

The Medieval Period, Day Twenty-Two

Grail Fever

Desperately Seeking...Something

Why are quests, the subject of medieval romances, so significant to Western culture even today?

(in other words, what does the grail quest have in common with such modern instances as

Lord of the Rings, Star Trek, and

Saving Private Ryan?)



What is the Grail?



- Sources include the *Queste del Sainte Graal*, c. 1220

Why are Eucharistic vessels becoming of more interest at this point in time?

- What did the grail symbolize to Malory in his time? Is this about the denial or the fulfillment of desire? (576, 582-3)

Rood screens, chancel (*cancelli*, lattice bars), nave (*navis*, ship, 559)



Romancing the past

■ What were the values of Malory's audience?

What else was popular in manuscripts?

What was Caxton's printed book market like in the late fifteenth century?

How does Caxton present the text in his preface?
(p. 814-818)

“knyghtly dedys and vertuous lyving”

- How are action and virtue interlinked?

Miles Christi, seven corporal acts of mercy, doctrine of penance

- Why is the figure of Lancelot especially important to both the relation and the conflict of the Christian and the chivalric codes? (e.g. 543, see comparison Grail narrative)
- How does the nature of virtue change according to gender?

Percival's cross-dressing demon lover (530-1)

Percival's drained and bald sister (564, 567, 572)

Visions of Division

■ Society vs. Individual

communal ethos in conflict spiritual self-awareness, conflicting definitions of kinship (522, 548) and “unkindly war” (556), Lyonell and Bors, also Gawain and Uwayne (540-1), like Balan and Balyn

■ Grail as healer, Grail as destroyer: holy vs. whole?

Earthly wholeness, holy division (502)

open wounds and making whole (518, 524, 585)

■ Multiplying Symbolic Binaries

Lancelot/Galahad, sex/virginity, sickness/health, this world/divine world; men/women; action/contemplation

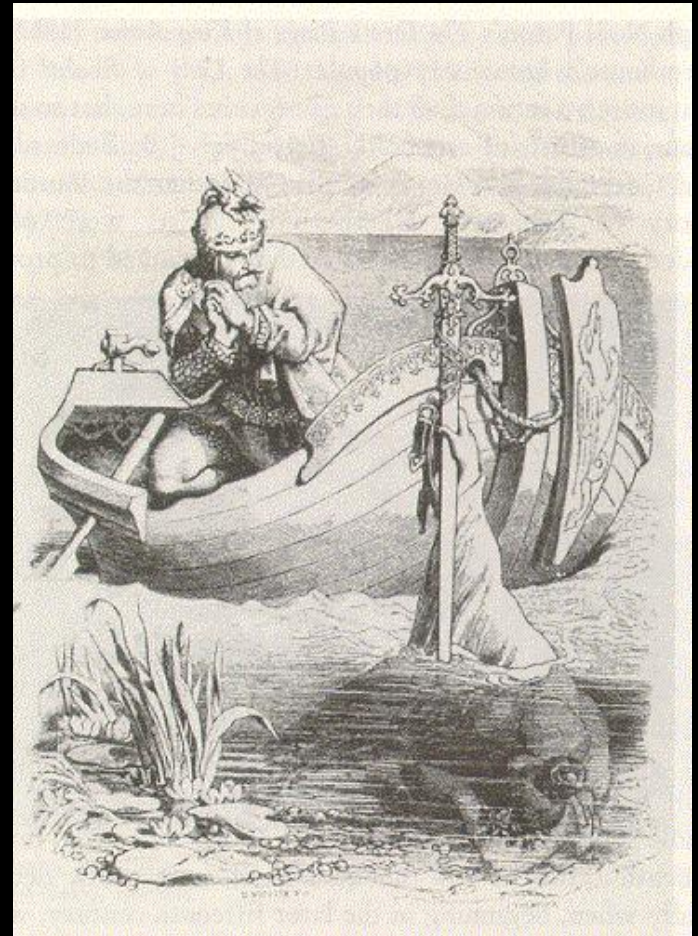
The Symbolic Landscape

- At times, it seems that the characters are moving across a textual page as much as any other setting—they are always reading signs at crossroads, on chairs, on tombs, on ships, on swords, even on foreheads (582).
- Who are the characters who interpret this landscape for the readers/characters of the narrative? What enables them to do this? Why is the ‘good man’ on 549-50 so disturbing?

Visions and the Verbal

Compare the text and images of different aspects of Arthurian legend—What is the same? What is added or lost? How would you illustrate the text? Which scenes would you choose to illustrate?

A. Arthur and Excalibur



B. The Lady of the Lake

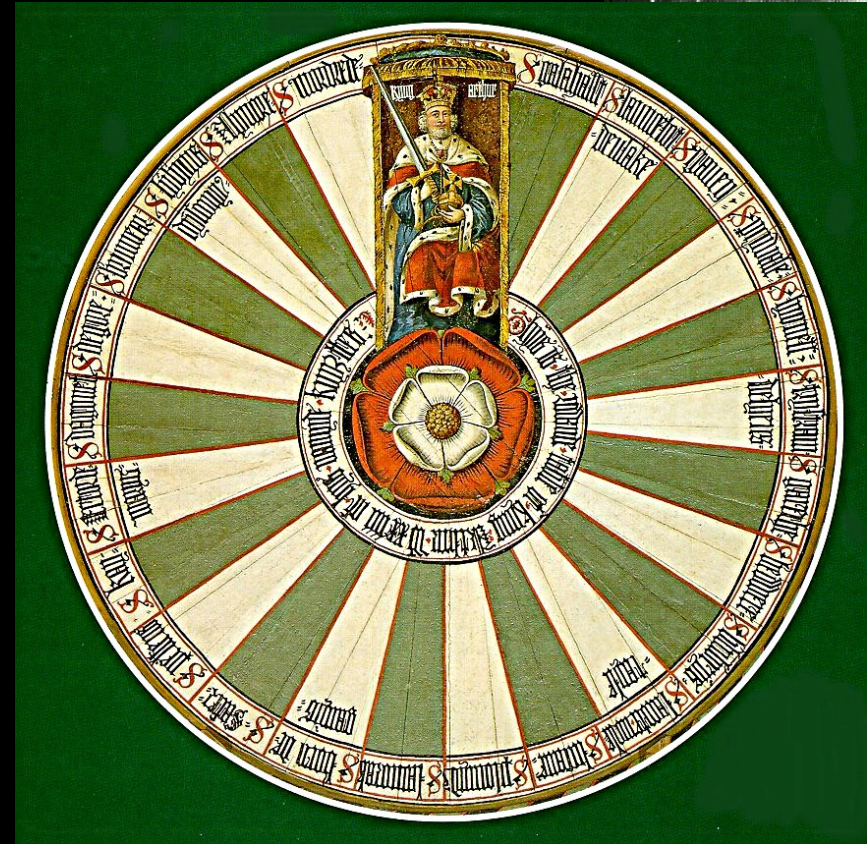


C. The Grail



D. More Grail





Next Class: The Death of Arthur

- Look at the different accounts of Arthur's death
- How does his death compare with other knights'?

