



Universidad
del País Vasco

Euskal Herriko
Unibertsitatea



Faculty of Arts

English and German Philology and Translation & Interpretation

**COMPARATIVE LITERATURE:
RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM
IN THE TALE OF THE GRAIL
BY THREE AUTHORS**

by

**ASIER LANCHO DIEGO
DEGREE IN ENGLISH STUDIES**

TUTOR: CRISTINA JARILLOT RODAL

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ABSTRACT:

The myth of the Grail has long been recognised as the cornerstone of Arthurian literature. Many studies have been conducted on the subject of Christian symbolism in the major Grail romances. However, the aim of the present paper is to prove that the 15th-century “Tale of the Sangrail”, found in *Le Morte d’Arthur*, by Thomas Malory, presents a greater degree of Christian coloration than 12th-century Chrétien de Troyes’ *Perceval* and Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival*. In order to evaluate this claim, the origin and function of the main elements at the Grail Ceremony were compared in the first place. Secondly, the main characters’ roles were examined to determine variations concerning religious beliefs and overall character development. The findings demonstrated that the main elements at the Grail Ceremony in Thomas Malory’s “The Tale of the Sangrail” are more closely linked to Christian motifs and that Perceval’s psychological development in the same work conflicts with that of a stereotypical *Bildungsroman*, in contrast with the previous 12th-century versions of the tale.

Keywords: The Tale of the Grail, Grail Ceremony, Holy Grail, Christian symbolism

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1. INTRODUCTION

It was a long time ago that the Grail settled as a literary-motif, with such ramifications as “Wolfram’s *Parzival*, Tennyson’s *Holy Grail* and Wagner’s *Parsifal*” (Harper 120), as well as Chrétien de Troyes’ *Perceval* and “The Tale of the Sangrail” (in *Le Morte Darthur*) by Sir Thomas Malory. The “wonderworking vessel in the care of mysterious king or keeper” (Lacy, *The Arthurian Handbook*, 316) typical of Arthurian stories, the modern usage of the term clearly differs from its original pagan and Christian roots. We might assert that the Grail-motif is indeed Celtic in origin and that the progressive Christening of the term did not take place until much later (Harper 109). Many of the oft-cited sources of the myth include all or some of the following: “Celtic mythology, the Eucharistic rites of Eastern Christianity, ancient mystery religion, Jungian archetypal journeys, dualist heresies, Templar treasure and the descendants of Christ and Mary Magdalene.” (Wood 169)

The main intent of this paper is to demonstrate, through straight textual analysis of some of the main symbols and characters, that Thomas Malory’s “The Tale of the Sankrail” in *Le Morte D’Arthu* displays greater Christening than Wolfram Eschenbach’s *Parzival* and Chrétien de Troyes’ *Perceval* in the way it presents religion through symbolism and character development. Before jumping into textual analysis, I will first introduce the broad literary context of each of the novels. Secondly, I will provide a brief summary of each narration. To conclude with contextualisation, I will introduce relevant biographical remarks for each of the authors.

2. LITERARY CONTEXT

Even though Chrétien and Wolfram shared the same historical time, the literary influences affecting each differ considerably. The main past inspirational forces belonged to one of the ensuing three literary cycles: the Matter of Alexander, the Matter of France and the Matter of Britain. The first, incorporated the epic writings from Ancient times dealing with the *Story of Alexander*, from which twelve-syllable-long Alexandrine verse-lines come from (Payen 147); the second cycle featured Christian epics written in the French “laisse”, among which *The Song of Roland* is the best-known example (Lestringant 204); lastly, the Matter of Britain heavily drank from Celtic and Breton legends and largely centred on the Arthurian myth (Payen 151). However, by far the most interesting product of the Arthurian cycle is that of the myth of the Grail.

Out of the three, the Matter of France, with its Christian epics known as “chansons de geste”, indubitably inspired Chrétien to produce his masterpiece, *Perceval* or *The Tale of the Grail*. Additionally, he might have received influence from *The Brut* by Robert Wace, considered to be the very first Arthurian tale proper in the Matter of Britain Cycle. The most widely read translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Robert Wace’s *Brut*, set the tone for the posterior Arthurian narrative tradition (Berthelot 30) by providing a vast corpus of recurrent characters in posterior Arthurian Literature, such as Keu, Mordred, Uther Pendragon and King Arthur himself (Berthelot 64).

Regarding Wolfram, he was probably inspired by the same sources already mentioned, plus Chrétien’s *Perceval*, which he adapted and improved in order to better fit German tastes. Concerning Malory, the Matter of Britain might have been his main inspirational force. We shall now have a look at the main storyline of the three works we are going to analyse later.

3. BOOK SUMMARIES

The common denominator in the three accounts that are object of this present study is the narration of the heroic adventures a young knight undergoes in search for the Holy Grail. However, the three differ regarding the starting point of the hero’s walk, there being several minor plot differences between Chrétien’s *Perceval* and Wolfram’s *Parzival*, whereas “The Tale of the Sangrail” by Thomas Malory is completely different from the other two.

Parzival by Wolfram von Eschenbach starts off with the account of the hero’s father’s adventures into heathendom. After liberating the Kingdom of Zazamanc, he becomes king and marries the Moors Queen Belakane in Baghdad. Upon departure from her, he leaves her a letter begging her to convert into Christianity if they ever were to get married, to which she consents. Meantime, in Spanish land, he visits his cousin Kaylet, King of Castille. By winning a tournament, he gains favour with Herzeolyde, Parzival’s mother, and they marry and conceive him the very same night. After rejecting the French Queen Ampflise’s advances, he eventually returns to serve the Baruch (a powerful ruler) in Baghdad, where he is ultimately slain by the Babylonians.

