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## The discovery of Merlin's spirit within the trinity of Robert de Boron's *Le Roman de L'estorie dou Graal*

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THE DISCOVERY OF MERLIN'S SPIRIT WITHIN THE TRINITY  
OF ROBERT DE BORON'S *LE ROMAN DE L'ESTORIE DOU GRAAL*

A Thesis

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BY

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## Introduction

Early in the twelfth century, Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote about the character of Myrddin from ancient Welsh verse in his *Vita Merlini*. He highlights some of Myrddin's legendary characteristics through his dialog with others, most often with the majestic poet Taliesin. Separately, he builds on other sources to develop Myrddin into a more modern, twelfth-century Merlin in *The History of the Kings of Britain*. Merlin is a character that our author, Robert de Boron, chooses to orchestrate events in the central portion of his only known literary work, *The Romance of the History of the Grail*, a trilogy written in France at the end of the twelfth century. In Robert's characterization of Merlin, the impish streak that he retains in his personality is legitimate. Robert's rationale in reaching back to include nuances of the Welsh Myrddin of legend stems from his choice to humanize his main character even though his role is that of a divinity. Stanley M. Burgess (1997) explains that a change occurred in Catholic scholastics in the eleventh century which singled out the Holy Spirit's work in Christian life; he calls this the "Age of the Spirit" (2). By the end of the twelfth century, though, the tide had shifted again, pulling back to the "triune nature of God and a Trinity defined as a single 'community of love'" (3). Robert writes in the midst of this transition as indicated by his emphasis on both the communication methods of the Holy Spirit and the work of the Trinity especially through Merlin's role. Robert selects Merlin to orchestrate the preparations for the arrival of the new Grail Keeper of the hallowed relic of the Last Supper that originates in part one, the *Joseph*. Robert also appoints Merlin as his co-author of sorts because, based on Merlin's mythical character with supernatural gifts and his subsequent evolution into the Christian faith, Merlin is the perfect candidate to facilitate the safety of the vessel holding Christ's Blood. Merlin carries within him a spiritual wisdom that reaches back to early man,

allowing him to function not just as a representative of the Holy Trinity, but as one who displays the powers of that divine union.

## Part One: Myrddin

To comprehend the complexity of the Merlin who emerges in Robert's trilogy, *Le Roman de l'estorie dou Graal*, it must be noted that it is impossible to define the true character of Merlin. In our modern time, it is not easy to shake off his Disney image, a white-bearded wizard donning a blue star-studded robe and conical hat. In medieval literature, he is known for mocking cameo appearances, playing the role of a prankster or one who adds comical emphasis to an ironic scene. It is in early Welsh verse, some claim with origins as early as the eighth century, however, where the core of Merlin's natural characteristics and magical talents begin to reveal themselves. His powers to levitate or maintain invisibility are not flaunted in these early days and can even be overlooked on a first read. These extant Welsh verses hold the heart of Merlin, then Myrddin, a sensitive Christian soul who laments the death of his loved ones and fears the might of his enemies, a softer side of his character often subordinated by his emergence in later literature as a scamp. This first section of the paper is intended to explore the researched history of Merlin's character to approach Robert's work with a broad concept of the Merlin that Robert chose as his narrator. A. O. H. Jarman (1959) is correct in claiming that Merlin was destined "to be drawn into the Arthurian orbit" (20), especially when considering his prominent role in Robert's Grail story. Continuous and developing legends about his person established a character seemingly like no other and for this reason Merlin held a certain enticement for a storyteller looking for the perfect voice. Robert's requirements would be stringent, for his candidate must be one who experienced authentic human emotions and was not bound by traditional social restraints. He must have prescient powers of a supreme being and a stalwart commitment to protect the Grail and its aura of sacred Trinitarian grace. For a twelfth-century romance writer with a plan, Merlin's history provided unending potential.

The medieval legends of Merlin's ancestral beginnings provide diverse details of his developing nature while they combine to form some central characteristics that fit adeptly into the Merlin that Robert would need to achieve the goal of his romance. It was in the Irish battle of Moira, in 637, Nora Chadwick and Myles Dillon (2003) report, where Merlin's character became enshrined in the tradition that identifies him as Suibne Geilt, an Irish king of *Dál nAraide* who after the battle became known as "Sweeney the Mad" because he "lost his reason in the din of battle" (81). Jarman (1959) describes the cause of his breakdown and subsequent display of a magical ability explaining, Suibne Geilt killed a cleric before the battle; thus, "terror and madness seized him, and he flew through the air like a bird," ultimately settling in the forest atop a yew tree, but upon hearing "the tumult of a great army he [. . .] ascended toward the rainclouds of the firmament" (27). The ability to levitate is only assigned to the legendary Irish rendering of Myrddin, yet the event is important as early recorded evidence of this supernatural power.

Suibne Geilt is a name used only in Irish legend; in Scotland the legend of the man who turned to the wild is named Lailoken, but when the tale migrated to Wales during the seventh or eighth century, Jarman (1959) explains that the name Myrddin most likely evolved out of the place-name Caer-fryddin, using the second half of the name, which transformed into Mryddin (29).

The complexities within Myrddin's nature spill from several prophetic medieval Welsh poems ascribed to Myrddin's authorship, which not only exemplify a tender, human side of his character, but also depict his magical talents that seem to hone themselves over time. Because Myrddin recounts recent tragic events, his verse is often laden with a desperate tone as he laments his fate. Chadwick and Dillon (2003) introduce perhaps the best example of Myrddin's narration in the Welsh version of the *Afallenau* (Apple Tree), which brings him to reflect on the

battle of Arfderydd (Arthuret), near Carlisle, in which his king Gwenddoleu was slain by the hand of Rhydderch (81). Jarman (1959) explains the modern belief that “the crystallization of much early Welsh legend into verse form occurred during the ninth century and it is possible that between 850 and 1050 a poem on the Myrddin legend was composed of which these stanzas [from the *Afallenau*] are a remnant” (20-21). The date of this battle “given in the *Annales Cambriae* is 573” (Jarman 23). Because of this battle, add Chadwick and Dillon, “Myrddin lost his wits” and for years lived in the wild forest of Celyddon in Scotland (81). Various remnants of his verse are indicative of a man who has assigned to himself the blame for not adequately defending his king.

Jarman (1959) introduces three surviving verses from *Afallenau* where Myrddin laments the tragedy of the battle and his fear that the huntsman, Rhydderch, will find him hiding in the forest:

Sweet-apple tree which grows in a glade,  
 Its peculiar power hides it from the men of Rhydderch;  
 A crowd by its trunk, a host around it,  
 It would be a treasure for them, brave men in their ranks.  
 Now Gwenddydd loves me not and does not greet me  
 — I am hated by Gwasawg, the supporter of Rhydderch —  
 I have killed her son and her daughter.  
 Death has taken everyone, why does it not call me?  
 For after Gwenddolau no lord honors me,  
 Mirth delights me not, no woman visits me;  
 And in the battle of Arfderydd my torque was of gold  
 Though today I am not treasured by one of the colour of swans. (21)

Immediately, Myrddin presents himself as one with nature. He speaks with tender kindness to the apple tree of the forest as “sweet” and “gentle.” As one who has become a legendary wild man of the forest, he lives in a tree that is invisible—he acknowledges its “peculiar power,” which protects Myrddin from the enemy he fears. It is not made clear if Myrddin holds any agency for the tree’s magical ability, but the implication cannot be ignored. Through conjecture, it seems

Myrddin must lament his inability to protect his king in war, as he tries to ease the pain with memories of wearing a torque “of gold” to perhaps recall his noble rank or valor in battle before Gwenddolau’s fall. His manifest suffering is made palpable by the discernable despondence in his tone; his existence is smothered by the weight of these conditions. The second stanza elaborates on the former and therefore clarifies relationships:

Sweet-apple tree with gentle flowers  
 Which grows hidden in the woodlands;  
 I have heard tidings since early in the day  
 That Gwasawg the supporter of \_\_\_\_\_ has been angered,  
 Twice, thrice, four times in one day.  
 O Jesus! would that my death had come  
 Before I became guilty of the death of the son of Gwenddydd. (21)

We now learn that Gwenddolau is his nephew—a gut-wrenching realization; the enormity of Myrddin’s guilt and misery is now more fully grasped. The *Cyofesi*, subsequently explained in more detail, reports Gwenddydd as Myrddin’s sister. He lives in hiding, seemingly in constant high alert, worried that he will be discovered. It is from within this type of frenzied condition, claim Chadwick and Dillon (2003), that Myrddin acquired the gift of prophecy (270). Most of all, this section shows Myrddin to be an early believer in Christ, an early disciple who will grow into a strong advocate for Christianity and who will be ready when Robert needs his service. The third stanza delves further into the heart of Myrddin:

Sweet-apply tree with gentle flowers  
 The steward, approaching it, will not succeed in obtaining its fine fruit;  
 While I was in my right mind I used to have at its foot  
 A fair wanton maiden, one slender and queenly.  
 For ten and forty years, in the wretchedness of outlawry,  
 I have been wandering with madness and madmen.  
 After goodly possessions and pleasing minstrels  
 Now I suffer want with madness and madmen.  
 Now I sleep not, I tremble for my lord,  
 My sovereign Gwenddolau, and my fellow-countrymen.  
 After enduring sickness and grief in the Forest of Celyddon  
 May I be received into bliss by the Lord of Hosts. (Jarman 1959, 21)



Myrddyn's emotional disposition is now emphasized. While he reiterates his grave situation, he presents a wider lens for his audience enabling us to view his life with other men of the woods and does so with a self-disparaging tone. He ends with a prayer for his own swift death, followed by a frequently used biblical reference to God, "Lord of Hosts" (See Samuel 1:3). Yet despite Myrddin's forlorn mood, for the third time he emphasizes his ability to remain hidden, and in this instance emits a sense of complacency about his skill. This flash of insight into his nature offers a preview of the plucky persona of the future Merlin, a rather endearing quality of his personality, once one gets to know him.

Over time, Myrddin develops from the somewhat tenuous spirit shown in the *Afallenau*. For example, Jarman (1959) references the *Cyfoesi*, a long poem, consisting mainly of vaticinations which span the space of six or seven centuries, composed near the time of the *Afallenau* (21). Almost the entire poem, explains Jarman, "is in the form of questions and answers, with "Myrddin uttering the prophecies in reply to Gwenddydd's interrogations" (24). The interesting part here is the development of Myrddin's personality when comparing the *Afallenau* and the *Cyfoesi* because in the latter poem Myrddin and Gwenddydd "share amity and concord" (21). In the *Cyfoesi*, Jarman emphasizes Myrddin as an "altogether more dignified figure" (24), which foreshadows the way the character of Myrddin will be viewed over time; Myrddin is no longer tormented by fear of Rhydderch and, in fact, he even prophesies the time of Rhydderch's death. Through the centuries, the visionary and magical traits illustrated in these early poems foreshadow the "Merlin to be" after the adaptations of Geoffrey merge with Robert's ideas in his *Le Roman de l'estorie dou Graal*. Robert's Merlin will continue to live in isolation; he will suffer—greatly; he will hone his ties to the mystical and natural world including the gift of prophecy; he will continue to possess an established confidence and an air of

authority; he will continue to be the narrator of his words; and he will grow more dignified over time. Most of all, his commitment to the grace of Jesus Christ through his work in the name of the Holy Trinity will become the unwavering focus of his literary life.

