

**Writing as Relic:
The Use of Oral Discourse to Interpret Written Texts
in the Old French *La Queste del Saint Graal***

Lisa Robeson

Many well-known critics of the thirteenth-century French romance *La Queste del Saint Graal*¹ have noted that the *Queste* author transformed the nature of Arthurian adventure. Scholars such as Pauphilet, Matarasso, Todorov, Poirions, and de Looze have argued that success in the quest of the Holy Grail depends on correct interpretation of signs and symbols that the knights encounter on their path, and not on military valor.² Interpretation of this new code requires that the knights substitute spiritual significations for the things that they see and hear, including the many inscriptions they read, for the traditional meanings that affirm the values of conventional chivalry: love, honor, *prouesse*, and material gain.³ Only the knights who are irredeemably worldly, such as Gawain and Hector, engage in typical Arthurian adventures and combats. The three chosen knights who eventually find the Grail—Galahad, Perceval, and Bors—are without peer in understanding spiritual interpretations.

¹ The thirteenth-century French romance *La Queste del Saint Graal*, or *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, is the second of the first three Arthurian romances that comprise the Vulgate Cycle. Probably composed by different authors, the stories of Lancelot (*Lancelot en prose*), and the narrative of the downfall of the Round Table (*Le Morte Artu*) delineate the rise and fall of the Arthurian kingdom of Logres. Written by an anonymous author, probably a cleric, perhaps a Cistercian, around 1220-25, the romance attempted to redirect chivalry toward spiritual goals. Adventures on the quest often require the knights to read rather than to fight, and their goal is a religious object: the Holy Grail (in this narrative, the cup of the Last Supper).

² See Pauphilet 1921:157-58; Matarasso 1979:11; Todorov 1971:137; Poirion 1994:204; de Looze 1985:131.

³ For more on the transformation of Arthurian romance in the thirteenth century, see Poirion 1976; Frappier 1976b; Hanning 1985.

Given the focus on interpretation in the romance, the written texts that the knights encounter on their adventures are of critical importance in achieving their goal. In this essay, I would like first to argue that the inscriptions that appear on stone monuments, crosses, and other durable surfaces share the characteristics of saints' relics; second, that the oral interpretations of these written texts, which are presented by a host of hermits, anchoresses, and other holy people, validate the inscriptions in the same way that oral hagiographies and eyewitness accounts of miracles supported the authentication of relics; and finally that the texts in the *Queste* that are not inscribed, but rather written down on parchment, are analogous to the documentary evidence necessary to validate the authenticity of relics after the twelfth century.

Jean Frappier and Pauline Matarasso have contended that the Holy Grail itself operates as a saint's relic in the *Queste*.⁴ However, the monumental inscriptions that appear in the romance also share characteristics with relics, since both serve as links between earth and heaven. Relics, or the physical remains of saints, were thought to retain the power of what Peter Brown has called "the holy dead."⁵ A saint's body retained the saint's holiness in *praesentia*, the sacred physically manifested. The relic is a point of contact between the divine and the temporal that may serve as a conduit for God's grace. Even after the early Christian period when the practice of veneration began, the inseparability of soul and body even after death remained a basic premise of veneration.⁶

Inscriptions in the *Queste* are obviously not the remains of human bodies, however holy. On the other hand, there is some evidence in the text suggesting that they are loci of *praesentia*, points at which the divine is physically made manifest and available to human beings. In the *Queste*, inscriptions are not "channels of grace," as one theologian in late antiquity termed relics,⁷ but conduits for the Holy Spirit. The Spirit, which plays an important role as a source and an end of the quest for the Holy Grail in this romance, moves through these inscriptions because it is the author, or at

⁴ Frappier 1976a:557; Matarasso 1979: 182.

⁵ 1981: 10. Brown provides a clear summary of the influence of Christianity on pagan attitudes toward the bodies of the dead and the rise of the cult of saints in the late antique world. For more on the cult of the saints in the later Middle Ages, see Herrmann-Mascard 1975 and Geary 1990. For a complete bibliography to date, see Wilson 1983.

⁶ Brown 1981:88,6-10; Bynum 1991:76-77.

⁷ Vitricius, *De Laude Sanctorum*, cited in Kemp 1948:4-5.

least the *scriptor*, of the mysterious inscriptions that prompt many of the knights' adventures.⁸

For example, events in the first episodes of the romance suggest a direct relationship between the presence of inscriptions and the Holy Spirit. The romance opens as Bors, Lionel, and Lancelot read texts incised on the stone chairs that surround the Round Table. Each chair bears an inscription that says, "Here shall sit this or that one."⁹ On the Sieges Perilous, however, the inscribed letters trace a different message: "454 years have passed since the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ; and on the day of Pentecost, this seat shall find its master."¹⁰ The knights do not understand the inscription, but it inspires such a feeling of awe in them that they decide to cover it with a veil. When Galahad arrives the next day, which is Pentecost, the knights lift the veil and find that the inscription has changed to "This is the seat of GALAHAD."¹¹ To the knights, these words look "newly made" (*nouvelement fete; idem*). In other words, it seems as if the text has been supernaturally edited while the inscription was covered.