From this point on, both Chrétien’s *Perceval* and Wolfram’s *Parzival* follow a similar storyline: Chrétien’s *Perceval* begins in the forest, and so we are told in *Parzival* as well, where Herzeolyde keeps the ignorant youth away from chivalry. However, after a brief encounter with a couple of

Arthurian knights, he decides to become one himself. Upon breaking the news to her mother, she swoons and later allows him to go in search of King Arthur, not without giving him a brief word of admonition. In his way to Arthur's Court, he causes Jeschute's husband to suspect her of infidelity, he slays Ither de Lalant, the Knight of the Red Shield, and steals his equipment to the dismay of the Arthurian congregation. Next, he is given to Gornemant de Goort (Gurnemanz de Graharz in Wolfram's narration) so that he might prepare him for the Office of the Shield. After a fortnight's training, he departs in search of her mother, but instead ends up fighting for freedom at Beaurepaire, a city who had recently been sieged and encamped around by the malevolent Clamadeu. Upon victory, the young hero vows servitude to Blanchefleur (Condwiramurs, in Wolfram's version) and marches his way after marrying and leaving her pregnant. In the middle of the forest, he lodges at the Grail Castle, where he beholds the Grail procession. Nevertheless, he stays silent in the face of the injunction given by Gornemant to not speak too much. After a tumultuous nights' sleep, he awakes to an empty castle and meets Sigune, his cousin. She reveals that by his failure to pose the Question he has let slip the opportunity to both healing the wounded King and he himself becoming King of the Grail. Later, he meets the woman he had wronged on his way to Arthur's castle in a pitiable state. After disclosing his guilt to "Orgueilleux", his husband, they duel and he finally acquiesces to the hero's request to restore his innocent wife's health by procuring her a warm bath. Later, he advances over a snowy field and stares at three blood drops reminding him of her beloved Blanchefleur (Condwiramurs). Arthur's fellow knights find him and joust against him, bringing him into his senses. They beg him to join the rest of Arthur's Court and they enjoy the company, until the hideous Dame on the Mule (Cundrie "la surzière" or "the sorceress" in Wolfram's version) appears. She scolds both Perceval (Parzival) and Gawain for their misdeeds, not asking the Question in the case of the young protagonist.

The narration turns to Gawain at this point. Since he is not the main focus of the analysis, I will, for practical reasons, skip this part of the narrative altogether.

Afterwards, the story goes back to Perceval/Parzival, after a five-year parenthesis away from the comforting presence of God, who he had cursed and rejected after the Dame of the Mule's scolding. A group of hermits informs him about the festivities of Holy Friday and direct him to the home of Trevizrent for godly counsel. Now a very pious hermit, he discloses he is, in fact, the young knight's maternal uncle and entreats him to sincerely repent of his sins before moving on.

The protagonist's walk is interrupted once again at this point. Briefly, this portion of the story accounts for Gawain's meeting of the Hideous Demoiselle (Duchess Orgueluse de Logrois in Wolfram's

narrative) and the rescue of the fair Queens and maidens trapped inside The Castle of Wonders, after passing the test of The Marvellous Bed, a mortal trap featuring a deadly lion and multiple javelins, for which he is proclaimed king of the castle.

After some time, Perceval/Parzival and King Arthur's host arrive and they celebrate the reunion. Even the "Maligne Demoiselle" ("Duchess Orgueluse", in *Parzival*) reappears, only to confess to Gawain that the reason behind her past irrational hatred towards knights was the man Grinomalant, who he meets in the "Gué Périlleux" (i.e., "the perilous ford"). The story ends abruptly here in Chrétien's *Perceval*, as soon as a future joust between the two is arranged. However, Wolfram's narration continues with the arrival of Firefiz, Belakane's infidel son begotten from Gahmuret, who comes claiming he is an Angevin as Parzival is. Enraged by the apparently nonsensical claim, Parzival and Firefiz joust until the misunderstanding is resolved. Shortly after, Cundrie "la surzière" (i.e., "the sorceress") rides in, bearing the Grail-emblem. Everyone rejoices, for Parzival is now able to heal Anfortas, the wounded King of the Grail, and, thus, succeed him as new King of the Grail. By this time, Arthur's and Firefiz's cohorts had already moved to the Grail Castle, where they were to celebrate the Grail Ceremony. During the Ceremony, Firefiz becomes infatuated with Repanse and Condwiramurs and Perceval meet after five long years of separation. Firefiz converts to Christianity and joins his wife in spreading the Gospel throughout India.

"The Tale of the Sangrail", included within the larger work by Thomas Malory *Le Morte d'Arthur*, although thematically related with the previous ones, testifies of a totally different series of adventures, as we shall appreciate next:

At the beginning of the tale, magic writing appears at the "Siege Perilous" (i.e., "Perilous seat"), a place no one has ever been able to assume at the Round Table, predicting someone would fill it that day. Then, Arthur catches word of a stone out of which no one is able to extract the sword. Several attempts later, Galahad achieves the feat and takes his seat at the Siege Perilous, after which the commencing of the Grail Quest is declared by King Arthur himself. Pained at his comrades' imminent departure, he arranges a final tournament.

After the final farewell, the story diversifies and provides brief snapshots at different points of each knight's progress towards the Grail. Thus, we learn about Galahad and Melias, Lancelot, Perceval of Wales, Bors of Ganis and Lionel, among others. Of Arthur's knights, only three catch a glimpse of the Holy Grail: Bors, Perceval and Galahad. We will now turn to them in order to complete the whole

picture.

After a while, Perceval's sister, Perceval, Bors and Galahad board the "Ship of Faith", where they find a sword which only Galahad achieves. They eventually arrive at a castle where the enemies of God are mysteriously slain. They are, then, forced to comply with the custom of the castle, which involved the shedding of blood of a pure virgin. Percival's sister passes away as she sheds her own blood for the group's sake. They place her corpse on a boat and let it drift away.

Meanwhile, Lancelot finds the ship where Perceval's sister lays and boards it. He later finds Galahad and joins him in the search of the Castle of the Grail (i.e., the Castle of Carbonek). Once arrived at the Grail Castle, Lancelot beholds the Grail for an instant, then faints. Galahad finds King Evelake, who had been waiting for his embrace for 400 years, after which he perishes. At last, Perceval and Bors find him at Carbonek and behold the marvels of the Grail. Galahad prays and is granted to decide on the day of his death. Next, he heals King Pellem, the "Maimed King". At the city of Sarras, a wicked Saracen King learns about the Grail and throws the three heroes in prison with the intent of starving them to death. However, the Grail provides for them every day. Eventually, the wicked King dies and they proclaim Galahad King of the Grail. Perceval becomes a religious hermit, whilst Bors returns to a desolate King Arthur.

4. AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

The life-experience of the three authors who wrote about the story of the Grail described earlier is enshrouded in mystery and the little we know can roughly be reconstructed from occasional references found in their literary production and writing idiosyncrasies.

Concerning Chrétien de Troyes, the fact that he had translated several Ovidian works before taking up novel writing towards the 1150s is contained within the prologue to *Cligès*, his very first novel. He has also written *Philomena*, an adaptation of Ovid's *Philomela* story and several other minor works such as *Erec*, *Les Commandanz Ovide*, *L'Art d'Amors*, *Li Mors de l'Espaule*, *Li Rois Marc et Iseut la Blonde* and *l'Aronde et le Rosignol* (Loomis 159).

The exact place and date of birth are unknown, although *Franconian* dialectal features in his work seem to point at Troyes as his potential birthplace (Loomis 158). In any case, he is believed to have written *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* (i.e., "The Knight of the Cart") at the Court at Troyes, for the

book is clearly dedicated to Marie de Champagne, his patron at the time, who dwelled at Court. Other important works by this author are *Érec et Énide* and *Le Chevalier au Lion* (i.e., “The Knight with the Lion” or *Lancelot*). His final romance, *Le Conte del Graal* (i.e., “The Tale of the Grail” or *Perceval*), was dedicated to Philip of Flanders, who passed away in 1191 (Lacy, *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, 88).

One of the greatest German epic poets of the high Middle Ages and Chrétien’s contemporary, Wolfram von Eschenbach is the author of *Parzival*, considered “a reworking, expansion and completion of Chrétien de Troyes’ *Conte del Graal*”. He also produced an unfinished tragic romance based on the Old French chanson de geste *Aliscans: Willehalm*. Nine lyric poems and two fragments known by the title *Titurel* complete the list of his works. The chronology of his literary production is not altogether clear, even though *Parzival* is believed to have been written between 1200 and 1210 and *Willehalm* between 1212 and 1220.

In spite of the many personal references in his work, there is little certainty about many aspects of his life. His surname might reference the old-Middle Franconian city of Ober-Eschenbach south-east of Ansbach, today Wolframs-Eschenbach in Bavaria, but it is not clear that he was born there (Loomis 218). There are mentions of his grave in the Frauenkirche and of the Eschenbach family from 1268 to the second half of the 14th C. It is unlikely that he was nobility, much less wealthy. In any case, he does call himself a soldier, although there is no reason to believe he was an actual *ministerial*. He might have spent some time at the court of Hermann of Thuringia, to whom he dedicated his *Willehalm*.

He most certainly did not receive formal clerical instruction. In fact, he claimed to be illiterate in *Parzival*, yet he was boastful about his knowledge. He presumably had a working-knowledge of French, even though he might have made mistakes from time to time. In any case, speculation on Wolfram's literacy is an ongoing debate even nowadays (Lacy, *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, 521).

Sir Thomas Malory lived in the war-stricken 15th-century England. Everything we know about his life is expressed in his renowned romance *Le Morte Darthur*. Thomas Malory was the knight prisoner author who finished the book during the ninth year of King Edward IV’s reign (1469-70). His speech was prominently East-Midlander, although he incorporated many Northern elements, perhaps in order to better imitate the style of Arthurian romances. He was well-read, even though there is not much evidence of him having been inspired in any other literary genres as much.

Out of the six Thomas Malorys alive at the time of writing *Le Morte*, Thomas Malory of Hutton Conyers in Yorkshire has been put forward as the plausible author. However, he was no knight around the year 1471, thus leaving Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel as the most likely candidate. Born around 1416, he started off as a reputed country landowner and later represented his country in Parliament (1445). However, he became entangled in crime during the fifties and many charges were brought to him: attempted murder, theft and vandalism, among others (Loomis 541). As a result, he was put in prison in London in 1452. Once the Yorkists seized power from the Lancastrians in 1460, he was apparently freed and joined them on a winter campaign in the north. During the mid-60s, he resumed landowning, even though he was apparently involved in a Lancastrian plot in 1468 and imprisoned a second time. He is believed to have written *Le Morte* while in prison. He was released in October 1470, and passed away shortly after, on 14 March 1471. He was interred in the Church of Greyfriars, Newgate.

Apart from *Le Morte*, he might have also written *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*, an Arthurian novel based on the traditional folktale “What Women Most Desire” (Lacy, *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, 294).

5. ANALYSIS

In this section, I will first describe the religious symbolism surrounding the Grail Ceremony in each account in order to perceive the main differences. Later, I will briefly analyse the main characters’ religion, while paying special attention to how they shape Perceval’s psychological development.

5.1. ELEMENTS OF THE GRAIL CEREMONY

The Grail Ceremony constitutes the centrepiece of Chrétien’s *Perceval*, Wolfram’s *Parzival* and Malory’s “The Tale of the Sangrail”: it not only features the holy relic known as the Grail, but also other magical elements of which the Bleeding Lance and the Swords will be subjected to careful analysis in this paper. Nevertheless, I shall commence by describing the nature of the Grail Castle that contains them first.

5.1.1. THE GRAIL CASTLE

The identification of the Castle with the Celtic “Otherworld” in the Grail romances should be quite plain granted that the castle drawbridge through which Perceval/Parzival accesses, represents some sort of “perilous passage”, “a well-known stock incident of Otherworld journeys” (Dunn 402) also present in “the Irish story of the Wooing of Emer.”, among others (Dunn 399).

Consequently, “the great house of the king where the Eucharist is celebrated” in Chrétien and in Wolfram is “an Irish palace” in which the Irish underworld is represented by the “man sitting on the waves” or the Manannan. Similarly, the invisible serving hands is a stock figure in imran stories.