Viewing Merlin's character at a glance, one might naturally dismiss his early development as having a meager influence in the ancient society of his origin, especially considering the early verses which depict the limitations on his lifestyle, ostracized into the life of a fugitive who seeks refuge in the forest. Typically, it is in a forest setting where Merlin eventually shows himself, appearing in cameo roles in a medieval saga or romance. But Peter H. Goodrich (2003) claims that the roots of Merlin's legend "predate any historical person, since they derive from the Indo-European type of priest-king, the shaman or the holy man, the convention of the wild man, the model of the biblical prophets, and the widespread conviction that natural and supernatural elements can intermingle in the physical world" (3). Jean Markale (2003) agrees and points to "the enormity of Merlin's part as a prophet," as he is one who "has the task of enlightening humans concerning their destiny" (410). Markale then brings his ideas closer to Merlin's home, to the Celtic druids. Using Roman documentation, partly from Julius Caesar's views found in his memoirs, *On the Gallic Wars*, even as early as the first century CE, C. Scott Littleton (2005) explains that "druids wielded enormous influence in Celtic culture"; they were both "religious and judicial leaders, political advisers to the kings, and teachers of the Celtic young" (436). Indeed, Littleton adds that the word "druid" means "knowing the oak tree" (436). Living in the forest like the druids or shamans, the legendary Myrddin has control over the elements as seen by the invisibility of his "Sweet apple tree." Viewing Myrddin's abilities at an even higher level, Markale calls him a "*demiurge*," a heavenly being, a controller of the natural world, a creator (413). But Paul Zumthor (2003) resists the idea that Myrddin "might have been

represented as other than a prophet”; however, his depiction of a prophet is limited for he adds that “Geoffrey is allegedly the first to have attributed magical powers to” Myrddin (132). While Zumthor apparently dismisses the mystical abilities shown in the legends, he does acknowledge that sorcery was a topic of discussion among clerics like Robert at the turn of the century (134). Markale is more intuitive to Myrddin’s eventual purpose when compared with Jarman’s view. Thus, when Markale goes so far as to equate Myrddin with an “Irish *Dagda*—a ruler over the animals who can take on their forms,” or “symbolize ascent, [. . .] not bound by time and space because he is himself at once past, present, and future,” it seems as though he just finished a re-reading of Robert’s romance (415). There is no way of knowing exactly what Geoffrey or Robert knew about shamans or druids or the Celtic *Dagda* as they wrote in the twelfth century, but as literary men, it would be surprising if they were not aware of their practices. For Robert, who desired to advance the significance of a Christian Grail to his audience, Myrddin’s more developed legendary persona would bring a deep sense of authority to Robert’s position.

## Part Two: Sacred Vessels

Robert's title for his twelfth-century romance, *The Romance of the History of the Grail*, begs for exploration into the nature of the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper. Thus, during my research of sacred vessels, an unexpected development revealed itself. It was personally astounding to discover the ubiquity of cauldrons and other kettles used in ancient ceremonies and myths, many offering an opportunity at rebirth and others possessing the agency to choose which hero or worshiper was worthy to eat or drink from the container. Richard Barber (2004) interprets French writer René Guénon who developed an idea in relation to the Grail that "folklore may contain fragments [. . .] of things which, [. . .] 'are not even human in origin'" because when studying commonalities in symbols, Guénon saw a "body of pre-Christian learning based on initiation rites, which is neither Celtic, nor Oriental, nor pagan in origin, but stems from the lost universal 'primordial Tradition'" (304). Barber explains that this "tradition stems from a 'universal revelation' in the earliest days of mankind from which all the great religions of the world stem" (304). This discovery is both profound and fitting, especially when compared to the Grail depicted by Robert in his romance, which holds the Blood of Jesus Christ and chooses who is devoted enough to share the daily hallowed meal. The examination of these ancient ties will show the impact of these primeval relics in forming our more current history of the Christianized Grail.

Ages before the time of Robert de Boron, before Myrddin made his home in the Celyddon Forests of Scotland, an idea was forming within mythological and spiritual belief systems of people. The idea must have emerged from an innate, sapient need to interact at some level with their creator. Vital to the process was a fact: food sustains life; therefore, spiritual sustenance was tied to food, often given by the gods in abundance. Tales of vessels developed

long before the time of Christ. In those prehistoric days, the first cooking vessels made from tree bark or clay provided a basic but wonderful tool for roasting or boiling food, which Richard Wrangham (2009) tells us was the impetus toward the development of a human's larger brain about half a million years ago (113-14). Breaking down the raw structure of meat during cooking allowed for less chewing and easier digestion, claims Wrangham, which provided the needed metabolic energy for people to think and led to the progression of advanced intelligence (114). Considering the life-giving sustenance cauldrons provided, it would be natural for our forefathers to assign a spiritual presence to these vessels as well; ancient societies eventually used sacred pots as a type of physical connection to the mystical concept of a god, an ethereal presence deserving of worship.

Exploring the import of these vessels by using remnants of pre-historic carvings and ancient legends recognizes a sturdy and profound thread that links ancient societies and the depth of their spiritual mysteries to like beliefs at the heart of the Christian faith as depicted by Robert in *Le Roman de l'estorie dou Graal*. It seems right, then, for Robert to pepper his Grail story with characters embedded in ancient legend. Robert's perception of the Trinity transcends the methods of the ancients presented in this section, most profoundly through the noticeable presence of the Holy Spirit, who reaches out to those who acknowledge the creator with a sudden waft of reassurance. Robert tacitly pulls in these revelations of the ancients, building a similar story of spiritual communion. He makes the connection to the past and in doing so is able to manifest an appropriate and entertaining Christian version for his twelfth-century audience.

According to Heinrich Zimmer (2003), "the growth of northern Europe's pagan religions was arrested in its prime when their practitioners came under the sway of Christianity; pre-Christian mythology, despoiled of its cult and ritual, was transformed into legend and poetry"

and became secularized (265). But while Zimmer lauds the primeval supremacy of nature and the “ecstasy of the instincts and of the unconscious” elements that embody those rituals (277), it is this same thread of mysticism, of visceral understanding, that Robert relies upon as the influence of the Christian Trinity—the foundation of the *Joseph* and the driving force in the *Merlin* and the *Perceval*. Robert’s trilogy holds more than a confirmation of the Trinity, for his work also awakens a primordial nerve by touching on the core of what makes us both physical and spiritual beings.

Robert acknowledges the importance of early mystical legends through his many allusions inherently built into the Christian belief system. Several ancient cultures, claims John Matthews (2006), “held the idea that the elements of creation were mixed by the gods in a great vessel before being poured forth to form the cosmos” (17). One of those vessels was called “the Krater,” and Matthews includes Plato’s version of that vessel, which describes the process: “[. . .] and once more into the cup in which [the creator] had previously mingled the soul of the universe he poured the remains of the elements and mingled them in much the same manner; [. . .] and he divided the whole mixture into souls equal in number to the stars and assigned each soul to a star [. . .] and they would hereafter be called Man” (18). Matthews contends that Plato’s description gives credence to the reason Robert’s Grail holds so much impact over time—he claims it is “literally the womb from which we issued” (18). Legends, even beyond the Celtic Realm, point to the presence of God, for Robert, the Trinity, since the beginning of time. Burgess references one mid-twelfth century Scottish theologian, Richard of St. Victor, who defines the Holy Spirit as the “creative force of the universe” and claims that “the whole Trinity operates through the Holy Spirit” (66). Richard of St. Victor’s theology would seem to have influenced a young Robert de Boron who designed his work around the triune nature of God.

In our modern day, when scholars search far into the past for tales of vessels that meet what Matthews calls “the Grail test,” the mythology surrounding each container must be examined fully to determine if it meets the following four criteria: The vessel must first be viewed as more than a dish used for an average meal and “more than a sacred object”; the container must somehow originate directly from a “divine source and serve as a medium by which humans can draw close to the deity” (15). Additionally, Matthews’ test demands that the contents of the vessel must be more important than the vessel itself. And finally, the vessel must hold the power to “transform those who come into its presence” (16). Only a container that meets these high standards qualifies it to be studied further as a precursor for the Grail story.

It was once typical for archeologists to search native lands for artifacts of indigenous people, but as studies expanded to include migration patterns, they naturally found that when societies were uprooted, they brought along their ritual ceremonies, eventually spreading and evolving into other religious ideologies originating in their new homeland. Maybe because of Britain’s insular detachment from the mainland, the Celtic people held the notion that their heritage would remain pure, but that line of thinking is somewhat contradicted by Littleton and Malcor (1994) who acknowledge that when it comes to legends and folklore, the islands have maintained a purity of origin only to a point (216). When speaking of specific legendary battles or tales of magical bards, any competition beyond the island is thin if existent at all; however, with regard to religious or spiritual beliefs, the many similarities between Britain and lands to the Far East can raise eyebrows.

While Irish sagas and Welsh poems readily reference spiritual connections with magical cauldrons or mystical vessels, Littleton and Malcor claim that “those very same motifs can be found in folkloric narratives worldwide” (216). From the Vedic traditions of ancient India, for

example, Matthews (2006) makes reference to a divine drink called “soma” held by the gods in a huge mythological vessel, which appeared in legend as far back as 2000 BCE (19). Soma was known as “the milk from heaven” and was “viewed in a similar fashion to the gift of fire from Prometheus” because a container of soma, not always in the form of a liquid, was also stolen by a god, Agni, from its sacred resting place to enhance the lives of his people (19). Matthews adds that when consumed, Soma produced a “mild euphoria said to be ‘more than the comfort of strength but less than intoxication’”; Annwn similarly, the belief system regarding soma is such that to “partake of it is to partake of the substance of life itself” (19-20). Comparatively, receiving the Christian Eucharist has also been asserted to elevate the connection between man and God. In documented stories about the Italian born St. Francis of Assisi, whom Markale (2003) considers “the last druid,” Burgess (1997) includes a report from Saint Bonaventure (ca.1217-74) who claims that when Francis received the Eucharist, he reacted “as if he were drunk in the Spirit: His heart was expanded, and he saw what would occur for him and his followers in the future” (74). Likewise, Burgess shows that eating the Christian Eucharist taken from a sanctified chalice provides what Saint Catherine of Siena (ca. 1347-80) called, “the divine light of the Trinity.” In this state she knew the effect of the entire Trinity’s presence: the warmth and light of the Spirit, the light and wisdom of the Son, and the power and strength of the Father” (114). Saint Catherine’s corresponding reactions to her spiritual bond with the Trinity reinforce legends from any nation in any time that depict a similar tangible human interaction with God after eating from a numinous vessel. Even though people have evolved some and brought about technological advancements that would stun our ancient forefathers, the essential human need for engaging spiritual fulfillment seems to have remained the same.



