle, 1775). "Eighteenth Century Collections Online." Gale.

reasoning, it would make much more sense for any cup depicted alongside the relics of Christ's Passion to be identified as the Holy Grail rather than the chalice of vinegar and gall.

The Gospel of Nicodemus is important for one other reason. Written in the fourth century, this apocryphal text predates any Arthurian literature and was widely translated and disseminated throughout Europe. Chrétien de Troyes would have been familiar with this work, and many scholars contend that the origins of the Grail legend rest in the Acts of Pilate section of the Gospel of Nicodemus. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church's* entry for the Acts of Pilate reads, "The work forms the basis of the medieval play-cycle on the Harrowing of Hell and of the legends of St. Joseph of Arimathea and the Holy Grail."<sup>6</sup> Scholars Richard Barber and Juliette Wood both maintain that the importance of Joseph of Arimathea. Specifically, Robert de Boron's romance draws heavily on the depiction of Christ's Passion as recorded in the Acts of Pilate; however, neither Barber nor Wood elaborate on the ways in which the apocryphal text was so influential, leaving one to think the connection is more apparent than it actually is.<sup>7</sup> The reason, I believe, that the Gospel of Nicodemus is thought to have contributed to the legend of the Holy Grail is because it records that after Jesus's resurrection he went to Joseph of Arimathea, who was locked in the cell. Though there is no mention of Jesus giving Joseph any book or the Grail, as Robert de Boron says in his romance, just the foundation of having Jesus go to Joseph and free him from the cell was supposedly enough to build the Grail legend on and trace the guardianship of the Grail back to Joseph.

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<sup>6</sup> *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* 3<sup>rd</sup> edition ed. E. A. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014 [online]).

<sup>7</sup> Richard Barber, *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 117-119. Juliette Wood, *The Holy Grail: History and Legend* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), 12.



Moreover, there is another visual depiction of the collection of Christ's blood in a gospel book which also predates the publication of Chrétien's romance, and has a very interesting history in relation to the origins of the Grail romances and the concept of the Holy Grail as a blood relic. The abbey of Weingarten was gifted a gospel book from Judith of Flanders around 1100 which contains an illumination of the Deposition, in which a man is shown collecting the blood of Christ [fig. 2].<sup>8</sup>



2. Illustration of the Deposition in an early twelfth century gospel book from the Abbey of Weingarten, Germany. A man, possibly St. John, collects the blood still pouring out of Jesus's hand while two other figures, likely Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, take down Christ's body. (*Kollektar*, Fulda, Landesbibliothek Fulda MS 100 Aa 35, 167:81r).

Dating to the early twelfth century, this manuscript provides another piece of evidence proving that there existed at least a visual tradition for the collection of Christ's blood. Furthermore, as I will discuss in detail below, the Flemish court was frequently responsible for the commissioning of Arthurian romances, creating a strong link between members of that particular court and the

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Barber, *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 123.

Grail legend. But, just focusing on Judith for right now, in 1067 Baldwin Count of Flanders, Judith's father, died and bequeathed to Judith a relic of the Holy Blood, which he had received nearly ten years earlier as a gift from Emperor Henry III. Relics of the Holy Blood can come in many forms, but in the literal sense they are a small amount of blood thought to be the blood of Christ. In 1090, Judith gave the relic of the Holy Blood, along with other relics she had received from her father, to the abbot of Weingarten. Today this relic of the Holy Blood still resides in the church at Weingarten along with her gospel book.<sup>9</sup> It was not uncommon for relic artifacts to be accompanied books containing the relic's history, provenance, accounts of the miracles it performed, and/or information on the saint that the relic was dedicated to. Considering this tendency plus the intense connection between the Flemish court, and the references to the Holy Grail in relation to a book, perhaps one of the other relics Baldwin returned from the holy land with was this supposed book written by Jesus, containing the legend of the Holy Grail. With both of these images depicting visual Christian predecessors for a chalice being used to collect the blood of Christ, I maintain that the grail of Chrétien de Troyes' *Le Conte du Graal* should be understood as the Holy Grail.

### *Christian Chrétien*

In addition to the visual support discussed above, Chrétien himself makes it very clear that the Grail he is writing about is no ordinary grail. Writing between 1170 and 1190, Chrétien de Troyes' *Le Conte du Graal* is the oldest surviving Arthurian romance, and it is for that reason that I am focusing so heavily on Chrétien and his romance. Although he was never able to finish

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<sup>9</sup> Meta Harrsen, "The Countess Judith of Flanders and the Library of Weingarten Abbey," *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 24, no. 1 (1930): 7-8.

his story – because, as we are told by Gerbert de Montreuil, “Death overtook him and did not let him bring it to an end” – Chrétien de Troyes is widely accepted as the first author to write a Grail romance.<sup>10</sup> Yet, the closest he gets to the adjective noun combination “Holy Grail” is when he refers to the chalice as *tant sainte chose* (“such a holy thing”).<sup>11</sup> Despite this shortcoming, Chrétien includes ample details making clear that this Grail is no ordinary chalice. The lance that is paraded alongside the Grail in the Fisher King’s Castle is most likely the Lance of Longinus because of its distinct and continuous stream of blood that flows from the tip. This feature would have certainly led Chrétien’s predominantly Christian audience to make this connection. Ruth Harwood Cline contends that there are plausible Celtic precursors for this Bleeding Lance motif.<sup>12</sup> Although I cede that Chrétien could have been aware of these Celtic lances, I firmly maintain that the socio-cultural state in which Chrétien was writing convincingly supports his audience associating the lance in his story to the Lance of Longinus. Grail scholar Pauline Matarasso eloquently makes a similar argument in reference to another Grail romance:

Those for whom [the romance] was written knew nothing of Celtic myth; they were, however, not only well versed in the traditional teaching of the Church, they were also familiar with a vast range of symbols culled from the Bible, from bestiaries, from the works of the Fathers; these were their natural vocabulary, the intellectual framework within which they lived. It is this habit of mind we must acquire, these symbols we must learn to recognize if we are fully to appreciate the *Quest*.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Quote by Gerbert de Montreuil, the author of one of the later *Continuations*, in Urban T. Holmes, *Chrétien de Troyes* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1970), 14.

<sup>11</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval*, or, *The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 13.6426.

<sup>12</sup> See Cline’s note in Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval*, or, *The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 87.3192. She references the lance of Balain and the Luin of Celtchar, both of which also feature a bleeding tip. Additionally, it has been confirmed that Chrétien was Jewish, further supporting the argument that his inspiration for the Bleeding Lance motif came from the Judeo-Christian tradition rather than a Celtic tradition. See Norma L. Goodrich, *The Holy Grail*, (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), 207.

<sup>13</sup> Pauline Matarasso, “Introduction” to *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, trans. Pauline Matarasso (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1969), 14.

Furthermore, aside from the implications of linking this grail to one of the most revered relics of the *Arma Christi*, Chrétien describes the holy powers of the Grail:

When [the maiden] entered with the grail, the candles suddenly grew pale, the grail cast such a brilliant light, as stars grow dimmer in the night when the sun or moonrise makes them fade.<sup>14</sup>

This element of sublime brilliance ascribed to the Grail recalls the trope often used to describe being in the presence of divinity. Going back to Greek mythology, humans would burn-up if they witnessed a god in his or her true form because the light that they put off was too powerful to take in. Similarly, in late-antique and medieval Christian artwork, an overwhelming bright light often characterized being in the presence of angels, the spirit of a martyr, or God himself. It was this trope that resulted in the Roman use of the radiant crown to signify apotheosized emperors, which Christians then adopted as the nimbus drawn around the heads of holy figures. Chrétien also imbues his Grail with the cornucopia-like power often attributed to the Holy Grail: “from [the grail] the king obtains one mass wafer, and it sustains his life.”<sup>15</sup> Here too, Chrétien mentions that the Grail containing a “host,” which allows the Grail to sustain the life of the Fisher King. Although this is very vague, it is possible that this is in fact a reference to the Grail containing the blood of Christ, which is what infuses the Grail with these powers. Such an interpretation was made in the depiction of knights witnessing the Grail procession included in the *Li queste del S. Graal* manuscript from Tournai (1351) [fig. 3]:

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<sup>14</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 89.3223-27.

<sup>15</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 173. 6423-5.



3. Illustration of knights witnessing the Grail procession from a manuscript of *Li Queste del S. Graal*, illustrated and written by Pierart dou Tielt, Tournai, 1351. (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS Arsenal 5218, 88r).

In this particular depiction, the illuminator Pierart dou Tielt chose to represent the host, which is contained to the Grail, as Jesus coming out of the cup with his characteristic halo confirming his identification. Although this manuscript provides an example of the host being identified as Christ as a reference to the Eucharist, thus creating a link between the grail of early Arthurian literature and the legendary Christian relic, this manuscript post-dates Chrétien de Troyes' romance by about a century and a half. Therefore, it is likely that Pierart was already familiar with the work of Robert de Boron – the work that is often said to have fully Christianized the Grail by including its religious backstory – *Joseph d'Arimathie*. Nonetheless, Chrétien clearly intended his Grail to be understood as a wondrous powerful object.

Returning to whether or not Chrétien invented the Grail, Chrétien and three other Arthurian romance authors, writing in about the same era, reference an earlier book containing

the legend of the Grail.<sup>16</sup> In the prologue to *Le Conte du Graal* Chrétien discloses that Philip, the Count of Flanders, commanded him “to rhyme the best tale ever told in any royal court: this tale is called the *Story of the Grail*.” With that request, the count gave Chrétien a book containing the story.<sup>17</sup> This dedication implies not only that there was an oral tradition surrounding the legend of the Grail that was popular prior to the publishing of Chrétien’s romance, but also that Count Philip of Flanders claimed to have actually possessed an earlier written version of the story that we do not have. Although it is possible that Chrétien fabricated this provenance as a way to legitimize his story and make it more alluring for his audience, he cites this book multiple times throughout his romance pressing his readers to believe that such a book really did exist.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, Count Philip of Flanders was closely connected to the patrons of the other Grail authors who also claimed to be writing based on some older book that was given to them. These intertwined relationships open up the possibility that there was one original book that contained the legend of the Holy Grail, and that moved among prominent Flemish families providing the framework for the Arthurian romances of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Along with Chrétien de Troyes, the anonymous author of the *Estoire del saint Graal* in the French Vulgate, writing around 1215, claims that the story was given to him in a book written by Jesus Christ himself.<sup>19</sup> Christ identifies himself as “the Master to whom Nicodemus

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<sup>16</sup> Two continuations to Chrétien’s *Le Conte du Graal* (the *Second* by Wauchier de Denain and the *Manessier Continuation*) were commissioned by Countess Jeanne of Flanders, Count Philip’s granddaughter, and both authors also refer to a book. I discuss this in more detail below.

<sup>17</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 3-4.63-66.

<sup>18</sup> See note 81 for the other instances when Chrétien refers to this book.