However, the Castle of the Grail depiction in Malory can hardly be linked to the Celtic underworld, because, whereas the Castles in Wolfram and in Chrétien are magical places whose denizens vanish into thin air after a rough night’s sleep (Poirion 768-70 & Hatto 130-1), Malory’s is described as a regular earthly castle (the Castle of Carbonek, 392). Therefore, the origin of the latter cannot be linked to Celtic mythology.

5.1.2. THE HOLY GRAIL

Various writers are of the view that the Grail (and its ceremony) has its roots on Irish tradition. The transition from pagan cauldron of plenty to Christian cup of redemption, can be traced back to the Irish “imrama” or sea-voyage tales, the oldest of which, “Voyage of Bran”, dates back to the 7th C (Brown, *From Cauldron of Plenty...*,66). Likewise, it has been ascribed to Celtic “agrarian cults”, in which man's ability to subdue “the natural and the agricultural” comes at the forefront (Nitze, *The Fisher King...*, 417-8). On the other hand, many Christian legends have survived up to date relating the mythological origin of the Holy Grail. One such is to be found in the *Perceval* trilogy by Robert de Boron, where the Grail symbol appears closely linked to the Sacrament of the Supper “and that again symbolising the continued presence of Christ in the world, to help and save- this was the final cause, the unacknowledged reason, the unknown beginning, of the whole cycle.” (Harper 120).

On the obscure origin of the Grail, Wolfram’s *Parzival* roughly attempts at divulging through whose inspiration it is revealed to humanity (i.e., the heathen “Flegetanis”) (Hatto 232-3), whilst “The Tale of the Sangrail” by Malory seems to ascribe it to a Heavenly origin, as he is the only one describing

how it is taken up to Heaven by God Himself (401). Regarding Chrétien's *Perceval*, it is hard to establish the origin of the Cup based on the little information that the book provides.

The Grail as a feeding element, from Chrétien's lenses, lies in line with the notion of "Celtic food-producing vessels" (Wood 186) of the ancient Matter of Britain tales, and is directly correlated to the nature of the rest of elements at table during the ceremony (mainly cutlery/kitchen utensils), with the notable exception of the Bleeding-Lance. However, he does not provide any clear details regarding the mystical origin of the Cup. Furthermore, both Wolfram (Hatto 126-7, 240) and Malory (317, 393, 400) coincide in depicting the Grail as a provider of food. In Malory, though, "the Grail" serves an additional purpose as "the receptacle for the divine food (wafer or blood)" (397) through which the kindred relationship between man and God is assured (Nitze, "The Fisher King in ...", 400-1), not just regular, earthly food.

Moreover, in some cases the Grail equally preserves the life of those who behold it. Concerning this claim, it is Wolfram's account solely which mentions that seeing the Grail will keep one alive for that week, no matter how old or sick one is (Hatto 239).

The Grail's actual representation varies from one account into the other. Chrétien (Poirion 765) as well as Wolfram (Hatto 125) and Malory (317) coincide in the depiction of the clarity with which it appears to the congregation. Nevertheless, in Wolfram Eschenbach's *Parzival*, the Grail is generally presented as a "precious stone" (Hatto 124) which, in the words of the hermit Trevizrent, he refers to as "lapsit exillis" (Hatto 239), "against which a phoenix rubs until it is consumed by the fire" (Brown, *The Bleeding Lance...*, 16). However, it is clearly represented as a cup in "The Tale of the Grail" (312) and the same can easily be inferred in Chrétien (Poirion 765).

Finally, Malory's account suggests that the Grail is "brought to earth" by God's angels, who surround and protect "the holy vessel" (391), whereas Chrétien (Poirion 756) and Wolfram (Hatto 251 Virtuous virgins; 401 Repanse de Schoie) resort to pure maidens to introduce the Grail to the congregation comprising a family of "Grail knights".

5.1.3. THE BLEEDING LANCE

Some scholars suggest that "the independence of the lance from the Grail" makes sense ritualistically, for they clash in effect: the one rends the Fisher-King in a wretched, miserable state, whilst the other

impairs life and nourishment. Therefore, the Grail provides atonement for the lance's inflicted wounds (Nitze, *The Fisher King...*, 406).

A possible mythological reference could be found in Irish tradition: “the marvellous spear called Crimall or bloody spear”, belonging to King Cormac, an epithet suggesting a parallelism between it and the spear at the Grail-Castle, which both bleed. The same was normally confounded with “the Luin of Celtchar” (Brown, *The Bleeding Lance*, 42). A more recent precedent is “the bleeding spear” in the Arthurian tale of Balin and the Dolorous Stroke, which most English readers are familiar with (i.e., the Second Book of Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*) (Brown, *The Bleeding Lance*, 42). In this sense, we could confidently assert that a point in common between the Lance and the Grail undeniably remains King Arthur, since they seem to “go back to Welsh or Breton tales of Arthurian quests” (Brown, *The Bleeding Lance*, 57).

It has been argued that neither Chrétien, nor Wolfram seem to have given any Christian coloration to the Bleeding-Lance (Gallais 479 & Brown, *The Bleeding Lance...*, 57). In *Perceval*, the novelist never states the Lance is a “holy thing” or that it belonged to the Roman soldier Longinus, who pierced Christ's side during Crucifixion, unlike Malory does (Brown, *The Bleeding Lance...*, 5), much less that it was King Escavalon's desire to seize it in order to take over the kingdom of Logres in the story (Poirion 837-8). Similarly, Chretien is reticent regarding “the marvellous”, to the point of disregarding the existence of two Bleeding-Lances in the story. On these grounds, many scholars have even criticised the narrative unity of the work itself (Gallais 479).

Regarding the part it plays in the novel, we can assume that it constitutes “the weapon with which the deity's strength impaired” (Nitze, *The Fisher King...*, 404), as implied by Wolfram (Hatto 244) and Malory (377). In fact, it appears to be venomous: in Chrétien, by polluting the land, and thereby causing the Fisher-King's permanent illness (Brown, *The Bleeding Lance*, 57). Likewise in Wolfram (Hatto 244).