A *topos* of medieval exegesis suggests that this editor may have been the Holy Spirit. Commentaries often stated that the Scriptures were written "by the finger of God," a metaphor for the Holy Spirit.¹² The metaphor

⁸ Lancelot, for example, is told by a holy man that " ... the Holy Grail is the grace of the Holy Spirit" (... *ce est li Sainz Graax, ce est la grace del Saint Esperit*) in *Queste:159*. All quotations from the *Queste* are taken from Pauphilet's 1984 edition, hereafter *Queste*; all translations are my own unless otherwise noted. For important discussions on the role of the Holy Spirit in the initiation of the quest and the symbolism of the Holy Grail, see Matarasso 1979:180-204 and Lot-Borodine 1951.

⁹ "CI DOIT SEOIR CIL" (*Queste:4*).

¹⁰ " ... CCCC. ANZ ET .LIIII. SONT ACCOMPLI EMPRÉS LA PASSION JHESUCRIST; ET AU JOR DE LA PENTECOUSTE DOIT CIST SIEGES TROVER SON MESTRE" (4).

¹¹ "CI EST LI SIEGES GALAAD" (8).

¹² The following passages, drawn from authors writing between the eighth and twelfth centuries, show consistent use of the figure "finger of God" to indicate the Holy Spirit: Ambrosius Autpertus, *Expositio in Apocalypsin*: "Que propterea arca testamenti vocatus, quia duorum in ea Testamentorum virtus digito Dei, hoc est, Spiritus Sancto inscribitus, non iam in tabulis lapideis, sed in tabulis cordis carnalibus" (CCCM, 27:441); Walter of St. Victor, *Sermones*: "Utrumque scriptum est in digito Dei, id est Spiritu Dei Sancti ... " (*Sermo 3*, CCCM, 30:26); William of St. Thierry, *Expositio super Epistolam ad Romanos*: "Scilicet que legis sunt, in tabulis scribuntur vel chartulis, quae vero sunt gratiae, digito Dei, id est Spiritu Sancto mentibus nostris inscribuntur" (CCCM, 86:58);

may have been suggested by the account of the giving of the Law in Deuteronomy. In this version, Moses says, “And the Lord gave me two stone tablets written with the finger of God and containing all the words that have been spoken to you in the mountain in the middle of the fire . . .” (Deut. 9: 10).¹³ Furthermore, in the Exodus account of the giving of the Ten Commandments, Moses puts a veil over his face after he has spoken to the Lord on the mountain, just as the knights veil the inscription on the Sieges Perilous after reading it (Ex. 34:33-35). In *On the Letter and the Spirit*, St. Augustine connects the inscription of the Law with the coming of the Holy Spirit at the first Pentecost. He writes that the crowd of apostles and people gathered in Jerusalem were like those Jews who waited at the foot of Sinai for Moses; only there, at Sinai, the finger of God (*digitus Dei*) worked in stone tablets, but at Pentecost it wrote in the hearts of men.¹⁴ Finally, the first inscriptions are read on the day before Pentecost and the search for the Holy Grail begins on the day of the feast, which commemorates the coming of the Holy Spirit.¹⁵

Johannes Beletus, *Summa de Ecclesiasticis Officiis*: “Sed Spiritus Sanctus datus est centumviginti discipulis in corde digito Dei spiritualementem intelligentiam intus eis dictante” (CCCM, 41A:247); John of Ford, *Super Extremam Partem Cantici Canticorum Sermones CXX*: “Meum erit ex munere tuo, vocum aliquas significationes verbo vel scripto exhibere: tuum vero digito Dei, qui est Spiritus Sanctus, ea quae significantur inscribere” (CCCM, 17:34-35); Peter Abelard, *Commentaria in Epistulam Pauli ad Romanos*: “Probat quod dixerat, legem videlicet Moysi bonam esse, licet occasionem inde in peccatum acceperit, quia videlicet est spiritualis lex, non saecularis, tamquam digito Dei scripta, id est Spiritu Sancto . . .” (CCCM, 11:205); Rupert of Deutz, *De Sancta Trinitate et Operibus Eis*: “Igitur legis et gratiae summa secundum numerum consonantia est, quia videlicet a paschali vespera quinquagesimo die, lex in tabulis lapideis digito Dei scripta per Moysen data est; gratia autem et veritas per Iesum Christum facta est, quinquagesimo nihilominus a resurrectione eius die Spiritu sancto misso de caelo in cordibus apostolorum scripta est” (CCCM, 22:715); Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*: “. . . quia idem Filius in sapientissima Virgine, quam aurora significat, incarnatus est inspiratione digiti Dei qui Spiritus Sanctus . . .” (CCCM, 43A:338).

¹³ “Deditque mihi Dominus duas tabulas lapideas scriptas digito Dei et continentes omnia verba, que vobis locutus est in monte de medio ignis. . .” Quotations from the Vulgate are taken from *Biblia Sacra*.

