Perceval, Galahad and the spiritualization of the Grail Quest in the

time of the Crusades

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Instincitiaully, when it comes to the legendary Arthurian myth of the quest for the Grail, one

knight's name in particular pops up: Galahad. He is the archetype for the protagonist of the story,

a perfect knight who accomplishes his quest and typically ascends to Heaven. Fascinatingly

though for a character who is so well associated with the legend his arrival into the Arthurian

canon is relatively late. We only begin to see his appearance within works in the early 13th

century, far past the original Grail myths which were written. Instead, the original myths

essentially always featured a different character, Percival. The contrast between Percival and

Galahd is striking, as Percival exhibits oftentimes selfish and naive characteristics. Why then,

would this shift occur? I surmise that the change occurs through the increasing power of the

Cistercian order whose theology can be reflected in works such as the *Vulgate Cycle*.   In this

paper I will analyze the influence of Bernard's *De laude novae militiae* and the role of religious

courtly propaganda during the times of the Crusades towards influencing the shift of the Grail

myth from a secular adventure to a religious quest in Chertian's Grail story versus the Lancelot

Vulgate Cycle's tale of the Grail.

The beginning of the change in the Grail story begins with the necessity of understanding the

character of Percival. Percival first is referenced in Chretian's earliest Romance Erec et Enide

but the more important work is *The Story of the Grail*. This work also serves as our first look into the original grail myth and thus it gives us a lens which allows us to view the evolution of the myth over time. Our first look at the original Grail Knight of Percival is him as a small boy observing a nearby knight. He comments on the large sword, the powerful shield and the gleaming armor which they wield and expresses material admiration for it. From this we can already tell that Percival is certainly not spiritually minded as a young individual, as he is inherently focused on the secular glory which knighthood brings. In a sense the work acts as a bildungsroman of sorts. A particular moment which exemplifies this is Perceival refusing to wait to be knighted, and proceeding to kill a knight whose armor he could not receive via threats(Troyes,116). The plot of the work in general focuses upon the development of Percival as a knight, rather than a spiritual quest as later seen.   The whole ceremony thing because it's not just about the thing about being holy it's more about him as a knight not exploring the adventure. He doesn't know how to behave in a secular courtly setting, and deal with others, but none of that has anything to do with the Grail as a holy item.

Call to action.

It is also important to analyze works beyond this to see how Percival's character did not or did evolve. In certain works we see the evolution of Percival grounded within the baseline Chretian. These works serve as a bridge between the secular nature of Chretian's grail story versus the much more spiritual version which we see today. The work which I examine is the High Book of The Grail by an unknown French author. It begins by acknowledging the ties to Chretian, as a hermit remarks upon the failure of Perceval to ask about the Grail in the ceremony. In this we see the inherent links which works belonging to this era have, the necessity to make Perceval drawn to the Chretian story already established. However we then see an attempt by the author to break

from that tradition as much as possible, with a character calling Perceval "Now as at this time is it said that he is the comeliest knight on live and the most hardy and the cleanest of all wickedness." We already now see the attempts to make Perceval into a more spiritual figure, with him being referred to as the Good Knight throughout the text (Barber). This coincides with the spiritualization of the Grail as previously mentioned. The Black Hermit character who is said to literally be Lucifer is defeated by Perceval, indicating his spiritual holiness and righteousness. Yet still the tale is bound down by the obligation to pay tribute to Chretian, through mentions of Perceval's mother and so on. It certainly is a start but not the dramatic transformation which we will soon see.

In order to understand the shift in the story, it is important to also see how the view of the traditional knight changed as well. Chief among proprietors of this change was St Bernard of Clairvaux, an important theologian of the time. Bernard was a heavy supporter of the Knights Templar, whose symbols and ideas we will see reflected throughout the Galahad stories. In particular, his treatise "Liber ad milites templi de laude novae militiae" exemplified many of the ideas which are expressed in those stories. For one, Bernard notes that the knights of Christ may safely kill and smite the enemy, as it is a gain not only for Christ but for themselves spiritually (Allen, 199). This is an idea which is obviously reflected in the stories which I will be examining. Additionally it is fascinating to see how Bernard decries secular knights, claiming that Templars clad themselves with faith not steel, no glory but formidability. This decrement of the standard model of knighthood can be seen in the rejection of traditional knights suich as Gawain when it comes to the grail quest. You cannot succeed if you're a secular knight.

