

Editor's Note

Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching has as one of its many objectives celebrating cultural diversity in studies of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Our offerings in this issue treat opportunities to make connections between popular culture and pedagogy, between medieval texts and contemporary concerns. David Staines traces the vagaries of the Grail legends on stage and film as a way of developing an awareness of the influence of literary traditions. Lee Ann Tobin explains how students' impressions of the Middle Ages, usually gained from movies and popular novels, can form a sound basis for pedagogy. Cynthia Evans sends California teens to explore the darkly wooded paths of Dante and to reconstruct them in the fashion of their own sun-lit but jaded culture. Elizabeth Girsch presents the case for legal, penitential, and pastoral documents as windows on the social consciences of Anglo-Saxons. Carolyn Prager uncovers medieval conceptions of Africans. Harriet Hudson reviews films on monasteries and Robin Hood, both fixtures in the medieval world of popular imagination.

In keeping with our desire to foster the teaching, in diverse settings, of Medieval and Renaissance culture, we desire to serve a readership whose interests are both practical and scholarly. Moreover, to insure interdisciplinary content for *SMART*, submissions may be documented according to either *The MLA Style Manual* or *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Our printed texts will continue to adhere to *The MLA Style Manual*. We will convert articles submitted in *The Chicago Manual of Style* format to the MLA style. Discursive notes should be held to a minimum in order to have an easily readable text. The concept of intellectual rigor requires that information of the type often relegated to notes be integrated with the main discussion, and the practical needs of teachers require that information about texts and sources appropriate to students at all levels be included in the text or works cited. In balancing the need for documentation with that for practicality, we urge your cooperation and assistance.

Judy G. Hample, Managing Editor

The Tradition of King Arthur: The Grail in Legend and Film¹

David Staines

It is a truth almost universally acknowledged that the Arthurian legends are the greatest of all myths. Their depiction of the rise and fall of King Arthur's ideal order and its embodiment in the Round Table has survived for nearly a millennium.

Although courses on Arthurian literature proliferate in colleges and universities, and in high schools, too, courses are exploring the realm of Camelot, most students are introduced to Arthurian myth, not in the classroom, or in books, but in films. Contemporary cinema necessarily provides a significant and appropriate complement to courses in the legends of King Arthur.

When I designed and introduced an undergraduate course, "The Tradition of King Arthur," at Harvard University in 1974, I was referring in the title to T.S. Eliot's sense of tradition as he defined it in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Tradition, he observed,

involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to any one who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a

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¹ An earlier version of this essay was the plenary address delivered at the sixth Teaching the Middle Ages conference, held under the auspices of the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, The Ohio State University, on February 23, 1990. The oral presentation, which included selected film clips from the Arthurian movies under discussion, was dedicated to the memory of Stanley J. Kahrl (1931-89), Professor of English and the first director of the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies.

sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity. (14)

The course did not, indeed could not stop at the end of the Middle Ages, for no myth so exemplifies Eliot's sense of tradition as the story of King Arthur.

In an introductory lecture, I explored Eliot's sense of tradition with reference to the Broadway musical *Camelot* and, in particular, its title song. That musical, if I may be autobiographical for a moment, holds a special place in my heart, not because it is especially good—it is *not*!—but because it had its world premiere on October 1, 1960 in my hometown of Toronto. *Camelot*, which opened a new theatre, the O'Keefe Centre, heralded Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe's first Broadway musical since their triumphant *My Fair Lady*. On that opening night, the stars and the press were everywhere, and I, like many Torontonians, stood outside the theatre to witness an event that was uncommon in the Toronto of that time.

Camelot was, at least initially, a disaster. On October 1, the curtain rose at 8:30 in the evening, and came down at 12:45 a.m. On Monday morning, one of the critics, as I recall, described the musical as "Götterdämmerung with laughs." And when my mother took me to see the show the following Friday, I felt cheated, for the show had already been cut, and the curtain fell at 12:15. *Camelot* was, and would remain, formless, an attempt to adapt T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* (1958), which itself had structural problems that Lerner's libretto inherited. The show went on to poor reviews in New York. It might have fallen into oblivion had it not been for Jacqueline Kennedy's public statement that her husband listened to the record of the musical every night as he went to bed. This presidential approbation and the tragic events of 1963 gave the musical a new flowering and an historical significance.