¹⁴ “. . . ibi in tabulis lapideis digitus dei operatus est, hic in cordibus hominum” (CSEL, 60: 182).

¹⁵ For more on the many parallels that the *Queste* author draws between the gathering of the knights of the Round Table after Galahad arrives at court and the appearance of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, see Matarasso 1969:286.

Saints' remains designated as relics also produced miracles. In the *Queste*, monumental inscriptions do not cause the spontaneous healing or alterations to the body so common in twelfth- or thirteenth-century accounts of miracles, but they do serve as a conduit for miraculous revelation.¹⁶ The messages of the inscriptions are not directions to find the Holy Grail; rather, they often contain references to history or prophecy. These references are usually explicated in oral discourses by local hermits or anchoresses. It is from these spoken explanations that the three Grail knights receive an understanding of what they see, hear, and experience; gradually, over the course of the narrative, Arthur's knights receive a fuller understanding of the history of the Grail and its relation to the Arthurian court. For example, in an episode in which Lancelot discovers an inscription on a stone cross, the nearby hermit who helps him understand his discovery recounts the long and detailed story of Joseph of Arimathea and the Grail in which Joseph's descendants bring the cup of the Last Supper to Arthur's realm of Logres.¹⁷ Lancelot cannot read the letters on the cross because he has not yet confessed his sin with Guenevere, but the encounter with his inscription begins an adventure during which the story of Joseph is told.

More significant still are the historical accounts that are presented to the knights in response to inscriptions that appear on the Ship of Faith, a large ship built by Solomon that will take the three knights who have been chosen to see the Grail to the last leg of their journey. The ship, which has no master and moves of its own accord, is filled with inscribed surfaces, including its hull, the scabbard of a sword, a cloth covering the sword, and both sides of the blade of the sword. Perceval's sister, who is their guide on this portion of the journey, provides oral explanations of the inscriptions that reveal that Galahad is descended from the Maimed King of Arthurian legend; she also discusses what role the Grail of the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus* plays in the history of the Maimed King's descendants. She explains that the inscription on the scabbard is the story of the Maimed

¹⁶ On the nature of miracles effected by relics in accounts of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, see Bynum 1991:70-72.

¹⁷ Robert de Boron's early thirteenth-century romance *Joseph d'Arimathie* was probably the first Arthurian narrative to conflate the platter or stone of Celtic tradition and the cup of the Last Supper. The story of the transportation of the cup from the Holy Land to Logres by Joseph's family appears in the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus; see Robert de Boron.

King and his descendants at Arthur's court (204-5).¹⁸ Furthermore, when the knights read the text on the blade of the same sword, they receive an expansion of both histories and their connections (206-10). In other words, Galahad, Perceval, and Bors, the three Grail knights, obtain a history of the

¹⁸ History in the *Queste* is a complicated and uneasy blend of Biblical narrative, apocryphal tradition, and Celtic legend. There are no fewer than five major dispositions on the history that culminates in the arrival of Galahad at Arthur's court and the beginning of the quest of the Holy Grail. The first, related to Galahad at the abbey where he receives his shield, recounts the departure of Joseph of Arimathea from the Holy Land, his arrival in the pagan city of Sarras ruled by King Evalach and his brother-in-law Nascien, and his conversion of both men to Christianity. The abbot also explains to Galahad that Joseph and his son Josephus left Sarras to come to Britain, accompanied by Mordrains (the baptismal name of Evalach) and Nascien; Galahad is descended from Nascien (32-35). The second important discourse on the history of the *Queste* world is given to Lancelot when a hermit explains the meaning of one of his visions. Lancelot sees the Grail moving toward a wounded King. The hermit reveals that the king is Mordrains. Lancelot is a descendant of Nascien (as is, of course, Galahad), and Galahad's mother is the daughter of the Fisher King: thus Galahad's history combines both the apocryphal and Arthurian traditions (134-38). A third disposition is recounted to Percival by his aunt, a holy woman. It is she who explains the underlying schema of the history to Logres. Major eras are marked by three great tables. The first table is that of the Lord's Supper; the second is the table of the Holy Grail, which supplied Joseph and Josephus with food when nothing could be found to eat. The third era of history is associated with the Round Table, established to bring chivalric Christendom together in order that they might undertake the Quest of the Holy Grail (74-79). The connections between biblical and apocryphal history and Celtic legend are further elaborated by Perceval's sister on the Ship of Faith. First, she explains the origin of the Waste Land. King Lambar, the father of the Maimed King, met and converted the pagan King Varian in Logres near the Ship of Faith. Varian killed Lambar with a sword; this murder, the first ever committed in Logres, laid the land waste (204-5). Her second narrative explains how Mordrains was wounded. His brother-in-law Nascien undertook a quest in a distant land, returned after great peril and rejoined Mordrains, bringing a miraculous sword that saved him. Despite a warning on the sword, Mordrains draws it and is instantly struck down as the sword breaks in two (206-8). Her final narrative sketches the connection between the lineage of Mordrains and Nascien, and that of the Maimed King and of the Fisher King. King Parlan, the Maimed King, was hunting in the forest when he came upon the mysterious Ship of Faith. Despite the warnings on the ship and the scabbard, Parlan enters the vessel and draws his sword. He is instantly pierced through the thighs with a lance. Perceval's sister tells him that the wound will remain unhealed until Galahad arrives at his seat, the Castle of Corbenic (209-10). At Corbenic it is revealed that King Parlan is the father of the Fisher King, Galahad's grandfather (259). Therefore, Galahad is descended from both Nascien and the Maimed King, neatly unifying history from the apocryphal tradition and the distant past of the Celtic story. Finally, a letter left by Solomon provides the history of the Ship, which was built from the Tree of Life in the Garden; it summarizes biblical events from the Fall to the construction of the boat by Solomon (210-26).