<sup>19</sup> The French Vulgate is also commonly referred to as the Vulgate Cycle, the Lancelot-Grail Cycle or the Pseudo-Map Cycle or simply the Prose *Lancelot*.

said, ‘Master, we know that you came from God’ . . . . He who is the fountain of all knowledge.”<sup>20</sup>

Jesus then placed a small book in the author’s hands and said,

Inside [the book] are My secrets,  
which I Myself put there with My own hand. . . .  
For these secrets cannot be named by any mortal tongue.<sup>21</sup>

The author goes on to open the book and reads the title: “Here Commences the Reading Concerning The Holy Grail. . . Here Commences Terror.”<sup>22</sup> Could such a book written by Christ have existed? Could this be the same book that Count Philip of Flanders possessed? It seems rather farfetched, but the consistency of details among the various Grail romances is undeniable and compelling.

Furthermore, Robert de Boron alludes to a book written by, or at least belonging to, Jesus in his Arthurian romance, *Joseph d’Arimathie* (c. 1200). According to this version, after Joseph and Nicodemus received the body of Jesus from Pilate, seeing that his wounds were still bleeding and “remembering the stone that had split at the foot of the cross when the drop of blood fell [on it],” Joseph used the vessel given to him by Pilate – “the vessel in which He had made the sacrament” – and collected the blood “from the wounds in His hands and His feet.”<sup>23</sup> Joseph then, knowing the power of this Holy Blood, hid the vessel in his home. The Jews learned of

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<sup>20</sup> *The History of the Grail* trans. Carol J. Chase. In *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation* vol. 1 ed. Norris J. Lacy (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), 4.

<sup>21</sup> *The History of the Grail* trans. Carol J. Chase. In *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation* vol. 1 ed. Norris J. Lacy (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), 4.

<sup>22</sup> *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances* vol. 1 ed. Oskar Sommer (Washington: The Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1916), 4. I chose Sommer’s translation for these lines rather than Chase’s merely because I liked the poetic tone of Sommer, however Chase’s translations were very similar in their general contents.

<sup>23</sup> Robert de Boron, *Merlin and the Grail*, trans. Nigel Bryant (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 18-19.

Christ's resurrection when His body was no longer where it had been interred. So, they decided to imprison Joseph and Nicodemus so that the Jews may put the blame on them, lest someone come asking questions about where the body of Christ lay. Jesus came to Joseph while he was in the dungeon and brought with him the holy vessel containing His blood. He entrusted Joseph with guarding the Grail, which is why the line of Fisher Kings is often thought to originate with Joseph. Joseph questioned, "Lord, am I worthy to keep such a holy thing as this vessel," which alludes back to Chrétien de Troyes' description of the Grail as 'such a holy thing' and makes a clear connection between the Grail in *Le Conte du Graal* and Robert de Boron's Holy Grail.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Robert reveals that Jesus shared other secrets with Joseph, which he "dare not" tell us "nor could [he], even if [he] wanted to, if [he] did not have the high book in which they are written: and that is the creed of the great mystery of the Grail."<sup>25</sup> Robert admits that the contents of this earlier great book were revealed to him and that it served as the source for his Christian tale.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, it is interesting that Robert calls this mysterious book of secrets 'the high book' as there is a surviving manuscript titled *The High Book of the Holy Grail*.

The *Perlesvaus* or *The High Book of the Grail* was written by an anonymous author for Jean de Nesle the chatelaine of Bruges. In the colophon of the Brussels manuscript of this romance, the author states that the book was written for Jean de Nesle<sup>27</sup> and that "it [had] only

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<sup>24</sup> Robert de Boron, *Merlin and the Grail*, trans. Nigel Bryant (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 22. See note 11.

<sup>25</sup> Robert de Boron, *Merlin and the Grail*, trans. Nigel Bryant (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 22.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, (New York: Delacorte Press, 1982), 259.

<sup>27</sup> The manuscript refers to this patron as the "lord of Neele" and as "Johan de Neele," *The High Book of the Grail*, trans. Nigel Bryant (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1978), 265. William Albert Nitze identifies this man as Jean de Nesle II "lord of Nesle and castellan of Bruges," *The High Book of the Grail*, trans. Nigel Bryant (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1978), 1. Richard Barber refers to this same man as just Jean de Nesle in his book *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief*



once before been written down in the vernacular, and that copy is so ancient that the letters can be read only with great difficulty.”<sup>28</sup> This is now the fourth reference to an older written version of the legend of the Grail. Could all of these references to an earlier book – Chrétien’s, the French Vulgate’s, Robert de Boron’s, and the *Perlesvaus*’s – be about the same book? Jean de Nesle did have connections with Philip the Count of Flanders, the patron of Chrétien de Troyes’ *Le Conte du Graal*. Jean, the chatelaine of Bruges – a major city in the Comte de Flandre – was a prominent Flemish politician and fought in the Fourth Crusade under the leadership of Thierry of Flanders, Philips’s son.<sup>29</sup> Could then the book mentioned in the colophon of the Brussel’s manuscript be referring to the same book which Count Philip gave to Chrétien?<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the description of the ancient text in the *Perlesvaus* as being only legible “with great difficulty” is reminiscent of the preface that Jesus gave Joseph after presenting the book to him in the French Vulgate:

Inside are My secrets, which I myself put there with My own hand, [so] that no man might see if he be not purged beforehand by confession and by three days of fasting with bread and water; and after that he must speak in such a way that he speaks the language of the heart and not that of the mouth.<sup>31</sup>

These cryptic requirements necessary to be able to read Jesus’s handwritten book would certainly make reading the text a ‘great difficulty.’ So, was the author of the French Vulgate

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(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 46. As was common in the Middle Ages with many different aristocratic families, there were many men in the House of Nesle named Jean de Nesle. After doing my own research on the Nesle family tree, I came to the same conclusion as Richard Barber noting that the dates and occupations surrounding Jean de Nesle better align with the man named in the manuscript.

<sup>28</sup> *The High Book of the Grail*, trans. Nigel Bryant (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1978), 265.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Barber, *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 46.

<sup>30</sup> See note 17.

<sup>31</sup> *The History of the Grail* trans. Carol J. Chase. In *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation* vol. 1 ed. Norris J. Lacy (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), 4.

referring to the same book mentioned by Chrétien and by the author of the *Perlesvaus*? The last connection which ties all four accounts together is the identification of the book containing the secrets of Jesus in Robert de Boron's *Joseph d'Arimathie* as "the high book;" thus connecting this book back to the *Perlesvaus*, also known as *The High Book of the Grail*.<sup>32</sup>

Bringing this discussion to modern day, in 1965, Rev. Dr. Charles Francis Potter adamantly believed that Jesus had written a book and even claimed to have found it.<sup>33</sup> Before and after Rev. Francis, there have been others who made the same allegations just like there have been many people who claimed to have found the one true Holy Grail. Despite how amazing it would be if all four Arthurian texts were referring to the same ancient text written by Jesus, which included the legend of the Holy Grail, without a copy of this book we may never know whether or not any such book ever existed. Additionally, there is a general consensus among theologians that Christ was illiterate and therefore could not have written such a book. However, the consistency of details and the insistence by multiple authors on the existence of an earlier book containing the Legend of the Holy Grail presents an exciting possibility. More importantly though, such references to an earlier book, or even an oral tradition, certainly further substantiate my argument that the concept of the Holy Grail existed prior to Chrétien's romance, allowing us to understand *Le Conte du Graal* in a Christian context. A Christian reading of *Le Conte du Graal* is important for understanding the Holy Grail in the context of the crusades because, as products of their time, *Le Conte du Graal* and other Arthurian romances were meant to lead the crusaders to a more spiritual purpose of life. Furthermore, my argument that the Holy Grail

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<sup>32</sup> Robert de Boron, *Merlin and the Grail*, trans. Nigel Bryant (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 22.

<sup>33</sup> Norma L. Goodrich, *The Holy Grail*, (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), 8.

symbolized eternal salvation for the crusaders rests heavily on the precedent for a religious understanding of the Holy Grail.

### ***Le Conte du Graal and the Crusader Ethos***

That their hearts may be comforted, being instructed in charity, and unto all riches of fullness of understanding, unto the knowledge of the mystery of God the Father and of Christ Jesus: In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

(Colossians 2:2-3)

Despite being a passage from a canonical Christian text, the above statement perfectly reflects the goal and intrigue of the Grail legend. The Arthurian romances that became popular in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries communicated the chivalric ideal, influenced by the crusades, to the aristocracy. Romance as a genre existed before Chrétien de Troyes' publication of *Le Conte du Graal* as the female-oriented counterpart to literary epic. Whereas epics focused on war, history and survival, romances were meant to be read as emotive and adventurous, communicating one's service to ladies as the pinnacle demonstration of chivalry. Originally the romance genre was focused on worldly achievements and worldly love; however, I argue that as the impact of the crusades deepened, authors replaced a knight's love and service to women with a knight's love and service towards God. The adventures in these romances became tests of piety rather than tests of love. Still aimed at the audience of aristocratic knights, romances during the peak of the crusades existed to persuade and instruct this class of men by emphasizing the necessity of spiritual piety to achieve both worldly success in battle and the otherworldly grace of God. This new romance centered around this new chivalry is exemplified by *Le Conte du Graal*, but rather than just applauding the Christian knight represented by Perceval, Chrétien presents Gawain as a foil character in order to condemn secular chivalry.

Scholars have proposed various interpretations of the symbolism in *Le Conte du Graal*, the most convincing of these aside from the Christian reading seems to be those focused on the Celtic origins of the Grail in the King Arthur legends, or those suggesting that the Grail legend grew out of the pagan concepts of vegetation spirits and gods of harvest. However, as I argued above in regard to the identification of Chrétien's lance as the Lance of Longinus, the symbolism in *Le Conte du Graal* has to be understood in relation to the socio-political situation in which Chrétien was writing because it is those conditions that would have shaped how his readers understood his romance. Given Chrétien's location in one of the primary crusading nations, his patronage by a crusading noble, and the atmosphere of intense religious fervor, I believe the Christian interpretation is the most probable.

Furthermore, Derek Pearsall, author of *Arthurian Romance*, suggests that it was the clergy who Christianized the grail narrative, appropriating "Arthurian romance to the purposes of religion by making the Grail the essential goal of the knightly quest and the symbol of a new life of Christian purity."<sup>34</sup> Pearsall makes this statement in reference to the romances published after *Le Conte du Graal*, citing *Perlesvaus* specifically. However, Anne Marie D'Arcy points out that, in the section on the Holy Grail, the *Catholic Encyclopedia* declares that the Church and its clerics chose to ignore the legend entirely, fearing it would cause separatism by supporting a possible origin for Christianity in Britain.<sup>35</sup> By skipping over Chrétien, Pearsall refuses to acknowledge any Christian symbolism in *Le Conte du Graal* or the reasons Chrétien might have had for including some of his obscure details. Moreover, as the Arthurian romances that were

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<sup>34</sup> Derek Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 42.

<sup>35</sup> Anne Marie D'Arcy, *Wisdom and the Grail: The Image of the Vessel in the Queste del Saint Graal and Malory's Tale of the Sankgreal* (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 2000), 26.

written shortly after *Le Conte du Graal* still existed in the same socio-political atmosphere as *Le Conte du Graal* and were often also patronized by crusaders, I would attest that the Arthurian romances that Pearsall was referencing carried the same message and motive as Chrétien de Troyes's *Le Conte du Graal*. There is another set of scholars who acknowledge the Christian symbolism present in the tale but maintain that there is no deeper didactic message being relayed. As a narrative with a specific intended audience, a politically active patron and a resonant historical context, it is logical to conclude that Chrétien could have interwoven a social message into his romantic fable.