We can see the influence of this ideology evident from other literature of the time. This certainly shows how the Galahad was not a unique product but rather a branch of an already existing genre. For instance, one only needs to look at the Hierarchical Statues of the Knights Templar composed in 1165 for examples of this ideology taking place. We can see the mixture of monastic theology and war mixed throughout. For instance, there is the discussion of how a marshal is supposed to take up the banner to charge. It specifically notes that the banner should be taken on God's behalf, and refers to the knights as the Christians implying the "Christainity vs everything else" theme common in Bernard (Allen, 202). We can also see the strict ideas of being a godly knight as it discusses how knights were not allowed to leave without permission until commanded to. This is highly contradictory to earlier chivalric romances of course where we saw a variety of knights doing essentially whatever they wanted. There is more of a sense of brotherhood evident in the Hierarchal Statues, which is additionally reflected by the fiction produced as well. We also have to look at the rise of the Crusade Romance, which is defined as being a romance whose primary purpose is discussing the clash between Christainity and the Middle East from the 11th to 13th centuries (Rouse, 217). In particular, I wanted to look at L'histoire de Gille de Chyn which was written in about 1230-1240. This work focuses on a knight who achieves fame and glory as a tournament champion and courtly lover. The knight then takes up the cross, goes on a Crusade, is killed and buried in an Abbey (Fordham). Not only that, but there is an episode directly alluding to Chretian's Yvain as the knight saves and promptly befriends a lion. As seen by this, the ideology of the New Knight applying to Arthurian style romances is certainly not an outlier. The work begins like a traditional romance but quickly becomes increasingly spiritual and religious, reflecting the attitude at the time. So as we examine

Vulgate Cycle, we can now place it in the context of a body of other works showing an evolved knighthood.

Now we move on to directly analyzing the elements of the Vulgate Cycle which make it distinct from the narratives of Perceval which we discussed previously. The central theme in the Vulgate Cycle is that worldly values are not enough to accomplish God's will. Gawain who previously was considered to be Arthur's greatest knight is chastised by a monk who notes "For when you were admitted into the order of chivalry you were not admitted in order that you should become a servant of the devil, but that you might serve our Creator." (Comfort, 53) This can be instantly compared to Chretian's Perceval where Gawain is in fact a role model for Perceval. In that story Gawain can be seen as a courtly and confident knight who liberates the people of a castle. The Vulgate Cycle turns this directly on its head by emphasizing that Gawain's chivalry means nothing if he does not also have exemplary religiosity. Galahad meanwhile accomplishes his tasks by embracing spirituality. Galahad within the context of the story is essentially a Christ like figure accomplishing astonishing miracles through the power of his faith. For example, near the end of the work he utilizes the power of the Holy Lance to heal the Fisher King. It is through the life of Galahad that knighthood is given true power beyond world matters.   The entrance of Galahad as well is emblematic of his status as an ideal knight. He arrives at Camelot with a monk-like figure announcing his ancestry as tying back to Biblical figures such as King David. Henceforth after he sits in a seat reserved for only the best knight and pulls a sword out of a stone. These two tasks which were unable to be accomplished by any other character cement him as being the best knight because of his spirituality and connection to God. He has no weakness,

no troubles because of his faith. In essence this work is similar to Bernard's doctrine because it shows how fruitless the secular knights are. Just as Bernard scorns the wastefulness of secular knights, the secular knights in this tale fail again and again. Meanwhile the "new knight" represented by Galahad succeeded in his mission which further proves Bernard's point about knights being able to accomplish all things through God.