Grail and its connections to their own culture and colleagues. They receive the religious and historical context of their individual adventures as well as an explanation of the purpose of the court and its role in history. Through the divulgence of the sacred and legendary histories of Logres and the Grail, they are able to transcend the limits of normal human understanding.

Such revelation is not a miracle in the same sense as those produced by relics, that is, a miracle that produces an effect against the laws of nature. In the *Queste*, however, inscriptions do generate at least one miracle of this type: they allow the Grail knights to transcend the normal sequence of time. When Galahad, Perceval, and Bors have completed their separate adventures, they reunite and enter the magical ship that does not have a pilot or crew. With Perceval's sister as interpreter, they read the inscriptions that contain prophecies on the scabbard and blade of the sword. The prophecies are unusual because what they predict has already occurred. For example, the writing on one side of the blade warns that anyone who unsheathes it—except he who is bolder than any other—is foredoomed to death; the inscription adds that this will occur only one time.¹⁹ However, Perceval's sister reveals that the event referred to has already occurred (204-5). In other words, the knights decode the prophecy *after* it has been fulfilled. In the same way, the inscription on the sword's scabbard foretells the unfastening of the old swordbelt and its replacement by one made by a virgin who is the daughter of a king and queen (205-6). Perceval's sister discloses that she is the maiden designated by the prophecy and that she has already made the belt (227). Finally, the inscription on the other side of the sword blade states that it will be most treacherous to the one to whom it should bring most honor, and that this event would happen only once (206). When Perceval asks about that prophecy, his sister replies, "Good brother, both these things have already occurred."²⁰

At the beginning of the romance, all of the inscribed prophecies are read first and fulfilled later; for example, the first inscription on the *Sieges Perilous* says ". . . and on the day of Pentecost, this seat shall find its master," and Galahad appears the next day. On the strange ship inscribed "I am Faith," the expected sequence of events is reversed. It is as if the Grail knights and Perceval's sister have somehow outdistanced normal

¹⁹ "ET cESTE CHOSE A JA ESTE ESPROVEE AUCUNE FOIZ" (203).

²⁰ "Biax freres ... ces deus choses sont ja avenues" (206).

chronology and are in passage on a ship that moves at high speed through time as well as space.²¹

The inscriptions in the *Queste*, then, function like saints' relics. Relics are created because the Holy Spirit is present in a saint's body, even after that body is dead; these bodies enable miracles to occur. In the *Queste*, on stone monuments and other hard surfaces, the Holy Spirit codifies written texts whose messages ultimately open a door to a revelation not permitted to any other than the select Grail knights. The inscriptions are a means of transcendence first of the normal parameters of human understanding and second of time itself.

Not any physical remain can become a relic, however, and not every written text in the *Queste* is a portal to transcendence. Relics had to be substantiated by testimony, either of the saint's life or of the miracles produced by his or her remains, or preferably by both, before they were accepted as authentic by the Church. Both oral and written discourses were acceptable as validation. However, these were both subject to credulity and charlatanism. In the most famous critique of the validation of relics, *On the Saints and their Relics*, Guibert of Nogent presses for more rigorous evaluation of the reliability of both oral and written hagiographies and accounts of miracles.²² He recognizes that relics are often too easily accepted because prelates want the prestige, donations, business, and pilgrimage that relics bring to a site.²³ First, sources should be examined. Guibert is a lawyer who demands reliable evidence for claims to stop abuse. He cites, for example, the story of Saint Pyro in Brittany whose legend glorified him as a martyr. When Guibert inquired personally into the circumstances of the man's death, interviewing those who knew him, he

²¹ Burns (1985:74-77) has also noted the knight's transcendence of chronological time after they enter the Ship of Faith. She argues that the *Queste* does not present a series of allegories and interpretations, "but a text that says the same thing over and over in a slightly different form, recasting itself constantly in a series of analogical molds" (77). Continual repetition of the histories and adventures in the narrative constitute a series of attempts to create a full explanation of the human past and future; these repetitions are an attempt to recreate "a past that can only be recaptured through textual re-enactment" (148). Certainly the knights do receive the information that fills "gaps" in the mysteries of the Grail. However, one may also see the reception of this information as part of an initiation ritual that the knights undergo on the Ship of Faith.