In the musical's title song, a young Arthur, fearful of marrying a woman named Guinevere whom he has never met, spies her from a distance as she approaches Camelot. Seeing her own fears about the impending marriage, he proceeds to explain to her the landscape of Camelot. In the Broadway musical, the scene was an enchanting moment as a young Richard Burton addressed a regal but terrified Julie Andrews. In the Hollywood film, the moment is less enchanting as a wooden Richard Harris addresses Vanessa Redgrave, who seems to have wandered by mistake out of a pre-Raphaelite painting. In both versions, the lyrics are the same:

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The climate must be perfect all the year.
A law was made a distant moon ago here,
July and August cannot be too hot;
And there's a legal limit to the snow here
In Camelot.

The winter is forbidden till December,
And exits March the second on the dot.
By order summer lingers through September
In Camelot.

Camelot! Camelot!
I know it sounds a bit bizarre;
But in Camelot, Camelot
That's how conditions are.

The rain may never fall till after sundown.
By eight the morning fog must disappear.
In short, there's simply not
A more congenial spot,
For happy-ever-aftering than here
In Camelot....
Camelot! Camelot!
I know it gives a person pause
But in Camelot, Camelot
Those are the legal laws.

The snow may never slush upon the hillside.
By nine p.m. the moonlight must appear. (Lerner 14-15)

Lerner's description of this earthly paradise is an embellishment of White's version of Camelot:

In the spring, the little flowers came out obediently in the meads, and the dew sparkled, and the birds sang. In the summer it was beautifully hot for no less than four months, and, if it did rain just enough for agricultural purposes, they managed to arrange it so that it rained while you were in bed. In the autumn the leaves flamed and rattled before the west winds, tempering their sad adieu with glory. And in the winter, which was confined by statute to two months, the snow lay evenly, three feet thick, but never turned to slush. (135)

This vision finds its origin in one of White's sources, Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, though the images in Tennyson refer not to Camelot but to the non-earthly Avilion (or Avalon). No longer the youngster awaiting his intended bride, Tennyson's Arthur is bidding farewell to his trusted knight Sir Bedivere:

But now farewell. I am going a long way
With these thou seest - if indeed I go -
(For all my mind is clouded with a doubt)
To the island-valley of Avilion;
Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,
Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies
Deep-meadowed, happy, fair with orchard-lawns
And bowery hollows crowned with summer sea,
Where I will heal me of my grievous wound.(596)

Tennyson altered Malory's account of the time of Arthur's passing from the summer to the winter,² and drew his picture of an idyllic world not from one of his medieval sources but from Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*. In his own poem "Lucretius," he adapted the Roman philosopher's same account of the home of the gods:

The Gods, who haunt
The lucid interspace of world and world,
Where never creeps a cloud, or moves a wind,
Nor ever falls the least white star of snow,
Nor ever lowest roll of thunder moans,
Nor sound of human sorrow mounts to mar
Their sacred everlasting calm! (1210-11)³

Lucretius' images find their source in the sixth book of Homer's *Odyssey* and its depiction of Mount Olympus, the home of the gods:

²For an account of Tennyson's indebtedness to Malory's version of Arthur's passing, see Staines 164-74.

³In *De Rerum Natura*, 3, 18-24, Lucretius describes the home of the gods: "before me appear the gods in their majesty, and their peaceful abodes, which no winds ever shake or clouds besprinkle with rain, which no snow congealed by the bitter frost mars with its white fall, but the air ever cloudless encompasses them and laughs with its light spread abroad. There moreover nature supplies everything, and nothing at any time impairs their peace of mind" (Lucretius 189-91). For the place of Lucretius and Homer in the Lerner "tradition," see Lee.

the abode of the gods that stands fast forever. Neither is it shaken by winds nor ever wet with rain, nor does snow fall up on it, but the air is outspread clear and cloudless, and over it hovers a radiant whiteness. Therein the blessed gods are glad all their days. (1,209)

Here, then, is a tradition of sorts, one that has shaped contemporary understanding of Camelot, yet one that has bypassed the Middle Ages. And the central figure here is Tennyson, the father of the Arthurian renaissance of the nineteenth century, the poet who resurrected and redirected understanding of the Arthurian legends and who still shapes our understanding of them.