However, whereas in *Parzival*, Trevizrent relates how the Bleeding Lance's contact with the Fisher King was necessary to alleviate his pain once (Hatto 249), yet Malory goes as far as to claim that the blood issuing from the lance “anoints” him (398) to the point of healing in “The Tale of the Sangrail”. Therefore, whereas Wolfram reasonably explains the motives behind an unusual application of the Bleeding Lance, Malory completely subverts its hurting status by considering it a healing element as well. Moreover, Malory's account differs from the other two in that the blood from the “spear” (the

lance) drips into the holy vessel, as if they were linked thus as healing elements (397).

Finally, we must remark that the three “darts” or “lances” Perceval's mother keeps from her deceased husband and bestows upon her son (Poirion 700) in *Perceval* similarly point to a popular and probably a Celtic source for the romance. The fact that this is the only other pointy weapon mentioned in the French writer's tale, besides the Bleeding-Lance and “the great jousting spear” further points back to Celtic origin (Brown, *The Holy Grail and the English Sir Perceval*, 663).

5.1.4. THE SWORDS

Concerning the Sword symbol, akin to the “sword of Manaan” belonging to the stepfather of “the Irish light-god Lug”, it appears generally identified with “the Celtic Sword of Light”, one of the central motives of “the Irish version of the Werewolf story” (Nitze, *The Fisher King...*, 406).

With regard to its attributes, Chrétien and Wolfram agree in that the sword has never been used and that it will only stand a single blow. However, they can actually be reconstructed: whereas Chrétien explicitly states that only the smith Trebuchet can repair it (Poirion 776), Wolfram explains in *Parzival* that it will only be mended at a certain time through submersion in a certain spring (Hatto 134). Moreover, both versions of the myth agree in the fact that the smith Trebuchet is the only maker of the sword (Poirion 775-6 & Hatto 134). Nevertheless, “The Sword with the Strange Girdles” in Malory's “The Tale of the Sangrail” (381) is, on the other hand, different in that it happens to be unbreakable, which probably explains its divine nature. As an example, its sheath is claimed to come from the Tree of Life (Malory 381).

In any case, the number of swords varies. In *Parzival*, there is only one sword, granted by Anfortas to Parzival at the Grail Castle (Hatto 127). Meanwhile, Chrétien mentions the smith Trebuchet has made other two whose whereabouts are unknown (Poirion 763). Finally, two different swords are described in Malory: the sword in the stone initiating the Grail-Quest (312), and the one on the ship they embark on their way to Castle Carbonek (376). Additionally, a third sword (“David's sword”) is also mentioned (379).

5.1.5. OTHER ELEMENTS AT THE GRAIL CEREMONY

This section places an emphasis on secondary elements influencing the overall atmosphere at the Grail Ceremony, yet not affecting the main plot. These elements are: the banquet, the wafer, the fish and the blood.

In Chrétien's *Perceval*, the Grail dinner would resemble a regular banquet since the Holy Cup is seemingly accompanied by regular kitchen utensils (mainly cutlery) and the congregation is offered a dish of deer as meat (Poirion 766). Wolfram's *Parzival* follows suit and appears to be even more graphic in the description of the preparations before the Grail dinner as drinking cups of gold for each knight, trolleys full of food moving along the four walls of the room, a clerk who checks the contents of these (Hatto 126) and all sorts of saucers and condiments (Hatto 127) are duly prepared.

A further feeding element is the wafer. Chrétien states that the "oblay" (i.e., "wafer") it produces is the only food source required to sustain life (Poirion 843) and calling it "a sainte chose" (i.e., "a holy thing"). Similarly appearing in Malory's "The Tale of the Sangrail", the wafer, as well as the secular food it provides, becomes "a symbol of the divine bounty" and "a reward of pious attention" (397) (Newell, *The Legend of the Holy Grail I*, 124-5), even though he never states the wafer is sufficient to sustain life. However, its divineness, as Malory describes the wafer, stands uncontested for it clearly transforms into Jesus Christ (397) at the Ceremony. Concerning Wolfram's account, upon Parzival's first encounter with the Fisher King, the latter commands a hundred pages to hold loaves of bread before the Grail (Hatto 126), yet without specifying their nature.

Regarding the fish symbol, the fish at table during the Grail-Ceremony is, according to Nutt, "a Christian survival of a feature common to Celtic otherworld tales, the magic food whereby a hero is made immortal, and which enables him to be re-born." (Nitze, *The Fisher King*, 367). An example of this is Boron's *Joseph*, in which the fish image at the Grail Ceremony is equally Christian in origin (Brown, *From Cauldron of Plenty...*, 77). Going further, "the fish" symbol usually stood conspicuously "on early Christian monuments" and it is definitely an expected element "upon the table of the faithful" (Nitze, *The Fisher King*, 368-9).

Stemming from that train of thought, scholars have "argued that the appearance of the fish on the Grail table is not a matter chance; for if the Grail stands for the communion-cup, fish stands for the sacred

wafer, and if the Grail symbolizes, with its contents, the Blood of the Lord (Malory 397), the fish symbolizes His Body.” (Nitze, *The Fisher King*, 368-9).

A similar conclusion is reached upon cursory examination of Thomas Malory’s Grail Ceremony found in “The Tale of the Sangrail”. After Joseph of Arimathea’s descent upon the congregation accompanied by four angels, he approaches the table where the Grail is and lifts up the Holy Wafer, resembling the face of a child. Suddenly, the image of the child strikes the wafer and upon placing it in the Grail, we clearly read how the resurrected Christ bearing the marks of suffering with which He was crucified issues out of the bloody Cup (Malory 397). From this detailed description, it may be concluded that the breaking of bread resembling the Christ, plus the physical bleeding of the man coming up from the Cup all point to the celebration of the Sacrament of Eucharist in “The Tale of the Sangrail”.