The religious elements of the Cistercians in particular cannot be downplayed when it comes to discussing the Vulgate Cycle. We can see the direct allusions to their order and thus Bernard within many of the symbols shown throughout the work. For instance, the shield which Galahad wields is described as being white with a red cross in the center (Comfort, 51). This is exactly the same as the Knights Templar. Not only did Bernard of the Cistercians exalt the Templars as being a kind of new knighthood, he also had a direct hand in helping to create them. In fact whenever a Templar was cast out of the order they would take shelter at a Cistercian monastery in hopes of being rehabilitated. In turn we also see direct allusions to the monks themselves in the work. Additionally, we see friars noted as wearing white clothes mentioned which can be seen as an allusion to the Cistercians themselves (Comfort, 165). Beyond simply resemblances to clothing, there exists specific allusions to elements of Cistercian theology as well. For instance when Lancelot is unable to enter a chapel he instead lies on his shield while the rest of the Grail procession passes him by. Then, his armor and horse are given to a nearby knight while he is helpless to do anything (Comfort, 229). This is highly similar to a ritual done within the Cistercian order where as a punishment, monks would lie as their brothers walked past them and then their possessions would be redistributed. Cistercian concepts of humility are evident as well when Lancelot confesses his sins. Those concepts are outlined in a variety of Ciscstercian

sources and Lancelot's confession follows the steps of fasting, vigils, et cetera which we see in those sources. All in all this work is clearly and obviously written by either a heavy Cistercian sympathizer or by a member of the order itself by how overt the references are.

The question is, why would the Cistercians who I have alleged to have created the Vulgate Cycle choose to have made something like this? We obviously have to look into the historical context in which the Vulgate cycle existed. At the time of the publication of the Vulgate Cycle, the Ciscterian order was quickly rising. Numbers estimate that they had approximately 500 monasteries at that time as there were even accounts of monasteries being overflowed with brothers. However the most important context necessary is the understanding of the advocacy for Crusades. The previously mentioned St. Bernard was a great advocate for Crusades preaching, crying out to "clothe not yourselves in sackcloth, but cover yourselves with your impenetrable bucklers" (Bryan). Given this and what we have seen from *In Praise of the New Knighthood*, it is safe to deduce that Bernard thought violence against pagans was ultimately superior to possible damage to the church. As noted by a previous scholar as well, the amount which Bernard advocates for violence increases heavily after *In Praise of the New Knighthood* in works such as his Sermons. Bernard deliberately notes in Sermon 66 that it is better for heretics to be killed than lead others into possibly heresy.   (Martin, 49). The Vulgate Cycle was created during a time of a multitude of Crusades, ranging from the Albigensian Crusade to the beginning of the Fifth Crusade. It was necessary to create works which would appeal to audiences that would then become the loyal soldiers of the church. Examining the mid 13th century crusading song *Chevalier, Mult Es Guariz* we witness the idea that being a soldier for good is noble. The song begins by assuring the knights that their salvation is secure and calling on images of Moses to

inspire the troops (Allen, 214). Sermons as well promoted the idea of fighting in the Crusades, as discussed by the prolific writer Gerald of Wales. Gerald discusses how nearly three thousand men joined the army during his time working as a preacher including "many of the most notorious murders, thieves and robbers" (Allen, 182). In another example there are recorded accounts of the author Bohemond handing out copies of a propaganda work entitled the *Gesta Francorum* (Paul, 542). So essentially religious propaganda was nothing new for this time period as it was an element of life necessary to support these crusades.

So then the question arises as to why then would they choose to use a romance? The obvious idea is that they were made to appeal to a different audience than the typical sermons or speeches. A non Arthurian example of this is The Siege of Milan which overlays crusading imagery on events long before them. It is fascinating as well that the Vulgate Cycle begins with secular, fairly well trodden Arthurian stories and ends with well trodden Arthurian stories. The Grail quest is essentially the only bit which is extremely spiritual, almost as if it is snuck in there. Given the expensive nature of books at the time, romances such as the Vulgate Cycle would have been kept for a long time most likely read over and over again. It would have been read to a multitude of people as well within the court which leads me to believe they served a specific purpose. If sermons or songs are supposed to inspire the people directly, a romance is intended to create a legacy. We already know that the Cistercians understood the power of appealing to noble people. One of the most prominent Cistercians was Henry of Clairvaux who was the brother of Louis VII. Bernard not only consulted with the Pope but also had one of his own monks become Pope Eugene III. Finally we saw a wide range of noble leaders establish monastic orders such as Alfonso I of Portugal. Knowing this and the Cistercian power at the time it would only make