To begin, in the following section I attempt to prove that *Le Conte du Graal* was written to illustrate the behaviors of an ideal Christian knight. By first examining St. Bernard of Clairvaux's *De Laude Novae Militiae*, I demonstrate that the ideal knight was one who was devout, unmaterialistic, and disciplined. Having established this context, I will discuss the aspects of *Le Conte du Graal* that would have instructed its readers on a similar spiritual life in order to argue for the complimentary motives of St. Bernard and Chrétien. Turning then to the Holy Grail specifically but building off of the similarities between Perceval's journey and the crusader mindset, I substantiate that the Holy Grail as the literal reward for Perceval, symbolized the same eternal salvation that was promised to the crusaders.

#### *De Laude Novae Militiae*

Rejoice, brave athlete, if you live and conquer in the Lord;  
but glory and exult still more if you die and join your Lord.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *In Praise of the New Knighthood*, trans. M. Conrad Greenia (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2000), 34.

At the outset, it is important to discuss St. Bernard of Clairvaux's *De Laude Novae Militiae* (*In Praise of the New Knighthood*) because the ideals set forth in this work parallel those in *Le Conte du Graal*. Written in the early twelfth century, before 1153 – since that is when St. Bernard died – as a response to his personal friend and a founder of the Knights Templar, Hugh de Paynes, this letter lays out and praises the values of the Templars. This letter offers a more historical primary document, intended for the same audience and with the same message as Arthurian literature. By analyzing the values set forth in this letter I hope to illustrate the historical context of Arthurian literature as a way to substantiate my claim that *Le Conte du Graal* disseminated the new chivalric ideal for the purpose of teaching and persuading the crusading knights. *De Laude Novae Militiae* functions similarly to Arthurian literature by defining the behaviors of the Knights Templar. While praising the Knights Templar for their honorable conduct, St. Bernard also boasts of the glory these knights must feel in an effort to draw greater numbers into the fight for Christ.

Members of the Knights Templar were characterized by their devout reverence of Christ, their discipline at home, and their rejection of material wealth. St. Bernard portrays this new ideal knight as “truly fearless... for his soul is protected by the armor of faith.... Gladly and faithfully he stands for Christ.”<sup>37</sup> Armed “interiorly with faith” these soldiers of Christ would march confidently into battle, not under the presumption of “their own strength, but [with] trust in the Lord of armies to grant them victory.”<sup>38</sup> Believing that it was the support of Christ that would ensure an army's victory was crucial for a successful campaign, and after the Battle of

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<sup>37</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *In Praise of the New Knighthood*, trans. M. Conrad Greenia (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2000), 34.

<sup>38</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *In Praise of the New Knighthood*, trans. M. Conrad Greenia (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2000), 47.

Hattin (1187) during the Third Crusade this thinking was further solidified. According to the Old French continuations of the chronicles by William of Tyre, Guy of Lusignan, the Frankish king in Jerusalem, “had trusted more in his own power and in his men than in the virtue of Jesus Christ and the Holy Cross.”<sup>39</sup> Supposedly, it was because of this arrogance that the crusaders suffered such a devastating loss to Saladin, the King of Egypt, and lost their relic of the True Cross. The importance of having God’s support in battle can also be seen in *Le Conte du Graal* through God assisting Perceval. Furthermore, St. Bernard continues that once in King Solomon’s Temple, “his devoted soldiers.... Honor the temple of God earnestly with fervent and sincere worship.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, these exemplary knights held their faith above all else, never straying from their trust in and dedication to Christ. As I will show in my discussion of *Le Conte du Graal*, Perceval will be repeatedly advised to attend church regularly to give thanks and show devotion to God.

Outside of battle, the Knights Templar were held to a standard of excellence that highlighted the ways in which the “kighthood of God” differed from the knighthood “of the world.”<sup>41</sup> In addition to exceptional piety, these new soldiers were expected to show stern discipline and obedience: “No arrogant word, no idle deed, no unrestrained laugh, not even the slighted whisper or murmur [was] left uncorrected once it [had] been detected.”<sup>42</sup> Moreover, “so that their evangelical perfection [would] lack nothing,” the Templars lived together, “united in

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<sup>39</sup> Peter W. Edbury, ed. and trans., *The Conquest of Jerusalem and the Third Crusade: Sources in Translation* (Aldershot, 1996), 37.

<sup>40</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *In Praise of the New Knighthood*, trans. M. Conrad Greenia (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2000), 50.

<sup>41</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *In Praise of the New Knighthood*, trans. M. Conrad Greenia (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2000), 45.

<sup>42</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *In Praise of the New Knighthood*, trans. M. Conrad Greenia (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2000), 46.

one family with no personal property whatever.”<sup>43</sup> Humility was a large part of the Templar teachings; “both in raiment and in rations they [shunned] every excess and have regard only for what is necessary.”<sup>44</sup> In contrast to the worldly knights – who St. Bernard criticizes for their gold and silver bits and spurs, adorned with gems, like the “trinkets of a woman” – the Knights Templar armed themselves with “steel rather than with gold. Thus armed and not embellished, they strike fear rather than incite greed in the enemy.”<sup>45</sup> However, most important in regards to the Templars was their focus on spiritual salvation rather than material gain: “Otherwise what is beheld would supplant what is believed, material penury threaten spiritual wealth and present possessions void future fulfillment.”<sup>46</sup> Coming full circle, rather than a thirst for hollow glory, it was their piety and want for spiritual salvation which encouraged the Knights Templar to fight in the crusades. Adopting this contrast between materialistic and spiritual, Chrétien juxtaposes the ambitions of Gawain and Perceval.

Aside from outlining and applauding the lifestyles of the Knights Templar, St. Bernard also hoped to encourage his aristocratic audience to join the Templars, or at least adhere to the lifestyle that they epitomize. St. Bernard very clearly asserts that any Christian knight to die fighting on the behalf of God would die a martyr: “How gloriously victors return from battle! How blessedly martyrs die in battle!”<sup>47</sup> Such a statement would not only excite men to fight and

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<sup>43</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *In Praise of the New Knighthood*, trans. M. Conrad Greenia (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2000), 45-6.

<sup>44</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *In Praise of the New Knighthood*, trans. M. Conrad Greenia (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2000), 45.

<sup>45</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *In Praise of the New Knighthood*, trans. M. Conrad Greenia (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2000), 37; 47.

<sup>46</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *In Praise of the New Knighthood*, trans. M. Conrad Greenia (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2000), 42.

<sup>47</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *In Praise of the New Knighthood*, trans. M. Conrad Greenia (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2000), 34.



die for their God, but also in a more positive sense, St. Bernard gives these knights peace of mind in a time of great uncertainty. Put simply, “how secure... life is, when death is regarded without fear.”<sup>48</sup> For the Knights Templar, their consciences were clear and their salvation after death was certain. Responding to the tumultuous atmosphere of the time, St. Bernard and the Arthurian authors provided this form of religious solace to attract more people, lay and aristocratic, to the crusader cause. As I will discuss further below, the promise of salvation, symbolized by the Holy Grail in Arthurian literature was also intended as a motivating reward for the crusaders. While for the laity, the Holy Grail simply came to symbolize a better future, a beam of hope in this time of massacre, but I will not address that symbolic aspect until the conclusion.

*Le Conte du Graal*

The knight must be entirely fair, intelligent, uncovetous,  
bold, nobly born, brave, generous,  
and loyal, free from vice and sin.  
If that knight came and lived therein,  
he'd rule the castle<sup>49</sup>

Chrétien presents a similar laudation of the knights of God by alternating his narrative between the stories of Perceval and Gawain. Despite both of these men being knights of Arthur's round table, Perceval and Gawain function as foils to one another: in the labels of St. Bernard, Gawain represents a worldly knight while Perceval will grow to represent a knight of God. In many ways Chrétien presents Gawain as the perfect knight with his chivalric honor, bravery and

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<sup>48</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *In Praise of the New Knighthood*, trans. M. Conrad Greenia (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2000), 35.

<sup>49</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 203.7594-7599.

behavior – including regularly attending church – yet Gawain is constantly distracted by corporeal gains that prevent him from attaining true perfection.<sup>50</sup> Perceval is immediately accepted into King Arthur’s court for his innate skill with weapons; however, he lacks the maturity and self-awareness to fully grasp the concept of chivalry. Throughout the narrative Perceval grows to regret the sins he commits out of naivety and embarks on a journey of penance proving his spiritual superiority.

### **Gawain**

Although clearly the knight more familiar with the code of chivalry, Gawain continues to undertake adventures driven by either glory or women. In this sense, Gawain is a very static and predictable character incapable of spiritual development. At Arthur’s court at Carlion the Ugly Maiden offers up a quest for “the knight who seeks the greatest fame in the world around,” to save the besieged maid of Montesclaire.<sup>51</sup> At this opportunity, Gawain eagerly “leapt up.”<sup>52</sup> Here, we see that Gawain’s ambitions are centered around worldly fame. Additionally, Gawain’s fleeting attention results in him repeatedly getting distracted by other, still secular, adventures including participating in a tournament on the behalf of an upset young girl and hunting a beautiful white doe. From the start, Gawain demonstrates that he is incapable of following through on his promises because the moment a more appealing adventure arises, he lacks the

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<sup>50</sup> Scholars refer to the old and new forms of chivalry as secular and Christian respectively, but it is important to note that the popular piety throughout Western Europe in the Middle Ages ensured that hardly any aspects of life were truly secular. Secular knights were still expected to be relatively devote. Because of this cultural reality I dislike the harsh binary of secular versus Christian, but it is the accepted language in this field and maintaining such terms was merely convenient.

<sup>51</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 128.4701-4702.

<sup>52</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 129.4718.

discipline to turn down a lady or a chance at fame. Aside from this unreliable behavior being strictly condemned for a knight of God, secular knights were also expected to follow through on their commitments.

While in pursuit of the doe, Gawain encountered the King of Escavalon who insisted that Gawain be taken to the castle to keep company with his sister. Gawain readily obliged; but once the King realized that Gawain was the man who killed his father, the King sent Gawain on yet another quest. Perhaps Gawain's last chance to pursue a spiritual awakening, the King made Gawain vow to return in one year having done everything he could to obtain "the lance whose tip is always weeping a drop of crimson blood."<sup>53</sup> Unfortunately Gawain is still incapable of achieving "singleness of purpose," and would be lured astray many more times before the final lines Chrétien was able to write.<sup>54</sup> As I discussed above, the Lance and the Grail are essentially interchangeable; therefore, Gawain is being enticed by the same reward as Perceval but refuses to see the value in it.