When I first taught "The Tradition of King Arthur," everyone in the class knew or knew of the Broadway musical. The afterglow of the sixties, the memories of the Kennedys, the song itself were all present. But when I teach an Arthurian course now, there is scarcely a student in the class who has seen the musical, and only a few know its title song. My introduction to the Arthurian legends in the seventies is not an appropriate introduction for the nineties.

When we teach, we have to move through our students' preconceptions and understandings, leading them into new areas of study. To teach the Arthurian legends now is to confront preconceptions based, not on *Camelot* or *The Once and Future King*—in the seventies most students in an Arthurian course had read White's novel—but on the plethora of films that may be loosely called Arthurian, from the studios of Walt Disney to the studios of Steven Spielberg. Arthur is everywhere in the cinema; no myth has such a cinematic presence. Through the movies, students know that Arthur had a wife who had an affair, that adultery seems to have destroyed an ideal world, and that some object called the Grail appeared, serving, some movies seem to imply, no purpose whatsoever.

The film version of the musical *Camelot* came out in 1967, following two other Arthurian films in that decade: Walt Disney's *Sword in the Stone* and Cornel Wilde's *Sword of Lancelot*. In the first sixty years of this century, there were only ten films about or related to King Arthur. Ten films in six decades, then three in one decade, and in the last two decades, eighteen films.⁴ And among these eighteen a persistent subject is the story of the Grail; there have been five films alone about Percival. The cinematic depictions of the Grail are, generally speaking, laughable, whether intentionally so or not.

⁴For a bibliography of the films and related critical material, see Harty, "Cinema Arthuriana: A Bibliography of Selected Materials."

Accepting the fact that students know Arthur mainly through the cinema, I decided last year to screen one Arthurian film towards the end of "The Tradition of King Arthur." I left the choice to the students, and in a rare display of unanimity, they recommended *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975). For the members of the class, this was at least their second viewing of the film, and to their surprise they found the movie disappointing. Perhaps the course had succeeded. Perhaps their direct confrontation with the legends created their dissatisfaction with this film's combination of satire, spoof, visual horseplay, and endless and improbable plot meanderings. The film originated in the Grail:

The Palin/Jones team in particular was turning out material dealing with the Middle Ages, although many of the sketches were set in modern-day Britain, as well. The original idea has been for the knights to buy a grail in the Grail Hall at Harrod's in London, because Harrod's has everything. (Johnson 199)

Yet the Grail plays a small role in the film, as does the Arthurian story itself. How ironic that this film, which also presents one of the few cinematic portraits of Galahad, may provide students with their introduction to the Arthurian world.

Six years later, another British Arthurian film appeared, John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981). Many students have seen it, and, to my amazement, many praise it. Incoherent to an extreme, more a cartoon than a film, *Excalibur* acknowledges indebtedness to Malory and borrows lines from Tennyson. The press release for the film underlines its incoherence: "From John Boorman comes this luminous re-creation of the waning age of magic and the dawn of rational thought." The Grail scene in *Excalibur* is an exercise in confusion and violence. Although Percival does seek the Grail, it is difficult, even for the most knowledgeable viewer, to understand the plot or the knight's presence.

1989 witnessed the most popular cinematic presentation of the Grail in film history. In *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Indiana Jones is on his own last crusade, and for this modern knight who had already searched for the Ark of the Covenant, what better climactic adventure than the quest for the Holy Grail? In the movie's early scenes, Indiana Jones explains to an art dealer that the story of the Grail is a bedtime story about three knights, two of whom had wandered away after protecting the Grail for one hundred and fifty years. Now, seven hundred years later, Indiana Jones, a contemporary knight, seeks the Grail, which has been secularized into the cup of everlasting life.

These recent films suggest that the Grail has been reintroduced into contemporary culture as a rich symbol. None of its dimensions, however,

reflects much understanding of an object which was already complex in the Middle Ages. Where did these cinematic grails come from? Like the title song in *Camelot*, modern understanding of the Grail has been shaped by Tennyson and finds its source in his poetry.