5.2. SOCIAL-TIES

The myth of the Grail is a complex narrative in which the social superstructure influences the action of the plot, in particular the role of matriarchy as a unifying force within Perceval/Parzival’s clan, especially relevant for the analysis of Chrétien’s and Wolfram’s accounts. Additionally, the religious distinction between the two main clans in the story will be explained before tackling main-character analysis.

5.2.1. THE ROLE OF MATRIARCHY IN THE CLAN

Broadly speaking, “matriarchy is the system of tracing family descent through the mother's line, and is not to be confused with gynocracy” (i.e., “government by women”) (Nitze, *The Sister’s Son...*, 298-300): in this type of social structure, the mother does not assume the leader-role, but rather her nearest male relative, usually the eldest brother (i.e., The Fisher King figure in both *Perceval* and *Parzival*). In essence, then, it enables males to enforce their authority, whilst women provide for its cohesive social framework. Hence, mothers’ role is highlighted as “the cornerstone of a society making use of human rapports in which rebellion against the exclusively despotic, viril and territorial constituency of male members of the community is downplayed” (Poirion, “L’ombre mythique de Perceval”, 197-8).

5.2.2. CLASH OF CLANS

From the previous section, we might easily infer that the tale of the Grail is certainly a family-narrative. From the many admonitions the hero receives, it is clear that something is expected out of him, even

if it's just the healing of his uncle, the Fisher King. We might argue that the restoration of power and a return to social life are equally important elements in the narrative (Gallais 477). Actually, "the plot of *Perceval/Parzival* relates a tale of strife between two clans: Perceval, his parents, his cousin Gawain, and his uncles, are members of one family or clan" (Brown, *The Grail and the English Sir Perceval*, 661), different from King Arthur's clan religiously, as we shall see further down. "We should keep in mind that the word *clan* is essentially a sociological term" and that "only in a general way is it synonymous with blood-relationship." (Nitze, *The Sister's Son*, 303-4)

Thus, we can observe the dispute between two clearly demarked "clans" in the story: Arthur's Court, prominently Orthodox Catholic; and Cathare (or "dissident" Christianity), represented by Perceval's mother and the Fisher King (Gallais 477-78).

(a) PERCEVAL'S CLAN

Perceval's religion can be appreciated from the moment he confuses the knights in the forest for God's sent messengers, already hinting at "a manicheistic antithesis between the material and the spiritual, good and evil" (Gallais 475). The type of religion of Perceval's mother is equally hard to classify as orthodox or not. As her brother, the Fisher King, she does not seem to require either rites or sacraments. This is further suggested in *Perceval* because if she remembers Church as a building and man-made institution at all, it's not until she realises his son's departure to Arthur's Court as imminent (Poirion 699). Nonetheless, one could consider the hermit uncle's faith is somewhat Catholic-orthodox in that he engages in certain ritualistic activities, such as "secret prayer". We could, therefore, classify his faith as more traditional than Perceval's mother's (Gallais 476), yet distinctive enough from Arthur's.

(b) KING ARTHUR'S HOUSEHOLD

In Malory, the Round Table attracts international recruits, extending to many races and ethnicities. This sign of internationalisation points to the succeeding imperial conquests by the group (Lynch 177). Its downfall is undoubtedly brought about by the ousting of Merlin as the Household's counsellor, after which the Arthurian world comes to be ruled by the human passions driving the knights under his command, thus no longer paying much attention to either Christian teaching or traditional wisdom (Radulescu 130). However, Arthur's final humiliation by failure definitely culminates for good in the *Queste del Saint Greal (Quest of the Holy Grail)* by Malory. Through Galahad's achievement of the Graal, "Arthur understands that the coming of the Grail means the beginning of the end of his

fellowship” (Malory 394), even in a later, fifteenth-century adaptation (Lynch 184).

5.3. CHARACTER CROSS-ANALYSIS

One of the possible readings of *The Tale of the Grail* is a story of an inexperienced youth’s conversion into Christianity. However, whereas Chretien’s *Perceval* and Wolfram Eschenbach’s *Parzival* place a special emphasis on the humane development of the main character (i.e., Perceval/Parzival), while in Thomas Malory’s “Tale of the Sangrail” no such clear development is perceived. In this section, we will firstly trace the hero’s development into maturity and later analyse other main characters who exert a relevant amount of influence on the hero in the shaping of the myth.

5.3.1. PERCEVAL/PARZIVAL

The hero of the narrative, Perceval/Parzival, is certainly predestined for glory, although his atypical personality also rends him a comical character. Regarding the former, although shabbily clad and young, most characters agree on his nobility. To illustrate my point, the Arthurian Court “find beauty and nobility” by just looking at him for the first time (Poirion 709), and so do the knights he encounters earlier in the forest. Likewise, Wolfram’s account refers to him as bearing “the marks of God’s own handiwork” (Hatto 73). In Malory, however, this is not so clear as little contextualisation of his coming into existence is provided.

Nevertheless, he is far from perfect. In fact, as one of the forest knights points out in *Wolfram* (Hatto 72) and *Chrétien* (Poirion 691), he remains a “stupid Wales” due to the childlike innocence he shows after nagging the knights on duty with what would seemingly appear as ridiculous questions. However, the fact that he inadvertently spirals down into sinfulness is one of the main reasons for the subsequent narrative to develop. Thus, *Perceval* and *Parzival* have often been considered as “chastisement” novels (Baril 313-4) for the young hero undergoes a gradual transformation into holiness. The emotional note in his subsequent failures is reinforced not only by his apparent innocence when committing each of the capital crimes leading to his spiritual downfall, but also his lack of empathy for others.