Significantly, Gawain pursues "with eagerness in expectation of a more famous reputation" the first temptation that arises after making his promise to the King of Escavalon.<sup>55</sup> For nearly all of Gawain's journeys Chrétien references a motivation of fame or glory. At this point, Gawain meets the Evil Maiden who embodies the vamp figures of myths and lore. Driven by her hatred of knights, she entices Gawain only to cause him much "misfortune or some

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<sup>53</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 166.6166-6167.

<sup>54</sup> Derek Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance: A Short Introduction*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 38.

<sup>55</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 179.6625-6626.

dreadful ill” that she hopes will kill him.<sup>56</sup> As a woman who is very beautiful but who is “worse than Satan ever could be”, this Evil Maiden represents the lustful temptations that many knights – both real and literary – inevitably succumb to.<sup>57</sup> Derek Pearsall acknowledges the prominence of lust preventing knights from attaining spiritual perfection, saying that the quest for the Grail was one in which “the knights of the Round Table could not but fail, because of their investment in the world and in women.”<sup>58</sup> With this statement, Pearsall is leading up to a discussion of the adulterous relationship between Lancelot and Guenevere of later Arthurian literature where the Vulgate compilers used this “tragic conflict of high ideals of love and honour” principally to teach “a lesson... concerning the nothingness of worldly desire.”<sup>59</sup> Greater than both Gawain and Perceval, Lancelot was considered the best knight in the world, and thus “his failure to win the Grail is a powerful indictment of the world of secular chivalry.”<sup>60</sup> If Lancelot’s love and devotion to Guenevere was enough to barre him from receiving the Holy Grail, certainly Gawain’s submission to the Evil Maiden was enough to preclude him from the quest for the Grail. A truly worldly knight, Gawain could not resist the Evil Maiden and her promises of sex and fame.

Following the Evil Maiden’s lead, Gawain’s next major distraction comes in the form of a castle so impressive “no living man has laid an eye on any fortress so extensive, so grandiose,

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<sup>56</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 185. 6864-6865.

<sup>57</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 200.7456.

<sup>58</sup> Derek Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance: A Short Introduction*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 45.

<sup>59</sup> Derek Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance: A Short Introduction*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 45-6.

<sup>60</sup> Derek Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance: A Short Introduction*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 47.

and so expensive.”<sup>61</sup> Cline notes that such a castle, filled with hundreds of ladies and maidens, held a tradition in Celtic myth as a place “where beautiful women lure heroes to a life of delights.”<sup>62</sup> The ferryman who transports Gawain across the river to the manor advises Gawain of the two very beautiful, noble, and incomprehensibly rich queens that live there. Inside the castle Gawain sees the Wonderous Bed, which he believes was built only for the greatest nobleman to recline on. Despite the ferryman’s warnings about the dangers that would befall on him if he were to sit on it – which no knight has survived – Gawain insists on sitting on the bed. Gawain surprisingly survives the magical traps triggered by him sitting on the bed, and he is joyfully welcomed by all the maidens as a man who will be “honored... above all other men.”<sup>63</sup> Although a seemingly good laudation, it is in contrast to being honored alongside Christ and the martyrs of Christianity. Furthermore, such glory came with the condition that Gawain would not leave the palace without the elder queen’s permission, and when she does grant him leave, he must promise to return by nightfall. In the last chapter Chrétien was able to write, Gawain sends a young man in the castle to Orkney where Arthur is holding court in order to ask Arthur to come to Gawain’s new palace with all the other court members who are able.

Because Chrétien died before finishing *Le Conte du Graal* we cannot say for sure what he intended for the future of Gawain; however, I am inclined to think that Gawain would have remained at the castle, preventing him from completing any of the promises he made before his arrival – like his promise to the King of Escavalon to return in one year with the Bleeding Lance.

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<sup>61</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 194.7236-7238.

<sup>62</sup> Quote from Ruth Harwood Cline’s note in Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 194.7233.

<sup>63</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 210.7880-7881.

Gawain had found out from the knight Guiromelant that the elder queen in the castle was his grandmother, also making her Arthur's mother, and that the younger queen was Gawain's mother. This information delighted Gawain as he had believed that both of these women were dead. Gawain also learned that he had a sister, and that she too resided in the castle. Having become aware that these women were his family, he chose to send the messenger to King Arthur rather than take the short journey himself; and after seeing his messenger off, "the lord Gawain returned to his new palace and sojourned with greatest joy and with delight."<sup>64</sup> He no longer seems irate at the thought of his confinement to the castle. Furthermore, Chrétien's word choice – now referring to Gawain as "*lord* Gawain" and to the castle as "*his* palace" – alludes to Gawain deciding to live in the castle with his family from this point on.<sup>65</sup>

However, the *First Continuation* does have Gawain leaving his new castle and, after a series of odd events, he arrives at the Grail Castle. Here, Gawain witnesses a very different procession from the one Chrétien had envisioned for Perceval. Gawain is not required to ask any specific questions in order to be told the truth of the Lance and the Grail in front of him; and although Gawain had also failed to mend the broken sword, the King begins to tell him how this very lance was that Lance which pierced Christ's side while he was on the Cross. Gawain, uninterested in the value of this spiritual knowledge, "dozes off... The following morning the knight awakens on a shore, [and] the castle has vanished."<sup>66</sup> Gawain's impressive courtesy, courage, and skill along with his obsession for glory, fame, and corporeal gains perfectly align

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<sup>64</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 242.9167-9169.

<sup>65</sup> Italics are my own for emphasis. Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 242.9167-9168.

<sup>66</sup> Annie Combes, "The Continuations of the *Conte du Graal*," trans. Alexia Gino-Saliba, in *A Companion to Chrétien de Troyes*, eds. Norris J. Lacy and Joan Tasker Grimbert (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), 194.

with those worldly knights St. Bernard condemned. His incessant failure to pursue a single goal or contemplate a larger purpose in life made him unworthy of the Grail, and the sacred knowledge and blessings that come with it. Focused solely on women and worldly glory, unable to grow spiritually in order to understand the benefits that would have come with acknowledging and respecting the power of the Holy Grail and the Bleeding Lance, Gawain remains merely a secular knight. Though adept in the skills and the ways of secular chivalry, he never becomes worthy of the Grail.

### **Perceval**

Perceval, on the other hand, is depicted as an ignorant, simple man until he undergoes his journey towards both knightly and spiritual perfection, and finally becomes a Christian knight worthy of the Grail. After just one encounter with a band of knights, Perceval seems wholly concentrated on learning the ways of knighthood; so much so that when he sees his mother collapse as he is riding away to join Arthur's court, he does not even consider turning around. Trying to live by the advice his mother gave him before his departure, Perceval sees a grand tent and insists on entering because he thinks a structure this beautiful must be a house of God. His mother had told him to stop and pray in every church he comes across; however, the tent was clearly not a church and Perceval ends up assaulting the woman he finds inside, stealing a kiss, taking her ring, eating her food, and then leaving. When Perceval arrives at Arthur's court, he still lacks proper manners as evidenced when he continues to interrupt King Arthur to demand that Arthur make him a knight. Despite this rough beginning, in which he was clearly not adhering to the chivalric code of gentlemen let alone the requirements of a knight of God, Perceval quickly picks up first on the ways of secular chivalry.

In his encounter with the Red Knight, Perceval demonstrates his innate physical skill and then his adoption of chivalric manners when he tells the defeated Red Knight to surrender himself at King Arthur's court. Perceval demands that the Red Knight

Inform the maid of whom I speak,  
the one whom Kay struck on the cheek,  
I hope, before my dying day  
to have such a reckoning with Kay.<sup>67</sup>

Perceval sends every knight who he defeats to Arthur's court with the same message: that his victories are in honor of the maiden whom Kay hit. Such behavior parallels secular chivalry's insistence on doing great deeds for the love of ladies. Gornemant of Gohort gives Perceval his next knightly lesson including a reiteration of his mother's instruction to frequently attend church "so [that God may] have mercy on [his] soul, and in this temporal condition, so He will keep you as His Christian."<sup>68</sup> Yet still, Perceval fails to understand the greater essence of chivalry; he does not attend church, he follows Gornemant's advice to avoid "excessive speech" too strictly, and he becomes enamored by the fair Blancheflor.<sup>69</sup>

While journeying back to his mother's house, Perceval asks to stay the night in a castle where he meets Blancheflor. Immediately captivated by her beauty and charm, Perceval promises to fight the men who have been trying to seize her castle, and in return, Blancheflor agrees to give him her love as a reward. This exchange between Blancheflor and Perceval is a quintessential example of secular chivalry with Perceval still acting solely for the love of a lady.

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<sup>67</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 37.1199-1203.

<sup>68</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 49.1668-1670.

<sup>69</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 48.1655.



Before he departs, the people of Blancheflor's castle recite, in unison, the following prayer for Perceval:

Sir, the true cross, where God allowed His son to suffer,  
grant protection from mortal peril...  
and bring you in security to someplace you may be at leisure  
and may have every joy and pleasure.<sup>70</sup>

Miraculously, Perceval wins the fight despite being greatly outnumbered. In fact, at multiple points in the story Perceval comes out victorious from battles that he simply should not have won. Chrétien implies, first indirectly and then very directly in Perceval's discussion with the Holy Hermit, that Perceval's success was due to a blessing from God. Furthermore, such accreditation to God was often deployed by crusaders to demonstrate God's support for their holy war, as demonstrated by the case of the Battle of Hattin mentioned above.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, this scene reveals that Perceval had God on his side almost as a divine predetermination for Perceval's success in his journey for spiritual redemption and the Holy Grail.

Once again Perceval sets out for his mother's home, promising Blancheflor that he will return, but this time he happens upon the Grail Castle. Inside, the Fisher King invites Perceval to sit and dine with him. The procession of the Grail and the Bleeding Lance begins and although Perceval is in awe of the objects passing before him, he remembers Gornemant's warning "not to talk too much, and he had taken these words to heart. He was mistaken."<sup>72</sup> The maiden who bore

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<sup>70</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 61.2154-2160. Also, with this quote I think it is important to point out the possibility that the "someplace" of leisure, joy, and pleasure could be referring to God granting Perceval eternal salvation in heaven. Additionally, the reference to the True Cross proves a knowledge of the relics of the *Arma Christi* and their power within this literary world that resembles the understanding of relics that the crusaders had.

<sup>71</sup> See note 39.

<sup>72</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 90.3295-3298.

the Grail continued passing by Perceval, but he decided that he would wait until tomorrow morning and ask one of the squires about the objects: “He put the matter off again and turned his thoughts toward drink and food.”<sup>73</sup> This scene marks a critical point in Perceval’s development by showing his desire for knowledge and his ability for deeper contemplation, though ultimately he fails to act and his thoughts return to immediate earthly satisfaction: the food and drink.

Waking up to find the castle now deserted, Perceval never gets the chance to ask the squire about the Grail and the Lance. He leaves the castle grounds and comes across a woman who reveals herself to be Perceval’s cousin who asks him to tell her his name: “Not knowing his real name at all, he guessed his name was Perceval of Wales... He spoke the truth, not realizing [it].”<sup>74</sup> Jean Frappier makes an important comment about this moment in Perceval’s journey, noting that “for Perceval the intuition of his name coincides with the intuition of his personality; until this point he existed only in relation to others, but now he is aware of himself and his responsibility.”<sup>75</sup> This interpretation supports the argument that I am ultimately making here, that Chrétien always intended Perceval to succeed in his quest for the Grail, because now that he is aware of his responsibility – becoming the next keeper of the Grail – he will be able to obey it. A knight’s obedience in his religious duties to God was a primary tenant of the Knights Templar and Christian chivalry. In the same conversation, Perceval’s cousin tells him that asking the Fisher King about either the Grail or the Lance would have cured the King of his ailment and brought prosperity to his kingdom. However, Perceval had failed and now his cousin says:

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<sup>73</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 91.3310-3311.