²² CCCM, 127: 79-175. I am indebted to Dr. Thomas Head for providing me with a draft of his new translation of Guibert's *On the Saints and Their Relics* (Head forthcoming).

²³ CCcM, 127:103-4.

found that Pyro had actually gotten staggeringly drunk and fallen down a well.²⁴ Unconfirmed or unexamined testimony should not be accepted. Furthermore, testimony should include certain information. Guibert says that it is a “sacrilege” (*prophanum*) to accept as a saint one of whose times, birth, life, and time and manner of death are uncertain or ambiguous.²⁵ Dependable information of this sort should be available in order to validate a relic.

Brian Stock points out that Guibert does not completely discount the validity of oral sources, but asks that they be substantiated, as Guibert himself investigated the stories related about St. Pyro.²⁶ However, his treatise does imply certain criteria for oral sources. For example, oral tradition is more reliable if it is presented by an eyewitness or by a person who received the account from an eyewitness. The information about a saint’s life he recommends—historical times, birth, life, and the time and manner of death—is not reliable if it does not use information that has been retained in the memory of the living (*nullius viventis memoria resident*).²⁷ This requirement is paralleled by the English preference for testimony that is “time out of mind,” within the memory of the oldest living person, usually a period of one hundred years.²⁸

Also, Guibert’s treatise reflects the bias of a highly literate reader. He seems to prefer that trustworthy written documentation support oral

²⁴ CCCM, 127:88.

²⁵ “Illud dicere audebo prophanum, quod ararum pone sacraria altissimos tribunalium instar thronos obtinent, quorum tempus, natalis ac vita, dies quoque et qualitas mortium in nullis viventis memoria resident” (CCCM, 127:89).

²⁶ Stock 1983:244. Guibert (CCCM, 127:87) recommends the support of ancient tradition (*vetustatis*) and truthful written accounts (*scriptorum veracium traditio*).

²⁷ CCCM, 127:89; The fact that testimony came from an eyewitness was important in the Middle Ages. According to Isidore of Seville (1:41), history is the narrative of deeds that have happened in the past; among the ancients no one composed history unless he was present and saw the things that were later written about (*Historia est narratio rei gestae, per quam ea, quae in praeteritio facta sunt, dinascuntur. . . . Apud veteres enim meno conscribetat historiam, nisi isque interfuisset, et ea quae conscribenda essent vidisset*) (1:41). Authorship by an eyewitness is important because things that are seen are things that are made known without falsehood (*Quae enim videntus, sine mendacio proferuntur*) (1:41). Jeanette Beer points out (1981:10) that Isidore falsely attributes the etymology of *historia* to the Greek words meaning “to know” and “to see.”

²⁸ According to Clanchy (1993: 152), “time out of mind” referred to “the earliest times that could be remembered by the oldest living persons.”

testimony. How can a community, he asks, “take as their patron someone about whom they know almost nothing because they can discover nothing written about him except for his name?”²⁹ In these cases, as Guibert says, “the clergy remains silent while any old wife or flocks of worthless little women chant fabricated stories about such patrons while at work on their treadles and looms.”³⁰ Finally, both oral and written texts supporting the claims of relics should conform to the stylistic aesthetics of literary tradition. Guibert reminds his readers that Augustine discounted the authenticity of the *Gospel of Thomas* in part because of its style, which created a *strepitus aurium*, a rattling or clattering in the ears.³¹ If the style of an account, even a written one, is ragged (*pannosus*), pedestrian (*pedestri*), serpentine (*humi serpente eloquio proferuntur*), and confused (*inconditissime delatrantur*), it will be believed to be false even if it is true.³² In other words, the style of any source should lack the repetition that creates a rattling in one’s ears, follow a logical and not a winding order, and should not sound pedestrian or vulgar. These, of course, tend to be standards created by literate culture and not by oral tradition.

Looking at the inscriptions in the *Queste*, probably composed about one hundred years after *On the Relics of the Saints*, in light of Guibert’s recommendations for evaluating the authenticity of relics, one sees that the oral discourses used to support and explain the inscriptions follow Guibert’s principles for good attestation.³³ For example, these discourses maintain a literate style and organization in that they mimic written biblical commentary.³⁴ Matarasso, for example, argues that these commentaries

²⁹ CCCM, 127:100: “Decant ergo michi quomo sibi illum patrocinari estimant, de quo quicquid est sciendum ignorant; nusquam de eo scriptum preter nomen invenies.”

³⁰ CCCM, 127:100: “Ceterum tacente clero anus et mulierculum vilium greges talium patronorum commentatas historias post insubulos et litatatoria cantitant. . . .”

³¹ CCCM, 127:87.

³² CCCM, 127:87.