The analogous nature of soma and the Christian Eucharist are somewhat startling, for Matthews (2006) explains that in some versions of the Indian legend, soma is a living being who must be “sacrificed and consumed or is a king who lives in a castle from which he must be symbolically released” (19). The wounded Fisher King who first appears in Chrétien de Troyes’ *Perceval*, later named Bron in Robert’s *Joseph*, waits in the Grail castle for the next keeper of the Grail to release him from his duty comes immediately to mind here (141, 155). In addition, the tales of soma directly link to the crucifixion of Christ and the subsequent establishment of Holy Communion whereby bread and wine symbolize Christ’s presence, transforming into his body and blood respectively during this part of the mass.

One of the most sacred moments in Robert’s *Joseph* is after Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea remove Jesus from the cross and Joseph collects Jesus’s Blood in the chalice of the Last Supper, forming a source of grace for Christ’s followers. The concept, however, is not a new one. For example, in one prehistoric Norse tale, Morgan Giles (2005) shares how after a young god, Kvasir, is murdered, his blood is caught in two jars and mixed with honey in a vessel, which emulsifies into “furiously roaring inspiration” (26-27). A quest ensues with Odin searching for the resulting mead mixture, and his eventual success results in bringing inspiration to poets (27). The divine blood gives authority and significance to the contents of the vessel, a concept that carries forth into Christian liturgy.

Referencing more recent history of Britain, Littleton and Malcor (1994) learn through their research that the Sarmatians, a people from an area near the Black Sea, held a belief in a sacred vessel as well. In 175 C. E., the Sarmatians were defeated by the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (18). One of the terms for peace required 5,500 troops from a Sarmatian tribe called the Narts to be “sent to Britain, most of whom were sent to the garrisons along Hadrian’s Wall” in

the far north, and with this influx of the Narts into northern Britain, came their myths that included “the Nartamonga, a cauldron-like vessel that would cook only food for heroes” (18, 24). Not only does this reference foreshadow the Arthurian saga “The Spoils of Annwn,” it also indicates how this early vessel had the agency to decide which man was a hero, agency that is a condition of “The Grail Test.” Littleton and Malcor explain how “this Cup of the Narts magically elevates itself to the lips of the hero who is above reproach, a hero without flaw” (221). Over time, the Narts assimilated into Britain’s population, a merging which Markale (1983b) describes as a “fifth-century synthesis of ‘oriental cults,’ druidism, and Roman traditions” (translated in Littleton and Malcor 1994, 27). Linda A. Peterson explains that a different tribe of nomads from the steppes of Central Asia, the Alans, invaded Gaul early in the third century (28). Littleton and Malcor suggest that “given their affinity for telling stories about the importance of cups in the Alanic religion, and the extent of the Alanic influence on the church of Gaul, the chances are good that Robert de Boron may have had an Alanic source for his grail material as well” (233). In fact, they add that over time, the Alans temporarily settled near the Rhine a few different times and consequently encountered Burgundians, the people of Robert’s eventual home (233). This influence may explain Robert’s choosing Bron’s son, Alain, as the father of the third keeper of the Grail at the end of Robert’s *Joseph*. The human connectedness to all people through spiritual ritual tends to confirm the existence of God regardless of the specific name used to identify the spiritual being. In Robert’s trilogy, his focus never veers from portraying this spiritual import in receiving the blessing of the Grail and communicating its spiritual hope. The ancient universal need for a connection to God suggests that for Robert, his twelfth-century audience would be receptive to the call.

It would seem then, that societies from other parts of the world have had great influence on the legends of Britain, especially regarding the central role that sacred containers have played in building religious belief systems. There are a few legendary vessels that hold the capacity to restore the dead back to life or to enact some type of rebirth, which if viewed metaphorically, the Christian Grail situates itself into this category. Matthews (2006) points to the Gunderstrup Cauldron which was discovered in a Danish bog in 1891, but with a date of origin after 120 BCE” (21). Guiles (2005) describes its “illustrative mouldings” that “show an antlered god surrounded by animals” (12). Besides the obvious druid-like connection to Myrddin of medieval Welsh verse, Guiles claims the artwork on this kettle “could represent a shamanic figure communicating with the spirits of the natural world” (12). The most compelling news is Guiles’ proposition that the vessel depicts “dead warriors who may be waiting to be brought back to life by the horned Celtic god Cernunnos,” who is shown sitting among the forest animals holding a torque in one hand and a snake in the other (12). Giles suggests “by dipping [the dead warriors] headfirst in his vessel they can be re-born” (12-13). He alludes to a recurring theme of re-birth in both pagan and Christian cultures, and if he is correct, the Gunderstrup Cauldron held the means to provide a divine experience, but it broaches into a higher level of grail sophistication when he proposes the container can bring the dead to life. But several other Celtic tales also claim the same power of renewal, echoing many of the properties later attributed to the cup of the Last Supper. Robert’s romance is filled with examples of new life, because despite all of the forward action, the focus remains consistently on the Grail.

The decidedly imaginative Celtic tale of the great Welsh bard Talieson’s birth through rebirth holds shamanic influence in its shape-shifting that alludes to Robert’s Merlin. It gives another example of the uplifting potential of new beginnings provided by a charmed vessel. The

high-spirited, comical tale, “The Cauldron of Ceridwen,” is a prose piece found in *The Mabinogion*, a collection of Welsh tales found in several medieval manuscripts and translated by Lady Charlotte Guest (2017), the plot involves Ceridwen, a Celtic female deity, who rules over harvests, pigs, and divine inspiration (222-223). The tale opens with a problem. Ceridwen’s son, Gwion, has a revolting physical appearance. Thus, his mother-god, Ceridwen decides to use her magical vessel and whip up a special blend that will grant Gwion extreme intelligence so that he might succeed in life despite his physical flaws. A mishap occurs and Gwion ingests three drops of the highly condensed brew of pure wisdom and knowledge. As Ceridwen chases Gwion around the yard in frantic anger, they both shape-shift several times. In Gwion’s final transformation, he converts himself into a grain of wheat, and Ceridwen, in an acute response, shifts herself into a “high-crested black hen” that reacts instinctively and eats the grain of wheat. Nine months later, Talieson, the renowned historical poet is born and proves to be the voice of many legendary poems, and who, John K. Bollard (2013) claims, often extols and demonstrates “his own knowledge” (17). With all the lively action, the significant regenerative quality of the liquid concoction can be easily overlooked along with the divine, which Matthews (2006) claims is at the “heart of the tale” (29). Robert’s Merlin, who has developed both intellectually and spiritually from his shaman-like character in Welsh verse, will nonetheless maintain his shape-shifting abilities while serving a higher purpose in the *Merlin*.

In the legend of Brân the Blessed, also found in *The Mabinogion*, “Brânwen, daughter of Llyr” begins with a cauldron of rebirth as well. Rachel Bromwich (1959) claims Brân, or “raven,” is a common epithet for a warrior, and it occurs as a proper name in Ireland as well as in Wales” (50). She adds that “a succession of scholars are agreed” that this legend of Brân introduces the “prototype of Bron, the Fisher King” in Robert’s romance section of the *Joseph*

(50). In a complicated plot where “a tumult arose,” Brân the Blessed, King of Britain, loses a battle with the Irish at his sister Brânwen’s wedding; they lose because each time an Irish warrior is slain, the warrior is dipped into a sacred vessel and regains life, ready to fight once more (177-8). During this battle, Bran receives a mortal wound in the foot by a poisoned spear (178). In what is known as one of the “Fortunate Concealments of the Island of Britain,” Brân orders his men to cut off his head and bury it at White Mount in London facing toward France and thus no enemy would ever be able to invade Britain from that direction (180). And the plan works because there were no invasions until, as Bromwich explains, the *Mabinogion* follows up on the burial of Brân’s head with one of the subsequent “Fortunate Disclosures, where Arthur *discloses* the head of Brân the Blessed from the White Hill, since he did not desire that this Island should be guarded by anyone’s strength but his own” (emphasis mine) and, yes, once again, the island is besieged by invaders (45). This news of Arthur’s bravado is relatively disappointing to learn, but the Arthur whom Robert develops will have Merlin at his side to prevent such logistical blunders.

One of the most often referenced Arthurian tales surrounds the Cauldron of Annwn. Littleton and Malcor (1994) have determined that the roots of this vessel’s fame originate in the ancient Northeast Iranian traditions surrounding a magical cup that presents itself only to the “bravest of the brave” (225). Once the story reached Ireland, however, it must have been adapted to fit in with other legends, for Roger Sherman Loomis (1959) explains that a central area in the advancement of Grail legends “lay in Irish sagas, recounting the visits of mortal heroes to the places of pagan gods, where they were feasted sumptuously from vessels of plenty” (294). The poem, “The Spoils of Annwn” according to Bollard (2013), may be from as early as the eighth century but was not discovered until later—closer to the thirteenth century (17, 20). O. J. Padel

(2000) clarifies that the main “purpose of the expedition was to free a prisoner, ‘Gwair,’” also known as Prydwri (35). Matthews (2006) provides two stanzas, below, from a modern rendition of the poem originally from the *Book of Taliesin*: “The Spoils of Annwn” (33-34). Taliesin’s own boastful voice is prominent as he describes Arthur’s tragic venture in his ship Prydwen (“Fair Form”) to raid the Welsh Otherworld and steal the magical cauldron of Pen Annwn. Bollard adds that the reference to “Lleminawg” (“the leaping one”) may be to Arthur (17). While they do rescue Prydwri and secure the vessel, they tragically lose all but seven men during the raid. Taliesin begins:

Since my song resounded in the turning Caer Pedryfan,  
 I am pre-eminent. My first song  
 Was of the Cauldron itself.  
 Nine maidens warmed it with their breath –  
 5 Of what nature was it?  
 Pearls were about its rim,  
 Nor would it boil a coward’s portion.  
 Lleminawg thrust his flashing sword  
 Deep within it;  
 10 And before dark gates, a light was lifted.  
 When we went with Arthur – a mighty labour –  
 Save only seven, none returned from Caer Fedwydd.