sense for the orders to try and maintain their hold over authority. The best way to do that is with familiar stories. Arthurian romances had already been well established at this point, as can be seen with authors like Chretian. Thus by using familiar characters with a different message there is more of an appeal and enjoyment of the work rather than an outright call to action. If you want romance to do something, have a material effect you can do that by promoting a specific theological doctrine by hoping they absorb. Then these kings and queens and nobles see this and therefore fight to try and realize what they see as the ideals in these stories which they read. The Queste Du Saint Graal doesn't call you bad for not joining the Crusades as sermons or songs might. It instead gently shows you an image of what an ideal knight may be like. In order to further add on to this point, it is also worth noting that the Vulgate Cycle was attributed under Walter Map. Walter Map was a well known prolific writer whose only surviving work was the anecdote-filled *De nugis curialium*. It is clearly not Map who wrote the Vulgate Cycle though as Map's patron the king of England would have most likely demanded a tale of an English knight like Gawain. Additionally, Map was not known for romances but rather amusing satires of church and society at the time. It is far more likely that his name was placed on the Vulgate Cycle due to the principle of the Cistericans order to attempt modesty as well as the already known name which he had. Finally, in terms of how this relates back to Galahad and Perceval the parallel is obvious. Perceval is everything the Cistercian order does not want, his history is that of a flawed knight who messes up and grows better secularily. No matter how much you attempt to change his character he will always be known as somebody who fails and is not good enough in the end. Meanwhile, Galahad is the second coming of Christ, a perfect being who represents absolutely everything the Order wants. He serves as a model to the court instead of the Perceval who would have driven them to more secular goals. Essentially Perceval is thrown out of the

legend in order to create a character designed specifically to serve as a spearhead of religious propaganda.

The effectiveness of what the monks chose to do is on full display in Malory's use of it for his collection Le Morte D'Arthur. Le Morte DÁrthur was described as being drawn from a variety of books. This is clear from Malory's pulling from works such as Yvain, Erec and Enide and so on. However when it comes to describing the Quest of the Grail, Malory essentially only uses the Vulgate Cycle (Dutton, 377). We see all the details down to a T, from Galahad sitting on the Siege Perilous and pulling out the sword to Lancelot's failure and punishment (Malory). This is particularly interesting given the wide range of material that he clearly had access to. Additionally, the Vulgate Cycle Grail story is a curious work to pull from as it does not shed the most perfect light upon Lancelot. Malory of course is well known for his love of Lancelot, such as allegedly "forgetting" the incident about Lancelot and the cart from the story. The obvious theory is that the Vulgate Cycle was something which was so pushed by the Ciscetercians that perhaps Malory simply thought it was the original edition. You would also not expect such a religious story from somebody who was in prison for thievery and violent robberies. Regardless of his intention, the use of the Vulgate Cycle displays just how well disseminated the Galahad version of the Grail story is.

In conclusion, the Vulgate Cycle shows exactly how you can hijack a tradition from the depths of history. The Cistercian Order, influenced by Bernard's ideas of knighthood and political power, did exactly that. In order to fuel interest in the Crusades and continue to implant seeds of their technology within noble courts they used the power of a simple romance to do so. It's quite genius really because what lasts longer in somebody's brain than the great literature that they have read? Ultimately though it is a matter of personal interpretation of whether you see the co opting as fascinating or as a threat. If such a legendary tale can be so easily changed, then who's to know how other stories might be changed by the wills of a person or group. It is thus always important to remember the history behind every tale because as if we have seen the characters and themes within them can move with the winds of time.

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