³³ Huygens dates *De Sanctis et eorum Pigneribus* between 1114 and 1120 (CCCM, 127:32). Pauphilet (1921:12) assigns 1220 as an approximate date for the composition of the *Queste*; Matarasso (1969:25) suggests a time between 1215 and 1230.

³⁴ Many critics have argued that the *Queste*’s narrative structure and interpretive episodes reflect biblical models, either gospel texts or exegeses. Locke (1960:25-33) considers the central model of the narrative to be Holy Scripture. Strubel (1989:44) asserts that the interpretive episodes function as “une glose permanente.” Baumgartner (1981:44) writes that the *Queste* is “un nouvel evangile pour cette nouvelle race de chevaliers”

follow a pattern of threefold biblical exegesis, certainly a structure developed from the literate establishment and not from folk tradition (Matarasso 1979:11). Furthermore, these oral discourses are often delivered by an eyewitness. Perceval's sister, for example, is reporting her own experience when she reveals that she has made the swordbelt that will replace the one found on the Ship of Faith (227), and an inscription on the forehead of Josephus, the son of Joseph of Arimathea, testifies to his identity and the reliability of the history of the Grail (268).

Even better, however, are oral accounts that are supported with reliable written documentation. Three written texts that are *not* inscriptions are encountered in the work. Two of these are letters, one written by the biblical character Solomon and read by the knights who discover it on the Ship of Faith; the other is a letter written by Perceval about his sister's death. Perceval places the letter under her body on the Ship of Faith, where it is discovered and read by Lancelot. The final manuscript text appearing in the work is the text of the romance itself.

First, the letter written by Solomon expands the explanation of the history presented to the elect knights as part of their encounter with inscriptions. The letter recounts the story of the Tree of Life, the tree from which Eve picked the apple. When she is expelled from Eden with Adam, she takes a twig from the tree with her and replants it. Eventually, the twig becomes the tree under which Cain kills Abel. In conformity with medieval tradition, the tree will become the source of the wood of Christ's cross, but as an Old Testament character Solomon does not know this and merely says that he used the wood to build the Ship of Faith (210-26). In other words, the letter, written by the builder of the Ship himself, helps to attest to the history that the knights have learned on their adventures and to connect the Arthurian present with the biblical past.

The second letter is even more significant in light of Guibert's recommendations. This letter provides exactly the information Guibert suggests to authenticate sainthood. Perceval's sister dies because the blood of a virgin was necessary to save a noble woman. Perceval writes a letter containing an account of his sister's parentage, the manner of her death, and

proclaimed by Bernard of Clairvaux. Poirion (1994:205) modifies the "*Queste* as Gospel" position by suggesting that while the *Queste* author did not intend his work to be read as a new Bible, he did draw from the hermeneutical tradition of grammar, rhetoric, and exegesis in developing his adventures and interpretations. Not all critics concur with the position that the *Queste* responds to biblical-type exegesis. Burns (1985:3), for example, suggests that the *Queste's* narratives and interpretations constitute "a whole series of highly fictionalized re-tellings which show literature's bold divergence from the theological model."

her role in aiding the knights in their quest. He does this, he says, so that if her body is found in a strange country, they will know who she is (242). The ship sails away by itself with the body of Perceval's sister. Lancelot enters it several days later, discovers the woman's body, and finds the letter, which says, "This young woman is the sister of Perceval of Wales, and was a virgin in both will and deed all her days. It is she who changed the belt on the Sword of the Strange Belt that Galahad, the son of Lancelot of the Lake, wears now."³⁵ The letter describes the young woman's lineage: who she is, her times, her activities on the Grail quest, and manner of her death. In short, it includes all the information Guibert specifies. Finally, Lancelot is also provided with the names of living witnesses—Perceval and Galahad—who could confirm the contents of the letter if necessary.

The final document alluded to in the narrative is the manuscript of the romance itself, which in a way becomes a written attestation to its own authority. In the last two paragraphs of the story, Bors returns to Camelot from the distant, mythical, eastern city of Sarras where Perceval, Galahad, and he had finally found the Holy Grail. After ruling Sarras briefly, Galahad receives communion from the Grail and is translated directly into heaven. Perceval becomes a hermit and dies after a year and three days; only Bors is left to return to court. Almost the moment Bors arrives, however, Arthur is determined to write down Bors' story, a personal history that is also the history of the Grail. Bors' eyewitness account is immediately transferred from oral into written text: it is *metoient en escrit*, put into writing, and placed for permanent preservation in the library at Salisbury, from which it is extracted by Walter Map and translated from Latin into French. Now, presumably, the French translation serves as the documentary authority—the *monumentum*, in the Latin sense of written authority—for the romance.³⁶

The fact that the romance presents itself as its own written authority has two important implications. First, a written authority has replaced the oral explanation and testimony that *primarily* supported the inscriptions in most of the narrative. In fact, the spoken discourses that are ubiquitous in the first two-thirds of the tale almost disappear in the last third. This substitution seems to undermine the authority of oral discourse and tradition. In the first two-thirds of the romance, new adventures commonly

³⁵ "Ceste damoisele fu suer Percevalle Galois, et fu toz jorz virge en volente et en oevre. Ce est cele qui chanja les renges de l'Espee as estranges renges que Galaad, filz Lancelot del Lac, porte orendroit" (*Queste*:247).