<sup>74</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 98-99.3573-3577.

<sup>75</sup> Quote from Ruth Harwood Cline’s note in Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 98.3575. Cline paraphrasing Jean Frappier (*Chrétien de Troyes et le Mythe du Graal*, pp. 120ff).

Disasters will ensue...  
 misfortunes caused by nothing other  
 than your great sin against your mother:  
 because of you, she died of grief.<sup>76</sup>

Perceval is saddened by this news, but treats it rather nonchalantly and continues on, now looking for the knight that killed his cousin's lover.

It happens that this knight, the Proud Knight of Moor, who killed Perceval's cousin's lover is the same knight who was traveling with the woman Perceval assaulted in the tent near the beginning of the story. Perceval handles this second encounter with the maiden and the Proud Knight in a mature manner that demonstrates how much he has learned about chivalry and about himself. After seeing the punishment that the maiden has endured because of Perceval's actions, Perceval approaches the knight and admits that all the blame should be his, confessing that "it was mere stupidity" of his.<sup>77</sup> By righting this first wrong that Perceval committed, Chrétien has begun the mirroring progression of Perceval's penance and redemption. While Perceval's choice to take responsibility for his wrongs against the maiden is a straightforward demonstration of his secular growth, the moment of his spiritual awakening is vaguer.

Early in the morning, Perceval watches as a falcon attacks a flock of geese injuring one in the neck. When he rides closer to the fallen bird, he becomes entranced by "three drops of crimson blood, which spread like blushes on the clear white snow;" Perceval fell into so deep a reflection that "he forgot himself outright."<sup>78</sup> The amount of detail imbued into this rather isolated scene – which Chrétien felt needed its own chapter in order to fully illustrate the

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<sup>76</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 99.3591-3595.

<sup>77</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 107.3910.

<sup>78</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 115.4188-4198; 115.4204.

importance of Perceval's existential hypnotic state – along with the indisputable association between the drops of blood in the snow and the drops of blood that flow from the tip of the Lance has led scholars to interpret the incident as a “quasi-religious experience.”<sup>79</sup> Pearsall contends that it is during this trance that Perceval “acquires a meditative self” and comes to the revelation “that the life of the knight is perfected in the service of Christ.”<sup>80</sup> While Perceval being able to accurately tell his cousin his name without actually knowing his real name can be considered the moment Perceval realizes his superficial self, those aspects witnessable by others – his name, personality, and actions – the purely introspective nature of this trance forces Perceval to confront his internal emotions, aspirations, and desires up until this point. Furthermore, this moment of internal contemplation directly precedes Perceval's return to Arthur's court where he is condemned by the Ugly Maiden for his failure at the Grail Castle, after which he vows to return to the castle to remedy his previous failures. After Perceval has outer revelation his cousin scolds him and then he demonstrates his secular growth in his interaction with the Proud Knight and the maiden from the tent. Keeping with the parallel structure that Chrétien has established, it would only make sense for him to prove his spiritual growth after his internal revelation and the scolding he receives from the Ugly Maiden. This progression substantiates the argument that I will make in more detail below that, had Chrétien finished his romance, he would have authored Perceval's apotheosis as the next Fisher King.

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<sup>79</sup> Derek Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance: A Short Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 38.

<sup>80</sup> Derek Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance: A Short Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 38. See also Pearsall *Arthurian Romance* pg. 37 and Ruth Harwood Cline, “Introduction,” in Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), xviii.

The Ugly Maiden proves to be a very curious character for many reasons. Describing the hideous woman, Chrétien writes:

If we can believe the book's  
description of this maiden's looks,  
then you would never find so fell  
[such] a creature in or out of Hell.<sup>81</sup>

Chrétien goes on to describe her appearance by comparing her features to a variety of animals – she had rat-like eyes, a cat-like nose, and the teeth of a billy-goat – and he claims that she had a beard and a hunchback. Frappier makes the interesting suggestion that “the ugly maiden is an exteriorized image of Perceval’s guilty conscience.”<sup>82</sup> Taken with Chrétien’s emphasis that so ugly of a creature cannot be found on land or in Hell and his fantastic description of her, Frappier’s theory that the Ugly Maiden is a personification of Perceval’s tainted conscience seems promising, or at least intriguing. Moreover, in a way the Ugly Maiden parallels the woman that Perceval offended in the tent. The maiden from the tent forced Perceval to confront his earthly wrongdoings while the Ugly Maiden represents Perceval’s guilt over his greater holy sins.

Appropriately, and hardly a coincidence, Perceval’s trance in the blood on the snow occurs directly in between his encounters with the maiden from the tent and the Ugly Maiden. I maintain that Chrétien organized the plot this way intentionally because throughout the story

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<sup>81</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 126.4615-4618. Also, with this quote, note Chrétien’s casual reference to a pre-existing book containing the story of the Grail, which Chrétien claims was given to him by his patron. Chrétien cites this book multiple times throughout the story (22.708; 77.2807; 167.6214; 168.6217; 176.6514).

<sup>82</sup> Quote from Ruth Harwood Cline’s note in Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 126.4610. Cline paraphrasing Jean Frappier (*Chrétien de Troyes et le Mythe du Graal*, p. 144).

there is a constant pattern of Perceval alternating between secular and religious. Both Perceval's mother and Gornemant of Gohort first instruct Perceval on the behaviors of secular chivalry, then on how to be a Christian knight; Perceval first spends time in Blancheflor's castle, then directly after he spends the night in the Grail Castle; in the first chapter Perceval questions a group of knights on the ways of knighthood when they passed by his mom's house, then after embarking on his second journey for the Grail Perceval comes across another group of knights and questions them on the rituals and beliefs of Christianity. Had Perceval not undergone his awakening while mesmerized by the blood on the snow perhaps he would have chosen a worldly quest similar to the one Gawain selected, still acting in accordance with the code of secular chivalry, but likewise absorbed by the secular temptations of fame and glory.<sup>83</sup>

Perceval's decision to reconcile his mistake is not driven by the love of a lady, but rather by his desires to know the secrets of the Grail, to purge himself of his hindering sins, to be worthy of the vision one more time, and to ask the proper questions in order to revive the Fisher King and his kingdom. Barber acknowledges that, in this sense, "Perceval is discovering the next stage on his journey towards chivalric perfection – the part that religion should play in the life of a true knight."<sup>84</sup> However, Perceval will have to go through a religious re-birth, and the rites of confession and penance, before he can achieve the spiritual perfection necessary to witness the Grail a second time. These Christian aspects of sin, penance, and sacrifice or charity (in

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<sup>83</sup> The morning of the blood in the snow episode, Chrétien writes, "Perceval rose early... to seek adventure, knightly fame" (*Perceval*, 114.4165-4167). The inclusion of this statement paired with Perceval's clear change in behavior after his internal revelation further supports the importance and effect of Perceval's trance.

<sup>84</sup> Richard Barber, *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 25.

endeavoring to restore the Fisher King's Kingdom) will come into play below when I argue for the analogy between Perceval and the crusaders.

### **Pious Perceval**

After the interlude on Gawain's journeys, Chrétien returns to Perceval in one last chapter regarding Perceval's story. This last chapter is the most important in my argument for relating Perceval to the crusaders with the end goal of equating the Holy Grail to eternal salvation because it includes the most details that directly parallel contemporary events in the last two decades of the twelfth century. For this reason, I felt it was necessary to insert a re-focusing break while still in my discussion of *Le Conte du Graal*. Five years have passed, during which time Perceval "had lost all his memory...so he remembered God no more."<sup>85</sup> Symbolically, Perceval has been born again and although he does not remember the wrongs he committed before, he is still carrying his sins with him. The fact that Perceval's sins stuck with him despite his memory loss, evokes the concept of original sin.

It is at this point that Perceval happens upon the second group of knights who chastise him for bearing his armor on Good Friday. As a reference to the Truce of God, the insertion of this law ground *Le Conte du Graal* in its historical context. The decree was first issued in 1027, but expanded and acknowledged throughout the first two crusades, "so that [the Church] might to some extent re-establish, on certain days at least, the peace which, because of [everyone's] sins, [the Church] could not make enduring."<sup>86</sup> The fact that the decree blames sin for the disruption of the peace, in conjunction with Perceval's sins still disrupting his anointment as the

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<sup>85</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 168.6218-6220.

<sup>86</sup> S.J. Allen and Emilie Amt eds., "Declaration of the Truce of God," in *The Crusades: A Reader* trans. D.C. Murano (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 25.

next Fisher King is at the very least intriguing, if not greatly significant in our reading of *Le Conte du Graal*. However, ignorant of this law and the significance of Good Friday, Perceval begins questioning the knights on their spirituality. The knights tell Perceval the story of Christ's birth and crucifixion, they make him aware of the importance of confession and penitence, and they tell Perceval of a Holy Hermit who could absolve Perceval of his sins. Just as the first group of knights Perceval encountered outside his mom's house inspired him to embrace a life of secular chivalry, the religious instruction from this second group of knights excites Perceval on a journey towards redemption and spiritual perfection, which will finally allow him another, this time successful, chance to witness the Grail.

Having reached the hermitage, Perceval wept, supplicating the Hermit "in terror of the sin he feared he had committed."<sup>87</sup> Although it seemed that Perceval was still unaware of his exact sins, when the Hermit asked him to confess, Perceval told the Hermit of his silence at the dinner with the Fisher King where he witnessed the procession of the Grail and the Lance, but failed to inquire about them. The Hermit informs Perceval that it was the grief he caused his mother with his abrupt departure, which caused her death. It was this sin which "cut off [his] tongue" at the Grail Castle.<sup>88</sup> Additionally, the Hermit reveals that the only reason Perceval has stayed alive this long is because his mother prayed to God to watch over him as he departed. This belief that success came to those who had been rewarded God's blessing – regardless of how outnumbered they might be, as Perceval often was – was very common throughout the crusades.

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<sup>87</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 171.6354-6355.

<sup>88</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 173.6412.



Similar to the example above with Perceval being blessed by the True Cross relating to the Battle of Hattin, Perceval's ability to overcome much more numerous opponents is similar to the outcome of the siege of Antioch in the First Crusade. Specifically, after Peter Bartholomew claimed to have received a vision from St. Andrew who revealed to Peter the location of the Holy Lance in Antioch, the crusaders recovered a worn lance from the floor of the Cathedral of St. Peter and went on to be victorious in their siege. Thomas Madden highlights that, "in the Holy Lance, [the crusaders] believed that Christ himself had given a sign of their impending victory."<sup>89</sup> This clear parallel between the religious ideology behind *Le Conte du Graal* and the ideology of the crusaders, along with reference to the Truce of God, demonstrates an apparent relationship between this romance and the crusades. Continuing to progress towards my declaration that the Holy Grail symbolized eternal salvation to the crusaders, all of the similarities that I have mentioned above and the others that I will discuss below are intended to validate the comparison of the rewards promised to Perceval (the Grail) and to the crusaders (eternal salvation).