Pre-eminent am I  
 Since my song resounded  
 15 In the four-square city,  
 The Island of the Strong Door.  
 The light was dim and mixed with darkness,  
 Though bright wine was set before us.  
 Three shiploads of Prydwen went with Arthur –  
 20 Save only seven, none returned from Caer Rigor

It is not easy to ignore the overreaching tenacity implied in this poem; the intense level of heroic acts to complete such a formidable task despite a distressing loss of men can be read to foreshadow Arthur’s Knights of the Round Table who will pledge their lives to Arthur in a similar fashion once he becomes King of England (111). The poem also “foreshadows the later

chivalric code of the Welsh” suggests Padel, “where aiding those in distress play a prominent role” (35). In line 8 of the poem, Arthur possesses a “flashing sword” which cannot be overlooked. Heinrich Zimmer (2003) references Robert’s *Merlin* and young Arthur’s ability to pull the sword easily from an anvil embedded in stone, seemingly God-given, “a blessed gift as a sign of favor from the supernatural powers” and confirming his right to the throne (270). The achievement must have some history, and it does in Alanic tradition; Littleton and Malcor explain that young men would thrust their blades into piles of wood or directly into the earth during barbaric ceremonies to prove their worth, a common form of sword worship among people from the Steppe region (184, 186). Arthur’s journey to the underworld—the quest—in “The Spoils of Annwn” surely suggests personal struggle, and yet Arthur defiantly thrusts his sword into the vessel to claim ownership of the prize. It is a vessel of such immense worth, one that can provide the regeneration of life, and one that serves as a portent of Jesus’ sacred Grail.

### Part Three: Robert de Boron and His Influences

Because it was near the end of the twelfth century when Robert de Boron wrote *Le Roman de l'estorie dou Graal*, the title that Nitze (1942) verifies as Robert's own (113), determining the influences that impacted his literary decisions involves much conjecture on the part of each examiner. Even the picture of Robert's personal life is no more than a sketch. The way of life in twelfth-century France must also be considered to understand his society's perspective in order to uncover Robert's sense of purpose, and we cannot ignore that for Robert's entire lifetime the Crusades raged on. During the last nine-hundred years or so, dedicated scholars of medieval literature have amassed a relative smattering of documentation to develop a plausible biographical portfolio of Robert the man with the understanding that reasonable speculation exists as we study the figure of one who impacted so significantly the genre of Arthurian Romance.

In the latter part of the twelfth century Robert wrote the *Joseph*, the first section of his only known literary work. The second section of the *Merlin* soon followed of which 504 lines were found intact, accompanied by margin notes and his original plan; the final section, the *Perceval* was written by a redactor, Nigel Bryant (2001) claiming that it is "in no way from Robert's pen" (7; Fn. 15b). Robert's romance is often referred to as his "trilogy." Stephen Maddux (1985) highlights a unique aspect of the approach Robert uses in telling his story claiming, "unlike other authors of his time, Robert brings his sources "within the fiction itself and shows it being created" (42). An illustration of this technique can be found in the *Joseph* when Robert uses a Biblical setting to present the cup Jesus Christ used at the Last Supper, to allow the company of Joseph of Arimathea's followers to name it "the Grail," and in the name of the Holy Trinity, to Christianize the vessel from that time forward.



A necessary factor in determining the ideology of a man who lived in France at the end of the twelfth century is to designate the location of his home since much can be gleaned by his associations and recorded historical events of the time. Robert lived in the high Middle Ages, which saw a wave of new monasteries and expansion of towns and trade in the community. Based on a linguistic study of Robert's work, Nitze (1942) considers it "a fact" that Robert was a resident of the village of Boron in Burgundy, France (114). The key to his discovery emerged after a close examination of Robert's written dialect and the syllabic nature of his use of "Thursday" (*djūesdi*) that originated in the Burgundian town of Montbéliard, located "eighteen kilometers" from the village of Boron; it is in Montbéliard where Nitze claims Robert wrote his romance (114). The location of Robert's home town proved to be advantageous due to its proximity to prominent cathedrals and religious centers of the time. Sophie Hand (1992) translates and cites Eugène Hucher (1875) who reports that Robert made a "generous land donation to the Abbey of Barbeaux in 1164," and he had a son, Simon (25). Robert also seems to have developed associations with families who fostered strong ties with the Catholic Church. Robert's patron, one Gautier de Montbéliard, was from one of those families.

The details of Robert's personal life are scarce, but because so many medieval scholars have examined documented evidence, other segments of his life can be surmised. Regarding Robert's position in society, Richard Trachsler (2000) claims Robert had a cleric's education, (30). In this role Robert had the "benefit of scholarship," which is the exact definition of the French "*clergie*," claims the OED. In a side note that Robert wrote in the margin of the verse form of the *Joseph*, he prefixed his name with "*messires*," leading Pierre Le Gentil (1959) to determine "Robert would have reached the status of a knight rather than a cleric" (252); however, Trachsler disagrees claiming "no knight of his time would have been capable of

assimilating such knowledge in matters of theology” (30). Without question, his privilege of education would provide much opportunity to examine scholarly ecclesiastic documents or philosophical works on Medieval Christian theology. He had the potential to learn of ancient works of literature, to transcribe them into French perhaps, or explore the mythology surrounding the legends of Myrddin and Arthur. While much of Arthurian legend has roots in the East, in his cleric’s role Robert probably had access to Merlin’s tales, which alone appear to have their origin exclusively in Ireland and later in Wales. Evelyn Birge Vitz (1999) further confirms Robert’s position when she explains that “romances generally show the stamp of the literary and clerical traditions in their references to ‘the book’ and other written documents, their interest in literate characters, [and] their recourse to classical allusions” (ix). In fact, *Le Gentil* points to the first section of Robert’s romance, the *Joseph*, where Robert writes the following margin note: “many tales were told about the good Fisher, that is Hebron or Bron” (253) indicating his acquaintance with ancient lore and foreshadowing his inclusion of mythological references such as Brân the Blessed as Bron into the *Joseph* section of his romance.

When scholars of medieval literature examine Robert’s trilogy, they often hypothesize on his motive for creating a biblically-rooted romance with the authority to transform the concept of the cup used at the Last Supper into a Christian Grail. Nitze (1943) thinks he has determined the reason stating, “Robert was obsessed with the idea of the Trinity” (1). His claim is a fitting explanation for the enthusiastically pious approach Robert demonstrates consistently within the romance, often illustrated by emphasizing the triune powers of God through the actions of Merlin. In the “incipit of MS BNf20047, the sole manuscript extant of Robert’s Verse *Joseph*, the opening line reads: ‘*Ci commence li romanz de l’estoire dou Graal*’ (‘This begins the romance of the history of the Grail’); in the words that Nitze believes are written in Robert’s

own hand, Robert then lays out the plan of his work (1). In doing so, Nitze interprets Robert's words to mean that "His *roman* can have no meaning unless Bron is followed by Alein and finally by a *tierz*," a third party, "who can be no other than Perceval" (1). A few verses later, Robert writes the following note:

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Lors sera la senfiance                 | The significance will be               |
| Acomplie it la demoustrance            | Accomplished by the proof              |
| De la benoite Trinite,                 | Of the blessed Trinity,                |
| Qu'avons en trois parz devise .        | That we have quoted in three parts.    |
| Dou tierz, ce te di je pour voir,      | What you are to see in the third part, |
| Fera Jhesu Criz sen vouloir. (Nitze 1) | Jesus Christ will want.                |

(translation mine). The vibrant tone of Robert's introduction transmits youthful verve, as if he himself cannot wait for the reading to begin. The nucleus of his energy comes from his own anticipation in depicting the way the "*benoite Trinite*" works in the world.

To determine how Robert's romance eventually did come together, literary scholars have studied the extant versions of the work. Based on Robert's own side notes, which Trachsler (2000) reveals are written "on vellum of superior quality" (27), Le Gentil (1943) claims that Robert wrote out an original plan to include five sections that would place focus on "Alain, Petrus, Moses and Bron" the Fisher King (254). However, Le Gentil adds that after writing the *Joseph*, he made a change to proceed to the *Merlin* and then to the *Perceval*; after reading Robert's handwritten note that says, "if God grants me life and health, I will assemble these parts if I can find them in a book" (254). After Nitze (1943) had read Robert's notation, he rhetorically wondered, "[W]as Robert ill at the time?" (2). We will never know.

Considering the wealth of speculation on the sources Robert used to complete his trilogy, the soundest determination is that Robert used Wace's *Roman de Brut*, a work Lacy and Wilhelm (2013) call a "lively" translation of Geoffrey's *History of the Kings of Britain*, written in Wace's own Old North French (88). Wace's translation is true to Geoffrey's *History*, with a few original

additions of his own. For example, Charles Foulon (1959) reports that Wace was the first in extant literature to make mention of the Round Table, a “legendary marvel” (99) fashioned at Merlin’s request by King Uther and his son, King Arthur. Richard O’Gorman (1969) adds that Robert gives the table Christian history by transforming it into a eucharistic symbol of the table at the Last Supper (904). Laura Loomis (1926) presents interesting information about the table of the Last Supper, claiming that it too would have been round (777). In her article, Loomis includes figures of several works of art completed prior to the twelfth century that depict Jesus and his disciples sitting around a circular table (Figs. 1-12). She adds that from the twelfth century “down to the present day the last supper scene has been visualized by artists as taking place at a rectangular table as in Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper*” (776). While it is certainly possible that Robert used Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History* as well, undoubtedly, he established Merlin’s personality from Geoffrey’s *Vita Merlini* to pull together character traits genuine to Merlin’s legendary nature, one with great breadth of human and divine passion, while often stubborn, abrupt, and somewhat quirky.

The claim that Robert used Chrétien de Troyes’ *Perceval* as a source is somewhat opaque. Scholars are not exactly divided on the issue because many find themselves waffling on a firm decision, and with good reason. In Chrétien’s romance, during a mystical meal of high importance, the participants use an ornate “*graal*,” a common French word, according to Trachsler (2000), for a “bowl or platter intended to accommodate solid food, with, in a pinch, a little juice” (53). However, it is difficult to ignore Chrétien’s specific reference to the aged Fisher King, especially when Chrétien’s *Perceval* is told that for the last twelve years, “By a single mass wafer the holy man / sustains and comforts his life / when the grail is brought to him” (Lacy and Wilhelm 190-91). The parallels to Robert’s Joseph become evident when recollecting how

Joseph of Arimathea subsists on only the food of the Grail while imprisoned for years. One perspective that causes skeptics to waver toward the middle is best explained by Maddux (1985), who explains that in Chrétien's *Perceval* "the graal is dubiously Christian while in Robert's work it is a relic of the passion, indeed, the greatest relic of them all" (42). While Maddux's point holds validity, we are still left with the appearance of the Fisher King in both romances—it's like a puzzle with no solution.