³⁶ *Queste*:279-80.

begin with the formula *or dit li contes . . .* (“then the tale says . . .”). The formula almost suggests that the tale is its own author. The last sentence of the romance, however, says, that the tale becomes silent (*se test*) and says no more about the adventures of the Holy Grail.³⁷ After it has been written down, it says no more because the orally transmitted tale no longer has validity; at that point, the written manuscript version has supplanted it as the official voice of the story. In a way, the tale’s last speech-act is to make its own testament, a written version that speaks when the tale itself is silent.

Second, the fact that the tale has been written down serves to distance the reader from the knights’ experience. Walter Ong has argued that the spoken word creates a community, drawing people through language into a living communal experience, but that writing distances the reader from the subject of the text.³⁸ The reader of the *Queste*, whether he or she is of the thirteenth century or the twentieth, cannot interpret the romance as the knights did with the inscriptions: they have no direct experience of writing as a reliquary for grace. R. Howard Bloch (1972:206) has written the following concerning the last paragraph of the *Queste*: “What looks . . . like a simple attempt to bolster the romance with realistic detail corresponds to a double linguistic movement: from the lived experience perceived at the ontological level of gesture, ritual, and vision to the oral account raised to documentary status through transcription and, finally, to literary status through translation.”

In its last paragraph, the text itself delineates its own layers of authority from oral tradition to written attestation to literary *monumentum*. But with this series of transitions in medium and language comes distance from the reader. Most Grail romance authors tend to refer to a source text, *un grant livre*, that is the source for a given romance.³⁹ But the inscriptions in the *Queste* belong to the realm of lived experience. Like the rituals the knights undergo, like the sacrament of the Eucharist they so frequently celebrate, like relics, and like the Grail, they provide direct access to what Bloch calls “the ontological level” of human experience. What is left is not written by the Holy Spirit, but by government clerks recording eyewitness testimony. Ultimately, the romance manuscript is an authenticating

³⁷ “Si se test a tant li contes, que plus n’ en dist des A VENTURES DEL SEINT GRAAL” (*Queste*:280).

³⁸ See espec. Ong 1982:41-46.

³⁹ For more on references to a “great book” as a source of the Grail romances, see Poirion 1976; Hanning 1985:356; Leupin 1982; Bloch 1972:206.

secondary document and not a primary text; it allows the reader to glimpse the Holy Grail only at two removes.

Bluffton College

References

Medieval Works

- Abelard (ca. 1079-1142) Peter Abelard. *Commentaria in Epistulam Pauli ad Romanos*. Ed. by Eligius Buytaert. CCCM, 11. Turnhout: Brepols, 1969.
- Ambrosius Autpertus (n.d.) Ambrosius Autpertus. *Expositio in Apocalypsin*. In *Ambrosii Autperti Opera*. Ed. by Robert Weber. CCCM, 27. Turnhout: Brepols, 1975.
- Augustine (354-430) Augustine of Hippo. *De Littera et Spiritu*. Ed. by Joseph Zycha. CSEL,60. Vindobon: Tempsky, 1894.
- Biblia Sacra* *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatum versionem*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1969.
- CCCM *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Medievalis*. Turnhout: Brepols.
- CSEL *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latina*. Vindobon: Tempsky.
- Guibert de Nogent (1053-1124) Guibert, Abbot de Nogent-sous-Coucy. *De Sanctis et eorum Pigneribus*. Ed. by R. B. C. Huygens. CCCM,127. Turnhout: Brepols, 1993.
- Hildegard (1098-1179) Hildegard of Bingen. *Scivias*. Ed. by Adelgund Fuhrkotter. CCCM, 43A. Turnhout: Brepols, 1978.
- Isidore (560-636) Isidore, Bishop of Seville. *Etymologiarum sive Originum*. Ed. by W.M. Lindsay. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911.
- Johannes Belethus (n.d) Johannes Belethus. *Summa de Ecclesiasticis Officiis*. Ed. by Heribert Douteil. CCCM, 41-41A. Turnhout: Brepols, 1976.