Repent and willing to obey the Hermit's ordered penance, Perceval remained at the hermitage until that Sunday. It was on that day, Easter Sunday, that "worthily, [Perceval] took communion."<sup>90</sup> The emphatic diction Chrétien chose to underscore how apropos it was for Perceval to take his communion on Easter seems to associate Perceval's rebirth to Jesus's resurrection. Additionally, after signing a truce on January 21, 1188, Henry II and Philip II agreed to set out for the Third Crusade to the Holy Land on Easter of 1189. Thus, this decree of

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<sup>89</sup> Thomas F. Madden, *The Concise History of the Crusades* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 28.

<sup>90</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 176.6513-6514.

truce and the set departure were perfectly situated within the time frame that Chrétien was writing his romance, which reveals the temporal parallel between the commencement of Perceval's journey for redemption and that of the crusaders.<sup>91</sup> To once again anchor the nature of Perceval's quest to the historical context it was written in, Pope Urban II's Sermon at Clermont (1095) – as written down by Baldric of Dol – emphasizes the crusade as a means to purge oneself of his sins.<sup>92</sup> Urban II calls upon the “oppressors of children, plunderers of widows; [those] guilty of homicide, of sacrilege, robbers of another's right,” advising these sinners “to be mindful of [their] souls.”<sup>93</sup> Similar to Bernard of Clairvaux, Urban II promises that those who fight in the crusade need “not be troubled about the concerns of tomorrow;” for if a knight of Christ should lose his life in battle, he “will have gained everlasting glory.”<sup>94</sup> Whereas Gawain was only ever concerned with immediate glory on Earth, Perceval's determination to cleanse himself of his sins in order to be worthy of the Holy Grail will bring him the same truly everlasting glory. As a quest of penance, Perceval's journey towards the Grail resembles the crusades of the eleventh and twelfth centuries – and even the later ones too.

By beseeching any lay criminal to become a Christian knight, offering salvation in the case of death no matter what sins they may have committed in the past, Baldric effectively motivates a multitude of peasants to join the cause. Just how convincing this incentive was to the

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<sup>91</sup> Recall that Chrétien wrote *Le Conte du Graal* between 1170 and 1190. Scholars are inclined to date this romance towards the end of this twenty-year time period (c. 1188-1190) making it a response to the calling of the Third Crusade and the fall of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem in 1187.

<sup>92</sup> Although this sermon was delivered nearly one hundred years before the Third Crusade, Pope Gregory VIII's call for the Third Crusade, which I do include below, presents the same rhetoric.

<sup>93</sup> S.J. Allen and Emilie Amt, eds., “Urban II's Call for a Crusade (Baldric of Dol)” in *The Crusades: A Reader*, trans. A.C. Kray (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 39.

<sup>94</sup> S.J. Allen and Emilie Amt, eds., “Urban II's Call for a Crusade (Baldric of Dol)” in *The Crusades: A Reader*, trans. A.C. Kray (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 39.

laity is illustrated in Albert of Aachen's account of the Peasants' Crusade. Albert reports on how "all the common people...the sinful, adulterers, homicides, thieves, perjurers, and robbers...influenced by the spirit of penance – all joyfully entered upon this expedition."<sup>95</sup> This historical mindset of the crusade being a form of penance by which the crusaders were able to redeem themselves from their sins, along with Perceval's current state of hindrance due to his sins and the simultaneous departures of Perceval and the crusaders on Easter, effectively links Perceval's journey to that of the crusaders.

Furthermore, by reminding everyone listening of the sins that they have to be absolved of in order to be accepted into heaven, the rhetoric in Urban II's sermon resembles the Holy Hermit's recognition of Perceval's lingering sins despite Perceval having lost his memory. Recalling this detail as a possible allusion to original sin, Chrétien's approach to persuading Perceval to carry out his penitence might have been even more effective than Urban II's by charging everyone with their inherent sin rather than just addressing the active sinners. Interestingly, in Pope Gregory's call for the Third Crusade, he employs a mode of persuasion more akin to the Holy Hermit's, blaming the sins committed by all followers of Christ for the fall of Jerusalem.<sup>96</sup> Perhaps the closer resemblance between Chrétien's rhetorical approach and that of Pope Gregory VIII is a result of their chronologically closer publishing. Whereas Pope Urban II delivered his sermon in 1095, Pope Gregory VIII's papal bull was published in 1187 and *Le Conte du Graal* was written likely between 1188 and 1190.<sup>97</sup> This comparison between *Le Conte*

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<sup>95</sup> S.J. Allen and Emilie Amt, eds., "Albert of Aachen on the Peasants' Crusade," in *The Crusades: A Reader*, trans. A.C. Kray (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 43.

<sup>96</sup> See notes 114 and 115.

<sup>97</sup> See note 91.

*du Graal* and the decrees of Pope Urban II versus that of Pope Gregory VIII further confirms that Chrétien was influenced by the time period in which he was writing.

Now, “as a Christian knight...redirected by his Easter Communion,” it seems that there is nothing preventing Perceval from completing his penance, fulfilling his destiny, and becoming the guardian of the Grail.<sup>98</sup> Unfortunately, Chrétien’s narrative hits its abrupt ending before the reader can find out whether or not Perceval’s penitence was sufficient for him to be rewarded the another vision of the Grail. However, just looking at Perceval’s progression so far in relation to the ethos surrounding the crusades, there is a clear correspondence between Perceval’s motivations for and experiences while undertaking his quest and the motivations and experiences of the crusaders. To complete the formulation of this argument, below I invert my approach, comparing the historical evidence to what I have discussed above from *Le Conte du Graal*; however, in the spirit of portraying *Le Conte du Graal* in a truly comprehensive nature, I must first address the *Continuations* to Chrétien de Troyes.

### **The Continuator**

Since Chrétien left his work unfinished, limiting us to only speculate about how he would have concluded his romance, I have included a discussion of the *Continuations* in order to further substantiate my argument that Chrétien’s intended ending would have included Perceval’s fulfillment of his destiny. It is also important to see the story of Perceval all the way through in order to asses additional details that might shed light on what the Holy Grail meant to Perceval, which in turn will contribute to my overarching argument that the Holy Grail symbolized eternal salvation. Starting with the *First Continuation*, which remains anonymous, Perceval is hardly

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<sup>98</sup> Rupert T. Pickens, “*Le Conte de Graal: Chrétien’s Unfinished Last Romance*,” in *A Companion to Chrétien de Troyes*, eds. Norris J. Lacy and Joan Tasker Grimbert (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), 187.

included at all, focusing more on the story of Gawain. However, as I mentioned above, Gawain continues to pursue quest after quest with the same inclination towards worldly distractions until he makes his own visit to the Grail Castle; but, rather than listening to the Fisher King reveal the secret of the Bleeding Lance, Gawain falls asleep.<sup>99</sup> This episode reinforces the greedy nature of Gawain's ambitions and underscores his representation of a knight of the world, never becoming worthy of the Grail.

The *Second Continuation* sets Perceval on an odd variety of quests, one of which directly counters a quest that Gawain failed at in the *First Continuation*. When Perceval succeeds, he meets a lady who tells him that "it means [he] will soon know the truth about the Grail and the Lance."<sup>100</sup> Although this is a promising foreshadow, on his quest to re-solder the broken sword in order to obtain the truth of the Grail and the Lance, Perceval was unable to completely restore it as "there remained...a very tiny break."<sup>101</sup> Because only the purest, most Christian knight could mend the sword Perceval's shortcoming symbolizes his lingering spiritual imperfection. There is a general agreement that Wauchier de Denain "very probably" wrote the *Second Continuation* for Countess Jeanne of Flanders, Count Philip's granddaughter.<sup>102</sup> Gerbert de Montreuil's *Continuation* (c. 1225) proves to be a difficult enigma. By the end of the *Gerbert Continuation*, Perceval has come to terms with his sin against his mother, achieving a personal

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<sup>99</sup> See note 66.

<sup>100</sup> Annie Combes, "The Continuations of the *Conte du Graal*," trans. Alexia Gino-Saliba, in *A Companion to Chrétien de Troyes*, eds. Norris J. Lacy and Joan Tasker Grimbert (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), 196.

<sup>101</sup> Annie Combes, "The Continuations of the *Conte du Graal*," trans. Alexia Gino-Saliba, in *A Companion to Chrétien de Troyes*, eds. Norris J. Lacy and Joan Tasker Grimbert (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), 196-7.

<sup>102</sup> Richard Barber, *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 28. There is no definitive evidence that Countess Jeanne commissioned the *Second Continuation*, but scholars believe it likely because we know that Jeanne had commissioned Wauchier before for other literary works.

introspective redemption; proven to be spiritually sound by being the only knight able to hold a shield adorned with a vermilion cross, meaning it contained a fragment of the True Cross; and was finally able to fully mend the sword. However, with Perceval back at the Grail Castle right where the *Second Continuation* left off, but this time having restored the sword, Gerbert's *Continuation* ends. Finally, it is in Manessier's *Continuation* (c. 1225) that Perceval once again finds himself at the Grail Castle where he witnesses the procession and succeeds in asking the king "whom they are serving and where do they come from."<sup>103</sup> The Fisher King, who ends up being Perceval's maternal uncle, crowns Perceval the King of the Grail Castle, making him the new guardian of the Grail and its secrets, and at last, Perceval fulfills his destiny as the keeper of the Holy Grail.

I mentioned the peculiarity of the *Gerbert Continuation* because, when considered in junction with the *Manessier Continuation*, Gerbert's *Continuation* hardly seems necessary. Gerbert wrote his continuation for an unknown patron; however, there is reason to believe that his patron was not a part of the Flemish court, while *Le Conte du Graal*, the *Second Continuation*, and the *Manessier Continuation* were all commissioned by members of the Flemish court. Gerbert, unknowingly it seems, was writing his *Continuation* at the same time as Manessier, who clearly states his patron to be the same Countess Jeanne of Flanders who had most likely commissioned Wauchier's *Second Continuation*. It would have been excessive and counter-productive for Jeanne, or any other member of her family, to assign the same task to multiple authors. Due to their concurrent composition and antithetical endings, the Gerbert and Manessier *Continuations* are often considered to be alternate endings, both building off of

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<sup>103</sup> Annie Combes, "The Continuations of the *Conte du Graal*," trans. Alexia Gino-Saliba, in *A Companion to Chrétien de Troyes*, eds. Norris J. Lacy and Joan Tasker Grimbert (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), 199.