His extreme *naïveté* first leads to his molesting Jeschute in both *Perceval* (Poirion 702-3) and *Parzival* (Hatto 76-77). Then, he slays his kin (Ither de Lalant) (Hatto 88 & Poirion 713) and nonchalantly steals his equipment. Afterwards, the climax is reached: he goes to the Grail Castle and fails to ask the Question (Hatto 127 & Poirion 764-5), for which he will be severely reprimanded twice in *Parzival*

(Hatto 134 [Sigune] + 164-66 [Cundrie]), although only once in *Perceval* (Poirion 774) before entering a five-year-long errancy (Hatto 253, 323 & Poirion 838) away from God. On these grounds, one may argue that Perceval's neglect of "his kin", including his maternal uncle the Fisher-King, constitutes the central misdeed, the expiation of which triggers the whole narrative-plot (Nitze *The Sister's Son*, 295). It is, therefore, the prerogative of the nephew to guard the honour, and therefore to avenge the shame of the uncle, whereas the latter affords the former his protection and assistance. After the five year-long errancy, he meets Trevizrent who leads him back to God through repentance (Hatto 253 & Poirion 845). After this point, the young knight goes back and ascends to the throne as King of the Grail in Wolfram (Hatto 387), yet no so clearly in Chrétien.

It is in the light of the nefarious side-effects of his lack of self-control that we need to analyse how the innocent relations of the hero are thus affected after his departure in Wolfram and Chrétien. We shall now take a look at what motivates his central failure: not posing "the Question".

A cursory examination reveals that the knight's gluttony greatly determines his failure in the key trials he undergoes as part of his training as a chivalric hero (Baril 313-4), at least in Chrétien's *Perceval*: thus, when Perceval's eating habits are moderate, he self-improves affectively and spiritually. However, whenever he falls back into the capital sin "gula", catastrophe ensues. Therefore, it would seem that alimentary abstinence constitutes a favourable condition for spiritual blessings and advancement. (Baril 318).

Going further, Chrétien has intermingled gourmandise with the problem of speech, studied by D. James-Raoul, since those two sins have the same origin: the mouth. Therefore, Perceval's silence during dinner at the Grail Castle might constitute a subtle form of "absces". (Baril 324) In fact, his refusal to ask after his host at the Grail dinner (Poirion 764-5) points to how his gourmandise and his bad assimilation of Goornemant's instruction are the only culprits of his personal failure in this episode (Baril 326). The magnificent dish he is served stirs his curiosity and delights in regarding the dish served by the Grail as another dainty dish. Therefore, the Grail is also presented as a reminder of Perceval's sin, who chooses to indulge in other earthly foods rather than the one served by the Grail, thus reiterating his fault after every dish he engorges. This can be read as a reminder of possible past experiences of the kind (Baril 331). Nevertheless, Trevizrent points at his mother's death as the ultimate sin which made asking the Question impossible in Chrétien (Poirion 843), both his mother's and Ither's in Wolfram (Hatto 253). In this sense, he would have committed three sins: cupidity, gluttony and silence (Baril 324).

In Malory's "The Tale of the Sangrail", no such fall-into-sin structure of Perceval is presented. The narrative story, on the other hand, regards him as "one of the men in the world which [who] most believed in Our Lord Jesu[s] Christ, for in those days there were but few folks at that time that believed perfectly; (...)" (Malory 339), and therefore, already perfect. In essence, then, Malory's ensuing narrative of the hero's heroic exploits (slaying a flame-throwing serpent [339] and the lechery-testing at the pavilion [344], among others) only aggrandises his already untainted reputation. Therefore, it diametrically differs from the other two in that the main hero is portrayed as a flat character in Malory's account, and not as a round character undergoing a process of maturation.

5.3.2. THE FISHER KING

The Fisher-King (i.e., the maternal uncle) should be the chief of the clan (Nitze, *The Sister's Son*, 302) as previously debated. In fact, regarding "parentage", Jean Marx makes his point that reconstructions of the legend confirm that the Fisher King is either an uncle or a cousin of Perceval's on the basis that "if the niece of the Fisher-King is the cousin-sister of Perceval's, he and Trevizrent do not belong to the same generation", which would in a way justify the King's old appearance (Radulescu 194) and, thus, his resemblance to Perceval's father (Radulescu 195). He is, in fact, sometimes regarded as "a sister's son" (i.e., "the Grail King is our hero's maternal uncle"), making him the closest male relative (Hatto 243) (Nitze, *The Sister's Son*, 295).

The Fisher-King "is doubtless a Mediterranean cult" (Nitze, *The Sister's Son*, 411-5). In any case, "the stages whereby the primitive cult became the Grail legend of the twelfth century are likely to remain conjectural." (Nitze, *The Fisher King*, 411-5).

He is consistently described as a "Fisher" in both Wolfram ("Angler" [Hatto 120]) and Chrétien, where we see him fishing (Poirion 760); not so in Malory (only occurrences: 314, 330), whom he generally refers to as "the Maimed King" (Malory 336, 377, 395, 398).

In line with the "Otherworld motif" in Celt mythology, the Fisher-King might as well represent "the Dis or Pluto of the Celtic otherworld", through mediation of "Bran the Blessed", "the representative of the Celtic god Cernunnos, from whom, as Caesar reports, the Gauls claim descent, and who as god of the otherworld and the shades was also god of knowledge and riches." (Nitze, *The Fisher King*, 367). Alternatively, and on the other side of the scale, Christian readings of the character equate him

to the words of Jesus Christ “I will make you fishers of men.” (*The Bible*, Matth. 4.19), suggesting an Evangelising function of the character, typification that can also be perceived in the figure of Fisher-King portrayed by the same personage in “Crestien, Wolfram, Didot-Perceval, Perlesvaus, Peredur, and Grand St. Graal” (Nitze, *The Fisher King*, 368-9).

The Fisher-King is generally conceptualised as an aged man (Poirion 762 & Hatto 128) that is sick from a wound and his life hangs on whether the “Grail-hero” successfully completes the Ceremony, normally by asking a Question (Nitze, *The Fisher King*, 373-4). Then, it follows that “he is either restored to health and prosperity or his suffering finds relief in death.” (Nitze, *The Fisher King*, 376-7). Therefore, his healing will mean his ceasing to be King in one way or another: death in Malory (396), yielding office to Parzival in Wolfram (Hatto 246).