Particularly noteworthy, however, each author in the above discussion claims he received a book as a resource for their respective stories. Jean Frappier (1959) includes a third person translation of Chrétien's assertion that "he had received from his patron," Phillippe of Alsace, "a *livre* which contained the story of the Grail" (185). Similarly, Le Gentil (1959) reports that Robert "refers [. . .] to his possession of the great book, written by the great clerks, which contains the '*grant secre . . . qu'en numme le Graal,*'" but Robert's assertion is contradicted in his epilogue when he claims, "the story of the Grail had never been told before he told it himself" (253). We are therefore presented with a conundrum unless the "great" book's secret is only a cornerstone from which Robert builds his own original version. For Robert, suggests Le Gentil, "the vessel is filled with the Holy Blood and represents the chalice of the sacrament, whereas Chrétien makes it the receptacle of the sacred Host, and implies it was large enough to contain a salmon" (255). Le Gentil sardonically adds, "If, indeed, Robert knew Chrétien's poem, he must have found it unsatisfactory and felt obliged to make drastic changes" (255). The specifically similar elements of each romance highly imply the two writers encountered some kind of interaction either personally, from the same source, or maybe through divine intervention.

Dozens of hypothetical scenarios can be tossed about, especially how the Fisher King came to be a character in each of the works. What matters to those who envision Robert's romance as the definitive Christian Grail romance are the specific links he makes to the chalice of Jesus Christ. Basing his argument on "well-known exegetical literature which connected the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea allegorically with the chalice of the Mass," O'Gorman (1969) includes a basic lesson to understand the rationale Robert may have used in developing his story, which he calls "the vision of Robert de Boron" (8). O'Gorman explains that because Joseph of Arimathea owned the sepulchre that held Jesus' body after his death, Robert saw "the possibility of making Joseph the possessor of the vessel of the Last Supper—now the Holy Grail" which correspondingly holds the body and blood of Christ (7). Robert makes this crucial symbolic connection early in the presentation of his romance, but it is the sacred power of the Trinity, intrinsic in the Holy Vessel, that propels his story forward.

It is impossible to examine all of Robert's influences at the end of the twelfth century, but the human condition does remain the same allowing us to, at the very least, grasp the heightened religious enthusiasm of his time. As he refers back to the late twelfth century to imagine Robert's community and social climate, Loomis (1963) claims that what "surely, though subtly," affected the Grail romances, "was the artistic and intellectual ferment of the time, for [ . . . ] at no period in the history of Western Europe have the arts and the zest for knowledge attained a higher level," which must include the Grail romances (5). "On the whole," acknowledges Alexandre Micha (1959), the *Merlin* displays considerable intelligence in its adaptation of Geoffrey's material and making the wizard the centre of interest" (320). The mystical elements, perhaps inspired by Geoffrey's *Merlini* or Chrétien's *Perceval*, which Robert weaves into his romance, define the time because as Zumthor (1973) notes, "the ideas of sorcerers and magicians were slowly

developing in clerical consciousness” (133), alluding to Merlin’s eventual vital role in the trilogy. Zumthor adds, “even as Church councils were issuing increasingly specific denunciations of *magi* and *incantatores*, literary authors began to take an interest in them” and “a slow but sure infiltration of the ‘magical’ theme [entered] into the romance world” including the young King Arthur (133). For this reason, actions that Robert presents as miracles in the *Joseph* have been interpreted mistakenly as simple magic in the *Merlin* because of Merlin’s impish reputation in folklore. As we shall see, however, Robert develops the character of Merlin in such a way that while he usually maintains his brash shell, he also holds the attributes of a chosen one whose majestic powers will mirror those witnessed in the *Joseph* since they are specifically generated by Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit before Merlin is born.

To enhance the arts in the twelfth and in the early thirteenth centuries, a class of professional story-tellers entertained kings, counts, and lesser nobles with a repertory of popular romances. Vitz (1999) advises that “verse romances of the twelfth . . . century were substantially more oral than is generally thought” (x). A. C. Spearing (1970) claims that the expressive devices needed to be simple (23) because the act of listening to a romance was a process far from simple. To this effect, Robert keeps his settings uncomplicated—maybe better defined as non-existent in most cases—which would have eliminated some clutter. In the *Joseph*, for example, Robert gives no physical description of the area where Joseph and his company settle for a time. He saves his description, which is presented elaborately, for enhancing elements of significance such as the ritualistic process of setting the table of the Grail (35). “The goal” of the telling, suggests Martino Rossi Monti (2010), “is to lift the soul of the listener to a higher level, [. . .] and awaken in him the consciousness of his affinity with the divine” (21). Sif Rikhardsdottir (2017) adds that the “emotive force of a text” is possible by using “emotional signifiers or

narrative signals,” and suggests that “even silence,” or a long pause, is evocative by inducing the listener to relate to each scene on a personal level (77-8). Because the medieval “audience’s attention moved in a linear fashion,” advises Spearing, “the poetic effect had to be cumulative and extend across time” (23). The intense verbal exchanges switch often and to heighten a poignant response, and occasionally characters fell to their knees or wept. In any case, the fast-moving dialogue as depicted here in the *Joseph* would provide for a riveting performance for the listener. Vitz adds that it was only “works of high seriousness” that were worthy of redaction (13). She concludes, therefore, that perhaps some wealthy bourgeois were “desirous of having a work read from a book” (14). She reminds her own audience that this desire in no way suggested private reading because “recitation from memory was far more common than reading of any kind” (14). Further, her point implies that Robert’s work was one of significance in its day. The widespread popularity of romances, particularly those involving Arthur, occurred, in part, due to the Crusades’ consequential mingling of societies across the globe and because all people long for an ideal king such as Arthur. As a result, Loomis (1959) notes how Arthur’s fame had spread throughout continents citing DeLage (1167-74) who declares,

the name of Arthur the Briton” extends [even] as far as the empire of Christendom. [. . .] Our palmers returning from the East inform us [. . .] Eastern peoples speak of him, as do the Western, though separated by the width of the whole earth . . . Rome, queen of cities, sings to his deeds, nor are Arthur’s wars unknown to her former rival Carthage. Antiock, Armenia, Palestine celebrate his acts. (62)

Even locally, Robert must have been aware of the growing gusto for an Arthurian story, inspiring him to grasp the spirit of the day in adapting a pivotal role for Arthur into his *Merlin*, the sequel to the *Joseph*.

Of all the historical events in France and England, Loomis (1963) believes that not one “except the Crusades influenced perceptibly the Grail romances” (5) and their audiences. Jon



Whitman (2008) claims that a difficulty with storylines such as those in Robert's romance involve a "notoriously elusive question. They involve [. . .] the specific problem of assessing the historical functions of such a story in its own time" (896). Whitman contends the Crusades, which had been escalating since the end of the ninth century, correspond to the "religious zeal of Grail romance" seen during the span of years Robert is reported to have written his trilogy, from about the 1180s through the turn of the century, which were "marked by urgent efforts to control the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and to possess the Holy Land at large" (896-7). This heightened religious intensity implies the swelling emotions of those attending the reading, which mimics the absolute devotion of Joseph's followers in the *Joseph*. Robert, too, must have been stirred by his community who sought to achieve unity with the same triune God that inspired Christians in the *Joseph*, for according to Whitman, "tales of those who seek the Grail and acts of those who take the cross share far more than a general sense of religious zeal" (897). In fact, he adds "it seems that the very patrons of a number of the earliest Grail romances eventually took the cross themselves" (897). Robert's patron, Gautier de Montbéliard, the Lord of Montfaucon took the cross in 1202 during the Fourth Crusade and died in Jerusalem in 1212 (Le Gentil 1959, 253). Robert wrote for people preparing for a holy war, and he would raise their Christian spirit. The matter emanated from the religious center of Christianity and caused the community to consider ways in which they could be held worthy in God's eyes.

After the failure to capture Jerusalem during the Third Crusade (1187-92) and the subsequent debacle of the Fourth Crusade (1198-1204), Christian people had to live with the knowledge of what Whitman calls, "a lost 'inheritance,' a scriptural inheritance, "*hareditas*" (900). At the end of the twelfth century, Robert completed his romance, the *Joseph*, which was the first surviving story of the Holy Grail the people heard during these years of loss (Whitman

900). Because Robert “radically shifts the temporal and spiritual coordinates of the Grail story” in his romance, Whitman explains that “now it originates in the time of Jesus” and now, this “historical and sacral relic” will “pass momentarily from its original guardian in the East to a later guardian in the West” (902). The Grail is *not* the Holy Sepulchre, but it is a tangible representation of it because, as the aforementioned reference to O’Gorman’s comparison of the Sepulchre to the Grail explains, the Grail, too, holds the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

Robert’s patron, Gautier de Montbéliard, according to Mary E. Giffin (1965), had family connections to influential church officials, including Pope Calixtus II (499). For this reason, Robert may have had opportunities to meet some of them who might have sparked his thinking about writing a Grail romance. It is probable that Robert travelled with his patron and in doing so, confronted potential inspiration for a story. For example, the Montbéliard’s were connected to the ruling family of Burgundy at Autun, the home of the leper shrine at the Church of St. Lazare, where, claims Giffin, the sculptures of Gislebertus by Denis Grivot and George Zarnecki, rest above the portals of the Church (499). It is Giffin’s contention that the scenes depicted in the sculptures “bear a resemblance” to Robert’s “general plan for his projected five poems” (499) and that he may have been inspired by visiting the Church of St. Lazare. The sculptures vividly depict the temptation of Adam and Eve and Christ at the Last Judgment triumphant over Satan; in spectacular detail, the other scenes physically portray the fight between Christ and Satan for the souls of people, and significantly for Giffin, in the scene of the Last Judgement where “the sculptor placed on the heavenly side of the archivolt, where St. Peter and the apostles are receiving the souls of the blessed at the gates of heaven—a chalice sits, indicating the place of the Eucharist in the struggle between Christ and Satan” (499-500). Robert does takes every opportunity to enact a seamless incorporation of these several themes into his

romance, and throughout, Robert's characters are vigilant against the utter anguish Satan can wield, while concurrently they glory in the hope of a heavenly future.

In this theoretical trip to Autun, Robert also may have met the bishop of Autun, "Étienne de Bâgé, a man of deep piety," claims Giffin, who was plausibly an acquaintance of Gautier since his relative, Ermentrude de Montbéliard was in residence there at one time (502). Giffin references Étienne's "most influential work on the doctrine of transubstantiation, '*De sacramento altaris*,' in which he used for the first time the word *transubstantiatio*," a concept that became a topic of much discussion during Robert's time of composition, eventually resolved when "the Lateran Council of 1215 defined the Eucharistic miracle" (502). It is surely possible the bishop and Robert had time to discuss his doctrine, fostering even further Robert's mystical view of the Christian Eucharist and inspiration to incorporate those theories into the telling of the *Joseph*.