Chrétien's unfinished original, and the *First* and *Second Continuations*. But, Leah Tether presents a comprehensive analysis of both *Continuations* which reveals that Manessier's *Continuation* is the more logical ending while Gerbert's *Continuation* was meant as an "interpolation".<sup>104</sup> This proposal makes sense so long as Gerbert truly intended to end his story on that cliff hanger, without addressing the outcome of the most important plot line: Perceval's quest for the Grail. Perhaps in support of Gerbert's *Continuation* acting as an interpolation for the collective story of the Grail, in the manuscripts that contain Gerbert's *Continuation*, it is always placed in between the *Second Continuation* and Manessier's *Continuation*. In this sense, the *Gerbert Continuation* functions to delay the conclusion of the story and add some embellishment to the characters and the narrative. However, Gerbert's *Continuation* is only found in two manuscripts. By comparison, Manessier's *Continuation* exists in six manuscripts, in addition to the two featuring Gerbert's *Continuation*, where it sufficiently ends the narrative without Gerbert's extension.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, in both of the manuscripts that contain the *Gerbert Continuation*, the last fourteen lines of the *Second Continuation* are repeated after Gerbert's *Continuation* and before Manessier's in order to make the *Manessier Continuation* weave into the narrative seamlessly.

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<sup>104</sup> Leah Tether, "The *Gerbert* and *Manessier Continuations*: Interpolation vs. Conclusion," in *The Continuations of Chrétien's Perceval: Content and Construction, Extension and Ending* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012), 165-189.

<sup>105</sup> I am going off of Tether's manuscript numbers with two including both the Gerbert and Manessier Continuations and six other manuscripts including just the Manessier Continuation. Combes claims that "of the fifteen manuscripts of the *Conte du Graal*, eleven contain the *First Continuation*, ten the *Second*, seven the *Third [Manessier Continuation]*, and two the *Fourth*, Gerbert's." Annie Combes, "The Continuations of the *Conte du Graal*," trans. Alexia Gino-Saliba, in *A Companion to Chrétien de Troyes*, eds. Norris J. Lacy and Joan Tasker Grimbert (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), 192. Barber just says that the majority of the manuscripts of *Le Conte du Graal* contain the first three continuations and only two contain Gerbert's. Richard Barber, *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 28.

Significantly earlier in the text, Gerbert states that it was his intention to “continue faithfully, and complete” the story of Perceval “according to the original source.”<sup>106</sup> However, that statement is not to be taken for granted as Manessier makes the same claim that he is laboring to finish his work also relying on the original authentic source:

In the name of Countess Jehane, lady and mistress  
of Flanders... It was begun in the name of her ancestor...  
it is for you that Manessier has labored to finish it –  
and accurately, according to the source.<sup>107</sup>

As I mentioned above, it is from these concluding lines of his *Continuation* that we know Jeanne of Flanders was Manessier’s patron, and it would have been nonsensical for her to have also commissioned Gerbert. Additionally, because of their shared patronage from the court of Flanders, Tether acknowledges Manessier as the “heir” of Chrétien de Troyes; certainly if anyone were to pose the original source book which Chrétien based his romance on, it would be Manessier not Gerbert.<sup>108</sup> Scholars disagree as to whether or not Chrétien intended to conclude his tale with the apotheosis of Perceval to becoming the King of the Grail Castle; however, considering the multiple implications of Perceval’s success – in *Le Conte du Graal* and the *Continuations*, all written under Flemish patronage – I would contend that Perceval was always meant to fulfill his spiritual destiny.

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<sup>106</sup> Leah Tether, “The *Gerbert and Manessier Continuations*: Interpolation vs. Conclusion,” in *The Continuations of Chrétien’s Perceval: Content and Construction, Extension and Ending* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012), 177.

<sup>107</sup> Richard Barber, *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 29.

<sup>108</sup> Leah Tether, “The *Gerbert and Manessier Continuations*: Interpolation vs. Conclusion,” in *The Continuations of Chrétien’s Perceval: Content and Construction, Extension and Ending* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012), 185. Another noteworthy observation Tether makes is the pleasing mirror effect Manessier fabricates by having his closing dedication resemble that which Chrétien included in his prologue. Whereas Gerbert’s *Continuation* presents a cyclical pattern within the narrative, Manessier’s *Continuation* brings the entire narrative full circle.



Perceval's journey for spiritual perfection, to become the ideal Christian knight, juxtaposed with Gawain's selfish obsession with acquiring worldly glory and pleasing women, was meant to instruct the knights of the Middle Ages on the ways of proper Christian chivalry. Specifically, Holmes and Cline both suggest that Chrétien intended the progression of Perceval's character from a naïve boy to a mature, disciplined, and devoted Christian knight to guide the new young King of France, Philip-Augustus, who also happened to be the godson of Chrétien's patron, Count Philip.<sup>109</sup> Philip-Augustus assumed his junior kingship when he was only fourteen years old and was crowned King Philip II of France only one year later. According to the only surviving contemporary depiction of Philip-Augustus's personality, the young King was "much inclined towards good-living, wine, and women."<sup>110</sup> In other words, Philip-Augustus was consumed by the exact lifestyle that Chrétien de Troyes and Bernard of Clairvaux were warning knights against. The need to instruct this young King combined with the fact that Chrétien did create a very dynamic character arch for Perceval – rather than just having him start out as the perfect Christian knight like Galahad, which would have been much easier and more direct – supports the role of *Le Conte du Graal* as an instructive story, communicating the same ideals outlined by Bernard of Clairvaux in *De Laude Novae Militiae*.

Furthermore, as an interesting side note supporting the relevance of the similarities between *Le Conte de Graal* and *De Laude Novae Militiae*, Jean de Nesle (the patron of *Perlesvaus*) went on crusade with both Thierry of Flanders (the son of Count Philip, Chrétien's patron) and Gautier de Montbéliard (Robert de Boron's patron). Before Jean de Nesle left for

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<sup>109</sup> Urban T. Holmes, *Chrétien de Troyes* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1970), 153. Ruth Harwood Cline, "Introduction," in Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), xviii.

<sup>110</sup> Péan Gatineau qtd. in Alistair Horne, *La Belle France: A Short History* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 25.

the crusade, he founded a Cistercian monastery in Picardy. Bernard of Clairvaux was the original leader in the development of the Cistercian Order, whose values are exemplified in part by his *De Laude Novae Militiae*.

Through the dissemination of Arthurian literature starting with Chrétien de Troyes's *Le Conte du Graal* and maintained by subsequent romance authors, the crusaders were instructed on the same principles of Christian chivalry that Bernard of Clairvaux detailed in his *De Laude Novae Militiae*. Namely, both authors encourage the denunciation of material wealth and earthly glory, indicting worldly knights as represented by Gawain in Chrétien's romance, and both authors praise the Christian knight who lives and fights for a greater spiritual purpose, the kind of knight Perceval eventually grows into. The condition of acting out of love for and obedience to God directly contradicts the nature of pre-crusade romance and the behaviors of the aristocracy at a time when men were frequently acting out of love for a lady and personal greed for immediate wealth and glory. St. Bernard insists that the Christian knight is protected by God even in the most uneven of battles. Historically, this mindset is confirmed by the Battle of Hattin and the siege of Antioch. Chrétien illustrates the divine protection of Perceval through his multiple triumphs despite being greatly outnumbered – such as when defending Blancheflor's castle. Chrétien then transparently credits God for these victories in Perceval's conversation with the Holy Hermit. St. Bernard applauds the great discipline of the knights of God. Chrétien finally portrays Perceval as capable of adhering to a singleness of purpose at the end of his character arch while Gawain remains fickle and easily distracted.

St. Bernard promises eternal salvation for all Christian knights who die in service of Christ. As I will address below, the requirement of death during service in order to be granted salvation will be expanded by the penance and pilgrimage rhetoric of the Popes issuing the calls

for the crusades, so that any participant in a holy war would receive admittance to heaven. Chrétien implies that Perceval will attain eternal salvation once he finds the Holy Grail and inquires about its history or why the Lance bleeds. Specifically, again in his conversation with the Holy Hermit, the Hermit prophesizes, “you’ll grow in merit and obtain first honor and then paradise,” and he advises Perceval to “perform this penance in all places, so that [he] may regain the graces.”<sup>111</sup> Taking these points of comparison, along with Flemish patronage of *Le Conte du Graal* and its continuations, and St. Bernard’s intended audience of Hugh de Paynes and other crusading knights, I stand to argue *Le Conte du Graal* served the same purpose as *De Laude Novae Militiae*, to instruct crusaders on the proper behaviors of a Christian knight and persuade more men to take up arms in the holy wars. The element of persuasion, as I touched on above, becomes apparent in the promise of the Holy Grail in *Le Conte du Graal* and of eternal salvation for the crusaders. After illustrating the similitude between Perceval and the crusaders even further still, at last, below I will assert the relationship between the two promised rewards.

### **The Holy Grail as a Symbol of Eternal Salvation**

It means you will soon know  
the truth about the Grail and the Lance<sup>112</sup>

Chrétien uses the promise of the Holy Grail as enticement for Perceval to become a perfect Christian knight. St. Bernard offers the eternal salvation of one’s soul as the reward for a crusader dying as a knight of God. Using the many parallelisms between Perceval and the

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<sup>111</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval*, or, *The Story of the Grail*, trans. Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 174.6455-6457; 6471-6472.

<sup>112</sup> Annie Combes, “The Continuations of the *Conte du Graal*,” trans. Alexia Gino-Saliba, in *A Companion to Chrétien de Troyes*, eds. Norris J. Lacy and Joan Tasker Grimbert (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), 196.

crusaders, in this section I argue that the Holy Grail symbolized eternal salvation in the context of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. However, in order to sufficiently prove the equation of the Holy Grail to the salvation promised to the crusaders, there is one more comparison that is important to outline, which I briefly mentioned above: the crusades were seen as a form of penitence that offered the reward of salvation. Significantly, when Pope Urban II issued his call for the First Crusade in his sermon at Clermont (1095), he worded it as a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. That being said, there was a pre-established recognition in the Latin West that a pilgrimage to Jerusalem was a supreme form of penance and act of holy charity. It was because of this high recognition of the importance and difficulty to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem that all pilgrims, not just the crusaders, were rewarded with guaranteed salvation.

As transcribe by Robert the Monk, Pope Urban II announced that all those who set out on this journey would “obtain remission of [his] sins and [could] be sure of the incorruptible glory of the Kingdom of Heaven.”<sup>113</sup> Perceval set out on his quest in order to absolve himself of his sins so that he could, once again, be granted entrance into the Kingdom of the Fisher King. Significantly, as a result of this parallel construction, the Kingdom of the Fisher King is equated to the Kingdom of Heaven. Such an interpretation is certainly a possibility; however, I will also discuss the possibility that the Kingdom of the Fisher King is an allegory to the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. The identical motivations of Perceval and the crusaders – to serve their penance – establishes that Perceval and the crusaders were journeying towards the same end goal. This premise, that Perceval was journeying for the same reason as the crusaders, is the first necessary

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<sup>113</sup> S.J. Allen and Emilie Amt, eds., “Urban II’s Call for a Crusade (Robert the Monk)” in *The Crusades: A Reader*, trans. O.J. Thatcher and E.H. McNeal (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 37.

component in proving that the Holy Grail symbolized eternal salvation in the context of the crusades.