5.3.3. TREVIZRENT

The “hermit” figure and the Grail-King “counterpart” in Wolfram and Chrétien, he is very dissimilar to the Fisher-King in that it incarnates the “avuncular archetype” more: the hermit-uncle who announces the Christian Law, he is mysteriously opposed to him (Poirion, “L’ombre mythique de Perceval”, 194). Regarding doctrinal standpoint, both Chrétien’s and Wolfram’s Trevizrent seem to adhere to Catholic doctrine: thus, Chrétien’s stresses the importance of formulaic prayer (Poirion 845) (Catholic Church 2650) and Holy Communion (845) (Catholic Church 1291); whereas Wolfram’s incorporates the existence of Purgatory (Hatto 239) (Catholic Church 1031) and the outstretching of a special blessing over the clergy (255) (Catholic Church 1576). At the same time, he regards himself as mediator between Parzival and God (255) (Catholic Church 1456, 1461).

Similarly to the Fisher-King, he is Perceval’s uncle in his maternal side, and “(...) his basic function (...)” that of “reminding the hero of his duties towards family” (Poirion, “L’ombre mythique de Perceval”, 194). Interestingly enough, his chivalric past (Hatto 234) is only expounded in Wolfram, as well as his efforts to combat his fleshly desires (Hatto 231, 247 [“Smoke never raises from my kitchen!”]) and the sins of his past (251). Not so in Chrétien, where only Perceval’s sin is the focus.

In Malory’s “The Tale of the Sangrail”, no equivalent to the hermit figure exists because of Perceval’s Christian perfection, as discussed earlier in Section 5.3.1. The closest resembling character would be Perceval’s aunt (Malory 336), who discloses his own mother’s death at his departure and provides a way to expiate his sin by healing his uncle “the Maimed King”, without much reprimanding from her

part.

5.3.4. THE HERO'S MOTHER: HERZEOLYDE

Only Wolfram Eschenbach provides the complete backdrop by telling the story of Herzeolyde and Gahmuret's affair leading to Parzival's birth proper (Hatto 64). On the other hand, Chrétien chooses to expose the story in the mouth of Herzeolyde, who, in turn, tells it to her son (Poirion 696). Thomas Malory briefly touches upon her passing away once in the whole narrative, but she is nowhere to be seen (335). Her only influence on the story is, thus, a brief reminder of his imperious need to avenge his kin.

Both Herzeolydes (i.e., Chrétien's and Wolfram's) try hard to protect their son from entering into contact with chivalry (Poirion 695 & Hatto 70) and they both try to discourage him from pursuing the Calling of the Shield through different ways: Wolfram's clothes him in rags (Hatto 75), whereas Chrétien's tries to persuade him of his unfitness (Poirion 698). However, it is no long after that he meets a couple of knights in the forest (Hatto 72 & Poirion 688-9). On hearing the news from her son, Lady Herzeolyde enters a state of severe distress. Both Chrétien and Wolfram expand on Herzeolyde's sorrow (Poirion 697 & Hatto 70) leading to her demise (Poirion 700 & Hatto 76). Therefore, Chrétien's Herzeolyde faints twice (Poirion 695, 700) and Wolfram's comes to hate even the chirping of birds (Hatto 71).

Mother's influence on Perceval is subtle yet capital throughout the story: Chrétien shows her influence on Perceval by his steadfast keeping of her counsel, even when he is ridiculed by others (Poirion 725, 727) and so does Wolfram.

6. DISCUSSION

In this paper, the diverse Grail-related symbols and characters have been the subject of analysis. Concerning the former, the Grail Castle, the Holy Grail, the Bleeding Lance and the Swords have been the main focus, whereas the characters of Perceval/Parzival, the Fisher King, the hermit Trevizrent and Herzeolyde have been studied regarding latter. All in all, the furnished corpus of evidence seems to support the claim that Malory's "The Tale of the Holy Grail" makes use of Christian symbolism to a greater extent than Chrétien's *Perceval* and Eschenbach's *Parzival*, which are more influenced by Celtic mythology.

To begin with, the vanishing Grail Castle redolent of the Celtic “Otherworld” tales does not appear in Malory’s account and instead substitutes it by the earthly Castle of Carbonek. Secondly, the Grail and its ceremony are overtly Christian in Malory’s “The Tale of the Sangrail”, the blood in the Cup of Redemption and the breaking “oblay” (i.e. “wafer”) pointing to the Christ who appears to the congregation; no such transubstantiation miracle takes place in the other two versions. Moreover, the fact that angels bear the Cup and is snatched up into Heaven by an invisible hand, quite possibly God’s, further points to this divine origin. Thirdly, the fact that out of the Bleeding Lance in “The Tale” issues healing blood, in contrast with the venomous nature of the weapon in both *Perceval* and *Parzival*, might imply its holiness is to be ascribed to the cleansing power of Christ’s blood. Fourthly, the divine origin of the sword at the Ship of Faith in “The tale” starkly contrasts with the *makeshift* swords in the other two accounts, which will break after a single blow. Finally, the fish symbol at table during the Grail Ceremony in Malory is a clear early-Christian church symbol.

Character analysis, on the other hand, yields greater Christianisation of the Grail myth according to Malory. Firstly, the Hero is, from the very beginning, presented as a role-model Christian in “The Tale”, whilst Chrétien’s and Wolfram’s undergoes a maturation process leading him into full spiritual maturity, in a way paving the way for the modern *Bildungsroman*. Secondly, although the “Maimed King” figure loses, to some extent, the Christian coloration the label “Fisher King” bequeaths him in *Perceval* and *Parzival*, he can in no way be related to a Dis or Pluto of the Celtic Otherworld due to the earthly nature of the Castle in “The Tale” by Malory. Finally, the lack of a hermit figure is dealt with by Malory by replacing it with Perceval’s aunt, in a way transgressing the Matriarchal ties common in Celtic society and active in Chrétien’s and Wolfram’s knightly world.

On the whole, I consider that the religious colouring of the majority of the symbols and main characters of *The Tale of the Grail* has been sufficiently dealt with in the present paper. However, and given the limited amount of research available concerning the symbol of the sword, future research should work at uncovering the meaning of the three swords in Malory’s “The Tale of the Grail”, as it might provide additional clues to its Christian or pagan roots.

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