In 1859 Tennyson published, to immense critical and popular acclaim, the first volume of his *Idylls of the King*, which included the four poems, "Enid," "Vivien," "Elaine," and "Guinevere." Poet Laureate for nine years, he had been obsessed with the Arthurian legends from the time of his boyhood reading of Malory. The first volume's success made him determined to create perhaps twelve idylls, an epic series on the story of King Arthur. But the next quartet of idylls did not appear for another decade, a delay that reflected Tennyson's reverence for the Grail story and his inability to accept its medieval meaning. A Low Church of England member himself, he did not believe in its sacramental significance. By nature a mystic, he believed in the spirituality of human nature rather than in a distinct and separate supernatural order. Hence he could not accept the Grail's supernatural reality. To one of his friends who suggested that the poet turn his attention to the Grail story, he confessed that he "shunned handling the subject, for fear that it might seem to some almost profane" (Tennyson, Hallam 1:458). He observed: "I doubt whether such a subject could be handled in these days, without incurring a charge of irreverence. It would be too much like playing with sacred things. The old writers believed in the Sangreal" (1, 456-57). At the same time he was convinced that an Arthurian epic had to contain the Grail story. So, perplexed and torn, he remained silent, abandoning his Arthurian project for ten years.

Tennyson's achievement, complemented by his stature as poet laureate, led to the publication of much medieval Arthurian literature. In 1861, for example, his friend F.J. Furnival brought out the first of his two volumes of Henry Lovelich's fifteenth-century poem on the Grail with its French prose source. On the opening page is a polite dedicatory acknowledgement to Tennyson: "I trust he will accept [these pages] as a slight acknowledgement of the debt of gratitude all English-reading men now owe him." The preface to Furnival's 1864 edition of the French prose *Quest of the Holy Grail*, the long treatise that had served as Malory's source, also opens with an acknowledgement of Tennyson's stature, which gave the books a warrant for their publication.

The 1860s, then, saw many medieval accounts of the Grail available for the first time. Meanwhile the Poet Laureate, the re-creator of the Arthurian legends, was unable to accept the spiritual reality of the medieval story and hence unable to write about the Grail.

In a "breath of inspiration," as he himself called it, Tennyson found, after ten years, a way to incorporate the Grail story into his *Idylls*. He

focused, not on the Grail, but on the questers. And his idyll of "The Holy Grail" was destined to reshape modern appreciation of the Grail.

Malory's account of the Grail quest is a study of human attempts to accept the call of Christ and repudiate the ways of the world. Although one hundred and fifty knights leave the court, only three attain the vision of the Grail: Galahad, Percivale, and Bors. Malory focuses on the purity of these men, their worthiness for the quest, and their response to the gift of divine grace.

For Tennyson, the Grail quest is important only as it shows the responses of individuals to the spiritual realm. "Faith declines," Tennyson commented on his age and his Grail poem; "Religion in many turns from practical goodness to the quest after the supernatural and marvelous and selfish religious excitement. Few are those for whom the quest is a source of spiritual strength."⁵ The poem, narrated by Percivale, is Percivale's tragedy, even though he is ignorant of this. Asked to be a leader in a foreign realm, "to be as Arthur" as one character says to him, Percivale madly follows the Grail. And his quest becomes little more than self-exploration. He fails to realize that such a vision is a divine gift, as Tennyson himself remains quietly skeptical even about this gift.

Tennyson created a new Grail by offering a new shape to its story. His treatment, which he thought would appeal to and be representative of the Victorian temper, did not always meet with enthusiasm from his contemporary writers. George Meredith wrote to a friend: "Alack, the *Holy Grail*. Did you ever read such lines? The Poet rolls them out like half yards of satin. They look and taste cud-chewn. The figures are Dresden China. If he has hit the mind of his age, as it seems, the age too has hit him and knocked spontaneity out of him" (1:406). But Meredith was right: Tennyson had touched the mind of his age, which his Grail story reflected.

The many new editions and abridgements of Malory that followed the success of Tennyson's *Idylls* usually acknowledge Tennyson's authority. Many of them reprint only those passages from Malory that were immediate sources for Tennyson's poetry. And some condense or dismiss Malory's long Grail section as unnecessary for a full appreciation of Arthurian literature.