Glastonbury Abbey is a religious center in England located in the southwestern section of the island in Somerset, not far from Wales. Also important is its nearby Isle of Avalon. According to Geoffrey's *Historia*, in the Battle of Camlam, the last battle between King Arthur and Mordred, the King was "mortally wounded and was carried off to the Isle of Avalon, so that his wounds might be attended to" (261). Many traditions claim that Arthur never died and would one day return. During Robert's time, Glastonbury maintained a strong connection with the French elite, especially during the reign of King Henry II. Valerie M. Lagorio (1971), adds that "Glastonbury Abbey had a distinguished history, bearing witness to its antiquity, holiness, and prominence as a religious and cultural institution in Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, and Norman times" (209). It is important to know from the onset, according to Lagorio, "from the time of its establishment as a Benedictine monastery in 673, Glastonbury [. . .] enjoyed the patronage of the

temporal and spiritual rulers of each succeeding age” and in the course of its long history, “the abbey had evolved its own collection of legends concerning its origins” (209-10). Lagario’s research indicated that the Glastonbury officials rarely made any effort to discern fact from fantasy (210), an important consideration when studying Robert’s romance, for Glastonbury’s powerful culture may have impacted Robert’s work, and in turn, Robert’s work may have added prominence to the Abbey in the vales of Avalon.

Robert’s personal impetus for the work he developed almost a millennium ago will always retain its enigmatic nature, yet studies suggest that Robert did acknowledge a few political influences who seemingly sought to guide elements of his trilogy. Le Gentil (1959), for example, wonders how Robert knew “of the identification of the ‘vaus d’Avaron’ with Glastonbury” (255). Trachsler (2000) claims that “an act of Essex, attests to the existence of a Robert de Boron” who received a gift in 1186 “from the English king, Henry II” (32), a fact which most researchers use as tentative proof that Robert was there at that time. This discovery caused Nitze (1942) to ask, “How came it that a native of Burgundy, before 1201, was interested in material concerned with Glastonbury, England?” (114); he discovers a plausible answer after learning that not only was Henry II “interested in Burgundian monasticism, but also Robert was acquainted with a fellow countryman Hugh of Avalon, Bishop of Lincoln” who he may have visited as well (115). If while writing his romance Robert wanted to combine the interests of his patron Gautier, the Bishop of Autun at Lazare, and the Bishop Hugh d’Avalon, Giffin suggests “he hardly could have done better than to show Petrus in the *Joseph*, emigrant to Avalon, discoursing on transubstantiation” (503). In the *Joseph*, Robert also uses several scenarios where he depicts the plight of lepers and Giffin notes a possible reason claiming Robert may have touched “the interests of Bishop Hugh d’Avalon, who tended lepers at Lincoln with his own

hands” (504). If it is true that Robert adjusted his *Joseph*, the additions do not seem out of place except for the character of Petrus who one day, in anonymity, joins a group of Joseph’s followers who pledge belief in the Trinity and in God; in hindsight, the scene does seem slightly forced. At Joseph’s table Petrus is accepted warmly as one who knows the power of Christ’s “flesh and blood” and who tangibly receives the grace of God through the Eucharist (35). By participating in the sacred feast, Petrus is now a legitimate authority on transubstantiation as a participant in the most sacred meal in the presence of the Holy Vessel. Near the end of the *Joseph*, a letter appears miraculously through a light from the Holy Spirit; the letter holds directions specifically for Petrus who will soon leave for the “Vales of Avalon” (41), a direct request from God himself, an impressive validation the authorities at Glastonbury would most certainly welcome. Petrus serves as a witness of the divine meal shared by God’s chosen people and has experienced the wave of grace that washes over the participants. Avalon is therefore deemed a worthy home for this holy man.

Considering the lack of facts recorded about Robert de Boron, it is not difficult to draw up a more detailed portrait of his life and accomplishments. The most telling fact about Robert is his writing, which depicts a man with intentions born from the heart. His words seem to burst forth with his genuine belief in God as the Trinity, concurrently showing his creative skill in transferring ancient mythological characters into the brand-new world of emerging Christianity.

### The Prose Version of Robert's Trilogy

Scholars who work with medieval texts rarely agree completely on a preferred form of Robert's trilogy: the original in verse or the subsequent prose version. Most likely when a reading was performed for an audience, the verse form was used to enhance the sound and rhythm of the recitation, not to mention that according to Vitz (1999), "prose did not appear until the end of the twelfth century, arising from the clerical tradition" (33). William Roach's evaluation (1956) of the Prose Joseph is positive. He claims it is the text, "virtually unchanged, of one of the oldest and most "correct" of the surviving manuscripts" (3). In a study to determine the value of Robert's prose version, O'Gorman (1970) explains that "Robert's romance is preserved in two distinct versions: a copy, more or less corrupt, of a version in 3514 lines of octosyllabic couplets which, presumably, descends from the original, and a prosification of that version made in all probability shortly after the composition of the poem" (450). In his argument, O'Gorman shares that while he prefers to use the original verse to maintain Robert's "style or his merits as a poet," it is often so garbled he replaces some sections with the corresponding prose to offer a "satisfactory reading" (451). Notably, while he only used a small sample of Robert's work in his study, in those sections O'Gorman has determined "the prose text should be treated with equal consideration with the verse" even though "many, like Loomis," do not even recognize the prose form's existence (451). Bryant (2001) clarifies that of the surviving seventeen manuscripts "only two go on to contain the entire trilogy of *Joseph, Merlin and Perceval*" (1). The text used in this paper is Bryant's translation of the prose trilogy in "manuscript E.39 of the *Biblioteca Estense* in Modena" (1).

### Challenges with a Spiritual Narrative Voice

When we hold Robert's trilogy in our hands, it is Robert's intention that we hold a book that originates from Merlin's knowledge, which he relays to his scribe, Blaise. Therefore, it is mostly Merlin's narrative voice we hear throughout the three parts. Considering that Merlin's character is not born until after the start of the *Merlin*, this claim deserves pause as it stretches the boundaries of logic until a few details are clarified. Like God, Merlin is omnipotent, so after he is born, which takes place shortly after Jesus' visit to Hell, he documents events beginning with the *Joseph*, in what is referred to as "Blaise's book" or *The Book of the Grail* (Maddux 1985, 53). Since Robert dies before he can complete his work, awkward inconsistencies in narrative voice do emerge. For example, when Merlin is described or involved in dialog, has Blaise adjusted the point of view? Just how much agency does Blaise have in the retelling? Merlin's omniscience brings authority to the text, but if Blaise tampers with any of the retelling, that authority diminishes. The occasional lack of clarity regarding the creative voice of *The Book of the Grail* can deter that process and serve as a distraction. The method Merlin uses to bring the story to Blaise will determine the reliability of narration.

Narrative intrusions work quite well at times, especially when Merlin's plucky tone comes through. Unfortunately, the intrusions often lack verve or sound remarkably similar to Robert himself. For example, at the end of the *Joseph*, the voice of the narrator makes the following announcement saying, "But now I must leave these four and tell of the fifth part, until I return to each of them in turn. Were I to do otherwise, you would not understand what became of them or why I am dealing with them separately" (44). These words are like those Robert wrote in the margins of the original text when he decided to move right to the *Merlin* (e.g. "Robert de Boron and His Influences," p. 25). Robert's voice also unexpectedly adds, "Meanwhile Merlin

went to Northumberland to tell Blaise these events” (77). In other sections the narration is incongruent with either the voice of Merlin or of Robert, as in “My lord Robert de Boron, who tells this story, says, like Merlin, that it is in two parts, for he could not know the story of the Grail” (63). It clearly sounds like Blaise is speaking here, which further undermines the speaker’s authority.

Other inconsistencies appear when Merlin is explaining the purpose of the *Book* to Blaise. Initially, Merlin’s presentation of the book is lackluster, claiming that Blaise’s voice will have no authority and that “few will recognize its wonders” (62). Eight pages later, Merlin tells Blaise, “Your work will be retold and heard with gratitude for as long as this world lasts” and “your book will be much loved, and many worthy people will give it eager attention” (70). As a result, Robert’s audience must determine their own importance of the *Book*. The discussion of *The Book of the Grail* will be expanded upon in both the *Joseph* and the *Merlin* because one of Robert’s main points of emphasis in his romance is the authority of the written word.

In the *Merlin*, when Merlin explains the concept of the *Book* to Blaise, he announces the existence of Joseph’s separate book, which will be joined with Blaise’s Book (62). Where is this other book? Does Joseph send it with Bron to the West? Only Merlin’s omniscience allows him to know, but he does not share his knowledge in this case. Scholars like Micha (2003) acknowledge Joseph’s separate writing existed (299), but most, Zumthor for example, consider Blaise’s *Book* as the trilogy itself (translated in Maddux (1985), fn. 6). It is quite acceptable that Joseph’s book is composed of the sacred words brought to him through the Holy Spirit in his cell and are thus omitted from the text by their very nature. Before Bron and Petrus leave for the west, Joseph relays what he learned from the Holy Spirit—except for the sacred words “given to him by Jesus Christ in prison” (43). Those words, Joseph “entrusted to the Rich Fisher privately,



*in writing*” (43, emphasis mine). Knowing that Bron, the Keeper of the Grail, takes those words with him on the journey to the West provides some closure for the audience, but if as Merlin claims they are joined with Blaise’s *Book*, the text we read should hold them.

Authority of the spoken word is challenged in some way in almost every scene in the romance. In the *Joseph*, Christ expresses truth by communicating to his followers through the Holy Spirit in the form of an intuitive knowing that enters the human understanding, but Robert has an audience who must physically hear the words, thus Robert uses the Grail as a vehicle of spoken communication, not only to voice guidance to Joseph, but also to verbalize the sacred teachings of God. In telling his story, Robert must conform to earthly methods, a written form that his audience will hear, but Burgess (1997) claims that “human language is defective when applied to spiritual reality” (45); therefore the most efficient way for Merlin to serve as narrator of *The Book of the Grail* through Blaise, would be to reveal the events to Blaise in the style of the Holy Spirit.