- John of Ford (n.d.) John of Ford. *Super Extremam Partem Cantici Canticorum Sermones CXX*. Ed. by Edmund Mikkers and Hilary Costello. CCCM, 17. Turnhout: Brepols, 1970.
- Nicodemus (n.d.) *The Gospel of Nicodemus: Gesta Salvatoris*. Ed. by H.C. Kim. Toronto Medieval Latin Texts, 2. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1973.
- Queste *La Queste del Saint Graal: Roman du XIIIe siecle*. Ed. by Albert Pauphilet. Paris: Champion, 1984.
- Robert de Boron (13th cent.) Robert de Boron. *Le Roman du Graal: Manuscrit de Modène*. Ed. by Bernard Cerquiglini. Paris: Union Generale d'Éditions, 1981.
- Rupert of Deutz (1075-1129) Rupert of Deutz. *De Sancta Trinitate et Operibus Eis*. Ed. by Rhabanus Haacke. CCCM, 22-25. Turnhout: Brepols, 1971.
- Walter of St. Victor (n.d.) Walter of St. Victor. *Sermo 3*. In *Sermones Ineditos Triginta Sex*. Ed. by Jean Chatillon. CCCM, 30. Turnhout: Brepols, 1975.
- William of St. Thierry
(1085-1148) William of St. Thierry. *Expositio super Epistolam ad Romanos*. In *Opera Omnia Guillelmi a Sancto Theodorico*. Ed. by Paul Verdeyen. CCCM, 86. Turnhout: Brepols, 1989.
- Contemporary Works*
- Baumgartner 1981 Emmanuèle Baumgartner. *L'Arbre et le pain: Essai sur La Queste del Saint Graal*. Paris: Société d'Éditions d'Enseignement Supérieur.
- Beer 1981 Jeanette Beer. *Narrative Conventions of Truth in the Middle Ages*. Études de philologie et d'histoire, 38. Geneva: Librairie Droz.
- Bloch 1972 R. Howard Bloch. *Medieval French Literature and the Law*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Brown 1981 Brown Peter. *The Cult of Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*. The Haskell Series on the History of Religions, n. s. 2. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Burns 1985 E. Jane Burns. *Arthurian Fictions: Re-reading the Vulgate Cycle*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

- Bynum 1991 Carol Walker Bynum. "Bodily Miracles and the Resurrection of the Body in the High Middle Ages." In *Belief in History: Innovative Approaches to European and American Religion*. Ed. by Thomas Kselman. Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press. pp.68-106.
- Clanchy 1993 M. T. Clanchy. *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307*. Oxford: Blackwell. Rpt. of 1979 ed.
- de Looze 1985 Laurence N. de Looze. "A Story of Interpretations: The Queste del Saint Graal as Metaliterature." *Romanic Review*, 76:129-47.
- Frappier 1976a Jean Frappier. "Le Cycle de la vulgate (Lancelot en prose et Lancelot-Graal)." In *Grundriss der Romanischen Literaturen des Mittelalters*, 4. Heidelberg: Carl Winter. pp. 536-89.
- Frappier 1976b _____. "La Légende du graal: Origine et évolution." In *Grundriss der Romanischen Literaturen des Mittelalters*, 4 . Heidelberg: Carl Winter. pp. 292-331.
- Geary 1990 Patrick Geary. *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hanning 1985 Robert W. Hanning. "Arthurian Evangelists: The Language and Truth in Thirteenth-Century Prose Romances." *Philological Quarterly*, 64:347-65.
- Head forthcoming Thomas Head, ed. *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology*. New York: Garland.
- Herrmann-Mascard 1975 Nicole Herrmann-Mascard. *Les Reliques des saints: Formation coutumière d' un droit*. Paris: Klincksieck.
- Kemp 1948 Eric Waldram Kemp. *Canonization and Authority in the Western Church*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Leupin 1982 Alexandre Leupin. *Le Graal et la littérature: Etude sur la vulgate arthurienne en prose*. Lausanne: Age d'Homme.
- Locke 1960 Frederick W. Locke. *The Quest for the Holy Grail: A Literary Study of a Thirteenth Century Romance*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Lot-Borodine 1951 Myrrah Lot-Borodine. "Le Grande secrets du Saint Graal dans la quête du Pseudo-Map." In *Lumière du Graal: Études et Textes*. Ed. by René Nelli. Paris: Cahiers du Sud. pp. 151-74.
- Matarasso 1969 Pauline Matarasso, ed. *The Quest of the Holy Grail*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Matarasso 1979 _____. *The Redemption of Chivalry*. Geneva: Librairie Droz.
- Ong 1982 Walter Ong. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Methuen.
- Pauphilet 1921 Albert Pauphilet. *Etudes sur la Queste del Saint Graal attribuée à Gautier Map*. Paris: Champion.
- Poirion 1976 Daniel Poirion. "Roman en vers et roman en prose." In *Grundriss der Romanischen Literaturen des Mittelalters*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter. iv:74-81.
- Poirion 1994 _____. *Écriture poétique et composition romanesque*. Orleans: Paradigme.
- Stock 1983 Brian Stock. *The Implications of Literature: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Strubel 1989 Armand Strubel. *La Rose, Renart et le graal: La Littérature allégorique en France au XIIIe siècle*. Paris: Slatkine.
- Todorov 1971 Tzvetan Todorov. "La Quête du récit." In *Poétique de la prose: Choix, suivi de nouvelles recherches sur le récit*. Ed. by Tzvetan Todorov. Paris: Editions du Seuil. pp. 129-50.
- Wilson 1983 Stephen Wilson. *Saints and their Cults: Studies in Religion, Sociology, Folklore, and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.