Tennyson was that seminal nineteenth-century figure who changed the approach to, and understanding of, the Grail, and we are still his progeny. Only now we treat the story, as the films prove, showing little understanding of the medieval versions, and not even showing the reverence Tennyson feared might be absent in modern treatments of the subject.

Yet the Grail story and its cinematic appearances suggest an avenue into Arthurian legends: not necessarily courses in the Grail, but perhaps studies that introduce students to some dimensions of the pre-Tennysonian Grail story. Is there a better way to understand myth than to watch such a revered story unfold, develop, even contradict itself?

In the 1180s, Chrétien de Troyes introduced the story of the Grail into written literature. In his account, a young innocent knight named Percival sees brought into a hall a grail, a dish usually used in the serving of fish. It is a grail, a common serving dish, and it contains food to sustain the Fisher King. From this humble beginning, writers create the stuff that dreams and myths are made of. Soon it will become a cup used at a table. Later it will become a chalice, sometimes used by Christ at the Last Supper, sometimes also used by Joseph of Arimathea to collect the dripping blood from the crucified Christ. In Malory, it becomes synonymous with the beatific vision.

And sometimes, for people such as Indiana Jones, the Grail story is simply a bedtime story, a mere fable, a form which Chrétien de Troyes despised so much.

One remaining cinematic treatment of the Grail provides an appropriate conclusion to a survey of the Grail in contemporary cinema. In 1978 Eric Rohmer brought out *Perceval Le Gallois*. Highly stylized, as medieval as the illuminations that seem one of its sources, the film tells the story of the Grail just as the earliest written medieval account did, for Rohmer's text is nothing less than Chrétien's own romance. And since Chrétien never finished his romance, Rohmer provides his own ending. As Chrétien's Perceval sees the band of penitents praying on Good Friday, so too does Rohmer's Perceval. But then, in an astonishing moment, Rohmer's protagonist suffers the Passion of Christ in a mystic re-enactment of the Crucifixion. The blood spurts out as the nails pierce his hands and his feet, and Perceval comes to know the ultimate and transcendent truth of the spiritual reality of the Grail.

In the world of contemporary film, Rohmer provides the one direct entrance into the medieval story of the Grail and a startling contrast to the varieties of grails that appear in the necessarily post-Tennysonian cinema of the last fifteen years.

⁵For these and other observations by Tennyson on his age and its faithlessness, see Staines 64-78; 149-55.

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Contemporary Medievalism as a Teaching Tool

Lee Ann Tobin

Teachers of medieval literature often complain that students lack background for their courses. While their complaint is shared by teachers of all literary periods and of other disciplines as well, medieval scholars have a particularly large gap to close between their subject matter and their students' knowledge. Today's students of medieval literature face unfamiliar genres, hard-to-recognize religious beliefs, alien philosophies, and mysteriously-structured social systems. And few of them come to college with any formal background about the medieval world.

However, a large proportion—at some schools, almost all—of students come to college with informal background knowledge about the Middle Ages because they have seen movies or, less often, read books that depict the period. Because this knowledge comes from mass culture, many professors fear that it may be too inaccurate to use; some simply disdain it. On political, psychological, and practical grounds, I would like to suggest some reasons for overcoming such fears and prejudices; further, I would like to offer preliminary suggestions for incorporating contemporary medievalism into already-crowded curricula.

First, since popular medievalism may be students' only information about the medieval period, for their teachers to deprecate or ignore such knowledge reinforces the notion that students are ignorant and the professor is knowledgeable, students are empty and the professor is full, and students are inadequate while the professor is capable. This scenario is one that still pervades the academic mindset for students and teachers alike; however, more and more educators, particularly from liberal, Marxist and feminist schools of thought, are offering convincing arguments for the dysfunctional nature of such notions. Paulo Freire calls it "banking education" (*Pedagogy* 63-68), meaning the traditional idea of student as an empty account into which deposits of knowledge are to be made, and he says that "its focus is fundamentally to kill our curiosity, our inquisitive spirit, and our creativity" (*Politics* 2). Feminist educators argue that such practices can actually inhibit intellectual development in learners who are not self-confident, a definition that encompasses nearly all female undergraduates and a sizeable proportion of male undergraduates as well (Belenky 214-229). Most teachers do not want to simply open students' minds and pour the

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