Along the way to Jerusalem, the crusaders were supposed to fast and practice abstinence; and, the cross that they sewed into their clothing solidified and advertised their statuses as pilgrims. The importance of the crusaders identifying as pilgrims is twofold: First, as pilgrims, they are emphasizing their journey as a form of penance. In this regard, Perceval is acting like a crusader, undergoing his quest in hopes of receiving forgiveness for his sins. The second point of importance is that, as pilgrims, the crusaders are ensuring their own salvation whether they die or not. Considering the crusader ethos presented in *De Laude Novae Militiae* on its own, there is the underlying condition that the crusader must die while fighting for God, or along the way, in order to be granted everlasting life. However, when considering it alongside the pilgrimage overtones publicized by the popes, the crusaders are promised their salvation as the rewarded for just taking part in the holy war. This adjustment is crucial for arguing that the Holy Grail symbolized eternal salvation. To demonstrate this necessary precondition, I will propose a scenario: Say that the Holy Grail does in fact symbolize eternal salvation, but there was still the notion that the crusader had to die in battle in order to receive salvation. So then, if Perceval is a crusader venturing under this assumption, how could he die and still obtain the Grail? In order to argue that the Holy Grail symbolized eternal salvation, the popes had to use this pilgrimage rhetoric in order for the crusaders to be gifted salvation without dying, thus allowing Perceval to stay alive in his journey to obtain the Grail and be anointed the Fisher King.

Furthermore, in his call for the Third Crusade in 1187, Pope Gregory VIII adopted the same Bernardine doctrine emphasizing the spirituality of the crusaders:

We promise, then, to all those who, with a contrite heart and an humble mind, will not to undertake this painful voyage, and who will be determined to do so by motives of sincere faith, and with the view of obtaining the remission of their sins, a plenary indulgence for their faults, and the life everlasting which will follow.<sup>114</sup>

Whereas Gawain was repeatedly going on the wrong quests for the wrong reasons, Perceval perfectly meets the conditions set forth by Gregory VIII in being contrite of heart and humble of mind, sincerely motivated, and desiring absolution. Aside from the pilgrimage terminology superimposed on the crusades and those who participated in them, there was a very real correlation between pilgrims and crusaders, in part demonstrated above by the crusaders wearing the sign of the pilgrim. Additionally, the crusaders had to take the Pilgrim's Vow, promising to journey all the way to the Holy Sepulcher. Perceval's vow to once again return to the Grail Castle to finish what he had begun, parallels this Pilgrim's Vow taken by the crusaders. In this sense, the Grail Castle would be analogous to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which is logical considering the Christological terminology used by Chrétien when describing the Fisher King and the host within the Grail, which alone sustains the King's life. Considering the Grail Castle within the Kingdom of the Fisher King as Perceval's sought-after destination and the Holy Sepulcher within the Kingdom of Jerusalem as the intended destination for the crusaders, I would contend that this analogy presents a more promising interpretation than relating the Kingdom of the Fisher King to the Kingdom of Heaven. However, it is within the Kingdom of the Fisher King that Perceval would achieve his apotheosis, or ascension into heaven, supporting the latter interpretation.

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<sup>114</sup> S.J. Allen and Emilie Amt, eds., "Letters on the Fall of Jerusalem: Papal Bull of Gregory VIII, 1187" in *The Crusades: A Reader*, trans. W. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 159.

Reinforcing this relationship between Perceval, the crusaders, the Kingdom of the Fisher King and the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, Pope Gregory VIII claimed that “Jerusalem fell because of the sins of Christ’s followers... [and] only through their penance could it be redeemed.”<sup>115</sup> As we may recall, Perceval failed at the Grail Castle on his first visit because of his sins. In embarking on his second search for the Grail, Perceval is told by the Holy Hermit that if he serves his penance, freeing him from his debilitating sin and allowing him to ask the proper questions in the presence of the Grail, then the Kingdom of the Fisher King would be restored. These causes and effects, and if-then explanations governing Perceval’s and the Fisher King’s fates, greatly resemble those set forth by Gregory VIII, thus also upholding the identification of Perceval as a pilgrim or crusader. Perceval has assumed the role of a pilgrim crusader in its entirety by serving his penitence while performing this ultimate act of Christian charity with the hope that the Grail would reveal itself to him once again so that he may restore the Kingdom of the Fisher King. Contending that Perceval would have sufficiently completed his penance, he would have been granted that vision of the Grail, illustrating his sinless purity, and blessing him as the next Fisher King to be sustained by the Grail Host until his ascension into the Kingdom of Heaven. Considering all of these parallels that justify equating Perceval to a crusader, I feel confident in stating that during the crusades the Holy Grail symbolized eternal salvation to the crusaders.

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<sup>115</sup> Thomas F. Madden, *The Concise History of the Crusades* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 77.

### Conclusion

What we call the beginning is often the end.  
And to make an end is to make a beginning.  
The end is where we start from.

-T.S. Elliot

My initial conception of what this paper would be changed drastically multiple times throughout this process. At the outset, I wanted to discuss the oscillating symbolism of the Holy Grail between secular and spiritual as demonstrated in the visual representations of it. However, the more and more I researched the more convinced I became of a Christian understanding of the Holy Grail. That is not to say that I am correct in this understanding, but luckily no one will ever be able to definitively prove otherwise. Convincing arguments can be made for all of the interpretations of the Holy Grail and I hope that, in this paper, I was able to sufficiently present an argument for the Christian reading of the Holy Grail. Rather than be bogged down by the incessant debate over the corporeal existence of the Holy Grail and the mountain of evidence previous Grail scholars have already surveyed in depth without reaching any conclusion, a crucial aspect of this paper is that I am only considering the Holy Grail as an abstract concept. Restraining myself to the readily accepted assumption that at the very least the Holy Grail existed in the minds of the people living during the Middle Ages, I was able to discuss the symbolic nature of the Grail as representative of and influential in society during the crusades.

Furthermore, throughout my researching process I became infatuated with Arthurian romance, specifically Chrétien de Troyes's *Le Conte du Graal*, and having been somewhat familiar with the works of Bernard of Clairvaux, I immediately began recognizing some of the similarities between *Le Conte du Graal* and *De Laude Novae Militiae*. Having made this realization, it became apparent to me that *Le Conte du Graal* likely functioned in the same way the *De Laude Novae Militiae* did in the context of the crusades, as a didactic text instructing the



crusaders on the proper behaviors of a Christian knight and also as a propagandic text urging more men to take up arms. I attempted to maintain this argument as both an underlying and supporting theme while making my primary argument regarding the Christian symbolism of the Holy Grail.

Wanting to prove that Holy Grail represented eternal salvation or the grace of God through a method not yet explored, I ended up making an argument for the analogous relationship between Perceval and the crusaders by dissecting the rhetoric in *De Laude Novae Militiae*, and some other primary sources from the crusades, and the juxtaposition of Perceval and Gawain in *Le Conte du Graal*. I justify focusing primarily on *Le Conte du Graal* because it is, as far as we know, the first Arthurian romance. Additionally, most Grail scholars skip over Chrétien when discussing the Christian nature of the Holy Grail because of the ambiguities in *Le Conte du Graal*. Because of the complex nature of symbolism and analogies, I thought it would be most persuasive and easiest to follow if I broke my paper down into three progressive arguments: (1) There was a pre-established Christian understanding of the concept of a holy grail. I prove the existence of such an understanding by first looking at visual evidence that predates the publication of *Le Conte du Graal*. Building off of this foundation and exploring the evidence in *Le Conte du Graal*, I am able to argue that the Chrétien's indistinct holy grail is intended to be the Holy Grail. (2) *De Laude Novae Militiae* and *Le Conte du Graal* both functioned as instructive material for how crusaders could behave as Christian knights. I begin by delineating the premises outlined by Bernard of Clairvaux on the lifestyles of Knights Templar, so that I can discuss Perceval and Gawain in these Bernardine terms. After presenting the various ways Chrétien imbued his romance with the teachings of St. Bernard and discussing why I believe that Chrétien always intended Perceval to arrive back at the Grail Castle free from

sin and fulfill his destiny by becoming the next guardian of the Grail, I am able to establish the correlation between Bernard's knights of God and Perceval versus Bernard's worldly knights and Gawain. The complimentary ideologies guiding Perceval and the crusaders prove a mental similitude between the two that will contribute to my final analogy. (3) In the context of the crusades, the Holy Grail symbolized eternal salvation. Building off of these Bernardine identifications of Chrétien's characters, I am able to significantly relate Perceval and his quest to the crusaders and their pilgrimage. By analyzing *Le Conte du Graal* and *De Laude Novae Militiae* alongside one another I was able to compare the ideologies guiding their behaviors, and though I interweave historical evidence and comparisons throughout section two, it is in this third section that I focus intently on the socio-historical context in order to illustrate the more literal and logistical similarities between Perceval and a medieval crusader. Having then covered all of my bases, in turn I am able to relate the reward Perceval is seeking (the Holy Grail) to the reward being promised to the crusaders (eternal salvation).

### *The Holy Grail and the Laity*

Finally, I would like to conclude this paper with simply a discussion on what the Holy Grail meant to the laity. Because arguments concerning the mentalities of the illiterate members of a society are much more difficult to substantiate, I chose to include my thoughts on the matter as an informal, impartial conclusion to this paper. Also, I believe that it is this aspect of the Holy Grail, which resonated with the laity, that makes the Holy Grail the ever-relevant symbol that it is. In this way, I hope you find this discussion an appropriate conclusion. Still in line with the idea of the Holy Grail symbolizing eternal salvation, for those lay members of society who were not directly participating in the crusades, the Holy Grail came to symbolize a promise for better

times to come. Significant for evaluating this line of thought is the rebirths of the Holy Grail at other tumultuous times in history, most prominently during World War II though also during the Religious Wars during the Renaissance. Goodrich confirms that “the Holy Grail strove to point beyond suffering toward hope and a better world.”<sup>116</sup> Additionally, Arthurian romances in general were often adapted and used “to distance the horror and justify the pain.”<sup>117</sup> This exploitation of the Arthurian legends can be seen in T.S. Elliot’s *Waste Land* (1922) or John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667). Both of these literary works sought to order a chaotic world. Whereas the near assurance of death resulted in the crusaders hoping for the best afterlife, the laity who were typically stuck living in their harsh reality begged for a better present.

As an additional commentary on the apropos popularization of the Holy Grail, the allure of the Holy Grail impacted the real world by enticing more men to join the crusader cause – whether by inadvertently or intentionally suggesting the existence of an extremely valuable relic, or by romanticizing the prospect of a crusader and a crusade with Perceval and his quests. It is in this regard that I do not see any coincidence in the Holy Grail being popularized when it was. The Latin Kingdom of the East had just collapsed in 1187 and contemporaries knew of the intense effect that a relic could have of crusader morale from the events at Antioch versus those at the Battle of Hattin. Therefore, despite the focus of this paper being on the symbolic nature of the Holy Grail, it is also important to mention the influential capacity that the concept of the relic actually demonstrated in shaping that time period, which it was also reflecting.

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<sup>116</sup> Norma L. Goodrich, *The Holy Grail*, (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), xxi.

<sup>117</sup> Muriel Whitaker, *The Legends of King Arthur in Art* (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1990), 311.

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