### **Part Four: The *Joseph***

When Robert was planning out his Romance, the pages of vellum where he scratched his outline have survived. As a part of his overall design, he begins with a relatively short, poignant section in the *Joseph* that engenders profound spiritual and emotive engagement from his audience. His intentions suggest a sacred depiction of the holy gift of grace available to people who, with sincere reverence, participate in the sanctifying act of Holy Communion. A complete shift in setting and purpose slows down the brisk pace in the middle section of the *Joseph* while Robert explores how people of these early days approach truth. The authority of the tangible written word versus the spoken word is considered while bringing attention to the human inadequacy of those mediums when compared to the Word of God as transmitted intuitively by the Holy Spirit. The *Joseph* closes by setting the journey of the grail keeper in motion with a reminder that an ongoing battle exists between God and Satan along with frequent warnings to be vigilant to those dangers. In the process, Robert skillfully takes the chalice of the Last Supper and augments its recorded history to develop a remarkable Christian symbol that he names “the Grail.” To please his twelfth-century audience who had begun to look forward to tales of the popular King Arthur, Robert uses recorded historical accounts surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and combines them with some characters of ancient legend. The divine triune power of God’s grace evident in the presence of the Grail is the force that drives most of this section of the trilogy.

Robert opens the *Joseph* with a didactic claim that immediately causes the listening audience to pause for a quick self-assessment; he announces that “All sinful people should know this” (15), referencing the events in Judea during Pilate’s governorship including Judas’ betrayal and Jesus’s subsequent arrest and crucifixion (16). Robert designs each of the early scenes to

follow the whereabouts of the vessel used at the Last Supper, a reminder of the Grail's legitimate beginning as the possession of Christ, which eventually reaches Joseph of Arimathea (19).

Bryant (2001) explains in his introductory comments that Robert follows the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*, which provided "an ingenious early provenance for the grail" (7). Tenderly, Joseph and Nicodemus remove Jesus's body from the cross, and Joseph uses the vessel to collect Christ's blood; they wrap his body in a sheet before they place it into the sepulcher belonging to Joseph (19). O'Gorman (1969) suggests that Joseph's use of the vessel for the "blood of Christ follows naturally" and was perhaps suggested by these words of consecration: "this is the chalice of my blood of the new and everlasting covenant" (7). For O'Gorman, this "hallowing" of the Grail underscores "the 'real presence' in the sacrifice of the Mass" (7), and Roach (1956) adds that Robert "went even further and made it into a Holy Blood relic" (1). Christ's vessel is the focal point of the entire trilogy, and Robert presents it perfectly with the authority of God.

The quick pace of this opening section moves to the scene where, boldly, Christ breaks into Hell to "set free Adam and Eve and as many others as He pleased" (19). Jesus' commanding attitude is palpable. In and of itself, this detail seems to serve as only a review of biblical history; however, Christ's descent into the underworld has vital importance in the plot of the romance because the epic event generates the need for retribution by the demonic population and their scheme delivers the evil energy that begins the *Merlin*, an event that occurs during the ebbing action of the *Joseph*.

Early in the *Joseph*, the full power of the Trinity is exposed after the Jews discover Christ's body is missing and Joseph is placed into a "dungeon" underneath a tower (20). Roach (1956) emphasizes that the "capture and imprisonment of Joseph might have broken the line of direct transmission of the holy vessel, but Robert [. . .] took the precaution of having Christ

himself bring the vessel to Joseph in the prison” (1). Christ does not tangibly appear before Joseph; instead, he visits through the Spirit of God. Just before he hears the voice of Jesus speak within his mind, “Joseph [sees] a great light and [is] filled with joy and with the grace of the Holy Spirit” (20). A Dominican Priest and Professor of Theology, Giles Emery (2011), provides insight that applies here. He explains that the Holy Spirit’s communication offers “evidence and knowledge that equals understanding” that sits “at the center of the revelation of the Trinity as a mystery of communion” (36-7). The Spirit pours through Jesus to communicate to Joseph that he has been chosen as the vessel’s keeper and that he must “guard it in the name of the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit,” which are “one and the same being in God” (22). In Robert’s work, claims Roach, “the mysterious vessel was for the first time brought into an explicit relationship with the events of the Last Supper” (1). “Henceforth,” claims Joseph Goering (2005), the “vessel” will “have its own history—the history of the Grail—as a very special relic of Christ’s earthly life, and the object of desire in popular song and story” (50). It is in this scene that Robert turns the vessel into an absolute Christian symbol.

Without warning, Merlin as narrator interrupts, claiming the Lord now communicates to Joseph about the “creed of the great mystery of the Grail” but he dares not tell those words to the listening audience (22). Merlin’s interruption causes much intrigue and piques the audience’s awareness by adding a detail to inspire anticipation of the *Merlin* section of the romance. He speaks to the audience as follows: “[A]sk me no more about it at this point, in God’s name, for I should have to lie” (22), a claim that would certainly call for the performer of the text to include an intentional pause to permit this unexpected news to resonate for a moment or two. These are the same mysterious words Merlin will later reference when he introduces Joseph’s role in the plan for *The Book of the Grail*. The introduction to the *Joseph* concludes by dolefully

announcing, “Joseph stayed imprisoned for a long time” (23). By most accounts, Joseph remains in the dungeon for about forty years.

The middle segment of the *Joseph* serves as a forty-year transition to the time when Joseph and his followers will leave Judea. The action shifts to Rome to witness both the validation of Jesus’ divinity and a demonstration of how social constraints impact the perceived value placed on the spoken word regarding what constitutes truth. To facilitate the argument, Robert shifts his focus to a nameless pilgrim, a former resident of Judea until after Christ’s crucifixion. To help the Roman Emperor’s son, Vespasian, a leper, this compassionate pilgrim informs his rich roommate about the miracles performed by Jesus. In an ensuing repetitive review of the pilgrim’s claim, which closely resembles the farcical, the pilgrim’s rendition is retold four times at which point, using a repetitive-shift plot structure often seen in folklore, the pilgrim adds an enticing claim that any found item belonging to Jesus would surely cure Vespasian (23-24). The retelling continues as the now motivated Emperor sends his counsellors to meet with Pilate to determine the truth about Jesus and to find an item touched by him (24-27). Eventually, the pilgrim’s story pans out and Vespasian is cured by looking at the cloth Veronica used years before to wipe Jesus’ face (28). Another round of repetition ensues to confirm an accurate testament of Pilate’s involvement in the matter, which leads to Vespasian’s vicious punishment of the Jews, a scene Robert most likely included to tap into his society’s need for retribution during this time of the Crusades. Gina L. Greco (1998) sees the purpose of this section as one that “dovetails Roman secular power with the history of Christ” thereby lending the “authority of Scripture and history” to the characters of the romance (43). While Greco’s claim has value, the opinion of the nameless pilgrim was most likely given tentative authority only because the Emperor was desperate to cure his son. Claims made by a lower-class

citizen are acknowledged as truth only if someone else with status confirms the words. This scene also presents the necessity of tangible proof like Veronica's cloth to assure the validity of any claim, a constant, almost pervasive, theme that runs through the trilogy.

In Robert's examination of "truth" it is the audience's perception of the speaker that matters in these ten pages. In a 2010 study by Holly Hearon, she analyzes Second Testament texts with focus on Luke-Acts to "determine the way written and spoken words were perceived, encountered, and experienced in early Christian Communities" (57). Her findings indicate that during the time of Christ, the "written word overlaps the spoken word" because the written word is perceived as having voice, a provocative concept since it is "dependent on living voices for vocalization, agency, and corroboration" (70). However, Hearon adds that since words are considered true from the perspective of the narrator, the distinction is to be found in the speaker and audience" (63). In Hearon's explanation, she includes an example using Herod who does not believe that Jesus is the Messiah; thus, for him, she says, the "scriptures remain written words bearing no living voice" and, therefore, have little authority (64). Hearon's discoveries further suggest that under ordinary circumstances a speaker such as the good pilgrim above would hold little authority for the Emperor of Rome, which explains the need for his too-frequent verification of the pilgrim's story. Robert seems to understand the incredulous nature of people because he often inserts side stories surrounding the written word that indicate the limitations of man to discern what is truth as in the episode surrounding Vespasian. Even for the characters who have witnessed God's miracles, Robert provides them with written or concrete evidence as confirmation of the event like he does with the cloth presented by Veronica.

While this digression from the story of Joseph of Arimathea authenticates Jesus' power of God, its focus on authorship and truth also elicits a reminder that Merlin is the narrator.

Returning to Joseph and his company, Merlin's voice is assumed to have genuine authority, but the voice of Merlin as raconteur will be studied further in the *Merlin* because his heritage as the son of a demon does raise some doubts.

Back in Judea, Vespasian rescues Joseph from the dungeon and in turn, Joseph converts Vespasian to "a firm belief in the Christian faith" by repeating the words Jesus asked Joseph to share with Vespasian (33). As a point of interest, Jesus tells Joseph to begin at the beginning of time, with "night and day and the four elements" (32). He also includes that God created man "from the very basest mud" (32), reaching back to the beginning of human existence, which not only calls to mind the myth of Prometheus' creation of man, but also the primordial rituals of cauldrons, the first spiritual vessels. In Joseph's recitation to Vespasian, Robert augments his Christian vessel legend with great import through the long history God.

Joseph leads his sister's family and any others willing to believe in the Trinity and leaves Judea to live in exile, a life devoted entirely to God. The group of Christians live in peace until lechery creeps into the community. As a result, crops fail, and a famine beleaguers the people (34). Joseph is desperate, so he prays to the Vessel for guidance. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus communicates with Joseph and offers a plan to determine which members of the community are worthy to remain (35). The first step is for Joseph to build a new table in the name of the first table at the Last Supper in preparation for a sacred meal in the presence of the sacred cup (35). Joseph's brother-in-law, Bron, is directed to go to the water and bring back the first fish he catches while Joseph is to set the Vessel before his own place at the table and keep the seat to his right empty, "signifying the place abandoned by Judas" (35). "Not only is Christ's blood present within the Grail," states Greco (1998), "but also, according to medieval theology, Christ would be bodily present at the table through the Sacrament of the Eucharist" (44). The table that

supports the vessel represents a promise of grace to believers. When it is time for the meal, Joseph calls out an invitation, but he limits his guests to those “who have true faith in the Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and are willing to obey the commandments, to come forward and take their seats by the grace of God” (35). Many come to the table and sense “sweetness and fulfillment of their hearts” (35), but others, hesitant, stand at a distance as shadowy onlookers. Emery (2011) explains that when believers “commune in the flesh of Christ and receive the Holy Spirit” they are “united to the Father; they are a new creation” (3). One of the seated, Petrus, speaks to those standing back from the table and asks, “Do you feel what we feel?” (35). No words spoken or written can accurately describe grace because it is an abstraction; the experience simply does not fall into the realm of human language. The dejected bystanders claim they “feel nothing” (36) and depart after Petrus explains that he and others feel the grace of the Trinity, which brings them “complete delight” (36). Lois Lang-Sims (1984) offers her own modern rendition of the Table at the Feast of the Eucharist saying, “This simple image seems, we do not know why, to gather up into its self the desires of the heart. We yearn towards it, with a love that is beyond anything we feel for the objects of our deepest personal affection; at the same time, it seems to radiate upon us a love that is far beyond any other we have been privileged to receive” (1). The Table, the second of three, and the holy vessel, together bring grace to the worthy. The yearning of which Lang-Sims speaks, is a drive, according to Whitman (2008) that is “particularly prominent in Robert’s own period, during which the Eucharist is given increasing ecclesiastical attention as the Church asserts its own institutional authority” (904).

After their meal, the people accepted at the table, both men and women alike, decide to name the vessel “the Grail” (36). Unexpectedly, one of the rejected bystanders, Moyse, remains behind and for many days begs acceptance to sit at the table until the company of the Grail speak



on his behalf. Sensing that Moyses is not worthy, Joseph warns him sternly. Regardless, Moyses, in an effort to deceive Joseph, takes the seat left empty by Judas and is instantly swallowed up as if he never existed (38). This shocking event is a reminder of Jesus' fierce justice on the wicked and of his endless battle against Satan to preserve the good. The scene also foreshadows events in the *Merlin* where vigilance is needed to stop the sinister plans of the demon.

As the years pass by and Bron's twelve sons grow into men, the time has arrived to establish a plan for the future protection and care of the Grail. Joseph once again seeks guidance from his Vessel. Alain li Gros, Bron's youngest son is appointed leader of the family. He is described as one who was "blessed with so much of God's grace that no one could have more" (42). Historically, "Alein" is a Celtic name, claim Littleton and Malcor (1994), but add that "it is far more probable that the name Alain came from the Alans of the East who invaded Gaul in the fifth century" (25). Littleton and Malcor add even more compelling evidence stating, "Given the affinity of the descendants of the Alans for telling stories about cups, and the extent of Alanic influence in the church of Gaul, the chances are good that Robert may have had an Alanic source for his Grail material as well" (fn. 1, Ch. 9). It is settled that Alain's unborn grandson will be the third and final Keeper of the Grail.

Petrus' destiny is to travel to the vales of Avalon and await the arrival of Alain's grandson. Earlier a letter bearing his name miraculously materializes out of thin air. When Alain's grandson meets him in Avalon, the letter created by the Holy Spirit will be read to Petrus who cannot pass from life to death without hearing the letter (42-3). As soon as he witnesses the bequeathal of the Grail to Bron, Petrus will leave for his destination, humble in the idea that he was one of the chosen (43). Referencing this divinely-inspired letter, Hand (1992) suggests that this scene represents "the beginnings of a movement from the oral to the written found in the

pages of the *Joseph*, where the stage is set for the elaboration of the problem in the *Merlin*" (4-5), which will take form in the discussion of Blaise's *Book of the Grail*.

Bron is the chosen one who will carry the Grail to the West and wait for his unborn grandson to relieve him of his obligation. From this time forward, he will be known as "the Rich Fisher" (35, 42). Up to this place in the romance, Bron maintained his role as brother-in-law to Joseph and has provided fish for the sacred meals. However, he is destined for a greater role as the next keeper and protector of the Grail. Many associate Bron with Hebron from the Old Testament, and rightly so because the "Sons of Hebron were among those set aside for the service of the temple, the Levites custodians of the ark of the covenant," claims Giffin (1965, 504). But she has trouble with the frequent association of Bron with the long forgotten Brân the Blessed from Welsh legend, which she acknowledges "Robert de Boron expected" (504). Either way, choosing the name Bron as the protector of the Grail is a suitable choice. Robert seems to use ancient links like this to represent the fullness and growth of the human spirit as it has been God's work all along—Christ's appearance on Earth makes sense of it all.

The Grail will have three guardians: Joseph, Bron, and the son of Alain li Gros. Maddux (1985) explains they will feel an "irresistible westward impulse" as they travel to their preordained destinations (43). Maddux adds that at the end of the *Joseph*, "concern for the future does make itself felt, but it occurs only at the conclusion"; in the *Merlin*, however, "it is everywhere" (43). To introduce that tension, the most ominous, the most emphatic speech to be found at the end of the *Joseph* comes through the Holy Spirit in "the words of Jesus Christ Our Saviour" as he speaks to both Joseph and his nephew, Alain, together (40). His words are aimed at Joseph who must see to it that Alain understands the import of his message. He says, "the Enemy is keen to deceive those who follow me; he must beware of the Enemy, and never be so

blinded by violent emotion that he fails to see clearly; and bid him keep close to him the things that will guard him from sin and wrath, and to cherish them above all else, for they will be of most use in guarding him against the Enemy's wiles" (40). This riveting advice is not an overblown warning, especially as we approach the *Merlin*, which opens in an angry hell. In the *Joseph*, the cup, the Grail that now holds Christ's blood, the vessel that sustains Joseph of Arimathea's life for years, becomes one of the most revered Christian symbols known throughout the literary world. In its telling, Robert pulls in legendary and mythological characters and events which develop his romance into a tale with history and heart, one with focus on the sanctity of the Grail's grace. While the *Merlin* is quite different, it is also exactly the same.

### **Part Five: The *Merlin***

Like the *Joseph*, the *Merlin* opens with dark overtones, now in the fiery depths of Hell not long after Jesus' harrowing of the place. This setting firmly fits "into the cosmic scheme of the struggle between God and the Devil for the souls of man," claims Micha (1959) calling to mind Giffin's (1965) description of the sculptures of Gislebertus at the Church of St. Lazare (32; see pg. 33). Surrounded by seething and smoldering ash, the fallen inhabitants who seek retribution devise a scheme to introduce one of their own into the world of humans. The fiends desire a spokesperson to deceive people on Earth to praise the work of Satan, ultimately destroying humanity (46). The plan they undertake is pure evil. Goodrich (2003) explains that because Robert reshapes Geoffrey's tale of the child Ambrosius, Merlin's birth becomes "a major event of salvation history" (10). Merlin will assure that the sacred vessel of Christ's blood remains protected throughout the Grail Keepers changing of the guard.

It is likely that this scene in Hell takes place simultaneously with one of the last passages in the *Joseph* when Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, ardently warns Joseph and Alain to be vigilant against the malevolence of the Enemy (40-41); the heightened emphasis present in Jesus' tone of warning would be prompted by the vile enactment of their plan to create a human agent, who Hand (1992) suggests will "carry forth their words and their wishes" (39). The actions of the incubus who eventually leads to Merlin's creation are deplorable and unsettling. The fiend first incites the chosen family into despondency through a series of disasters, killing off their livestock, strangling their son in his sleep, and even leading the mother of the household to climb on to a box with a rope around her neck before he invisibly "pushe[s] her off and strangle[s] her" (46-47). Eventually, the incubus moves as invisibly as air and, while in her sleep, he impregnates the only surviving daughter of the family who has retained her faith in God.

While the demon's seed grows, God intervenes in its development. Robert designs a Merlin who in utero receives the gift of foresight presented directly from the Lord (55). His incubus father has already bestowed to him the ability to know the past, thus Merlin's omniscience is certain. God further allows the child to choose for himself the side of evil or good, for while "a demon had made his body, God gives more to Merlin than to other men" because God knows "he would certainly be needing it" (55). Therefore, Merlin's role is preordained by God and the godlike gifts he receives; most notably, "the spirit to hear and understand" (55) offers Merlin the communicative abilities of the Holy Spirit. As soon as he is born, Merlin is acutely aware of his circumstances. He receives an essential attribute from his father that ironically enables him to secure the safety of the Grail. Sydnor E. Ownbey (1926) explains that Merlin's demon father, without a "corporal" body, existed as a "sheer intelligence," so Merlin inherits the power to teleport from one place to another (10).

When these mystical attributes are joined with Merlin's other essential inherited abilities from both his mother and father, the result is an odd, supernatural being in human form. From his incubus father, Merlin inherits an excessively hairy body, off-putting to those he first meets (55). Markale (2003) suggests that "the propagators of the legends of Merlin portrayed [him] as an incarnation of Instinct," and this is why Merlin bears an animal-like appearance (424). All must try to ignore Merlin's unusual outward appearance, but Monti (2010) claims that the "second century Bishop Ambrose's fourth century *De officiis ministrorum (On the Duties of Ministers)* was dedicated to the education of clerics" (23), so Robert may have known the tract. In Ambrose's work, he emphasizes "fundamental Christian virtues such as simplicity and humility [. . .]. This beauty shines through in behavior and deeds rather than the physical" (23-24). Bishop Ambrose's words are accurate in Merlin's case because once the events of the plot begin to

dominate the action, Merlin is accepted and trusted as one with God, and therefore, his unusual outward appearance seems to fade.

With the aid of her confessor, Blaise, Merlin's mother is resolute against evil and as a consequence, she passes to Merlin a resilient force of decency. Merlin's mother is a pure Christian soul, and therefore most positively augments Merlin's moral code (55). Geoffrey Ashe (2006) suggests that "Robert was determined that [her] son should be good, [so] he solved the problem boldly by dismissing Geoffrey's earlier neutral demon father, described as having "partly the nature of men and partly that of angels" in *The History of the Kings of Britain*, "and substituting a diabolic agent, in keeping with Christian convention, but then sidestepping the consequences" by allowing Merlin to choose his own path (168). Merlin's mother also blesses her son with human emotion, which adds a developing warmth to his demeanor (117). Merlin is fated to be of a mixed race; he is the devil's progeny, and yet he is generously blessed by God. He is born with powers of the commanding spiritual force of the Trinity, and therefore he is prepared to direct England's destiny into Christianity while assuring that the prophesy of the Grail is fulfilled.

Merlin is assigned the immense, life-long mission of protecting the Grail into the future, and the powers he is given to achieve success specifically match those of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Immediately, similarities between Merlin and the Father reveal themselves when the young Merlin defends his mother at her trial with a dignified confidence and authority. Later, we witness his interactions with dishonest clerks, scolding them to "never again meddle in this art" of astronomy (76). He protects King Pendragon and his brother Uther and guides their decisions with great care. Further, Merlin shares traits with the Son of the Trinity. Merlin and Jesus are both created through immaculate conception. Further, similar to Jesus' knowing the

thoughts of the scribes and Pharisees, leaving them “all amazed” and “filled with fear,” (Luke 5:25), Merlin too astonishes messengers sent by Vortigern (71). Both have the physical presence of a miracle worker, and both walk the earth while spreading the word of God’s existence, and in doing so, they teach. Both must work to gain the trust of their audience, even though some remain suspicious of their powers. And through their work, they both suffer. As St. Mark emphasizes, Jesus teaches that “the Son of man must suffer many things” (Mark 8:31). Similar to Myrddin who is “condemned to suffer in solitude in the company of the beasts” (Loomis, 25), Merlin warns Blaise that creating *The Book of the Grail* will cause Blaise suffering, in the form of sacrifice, but Merlin will suffer more (62).

Most often Merlin resembles the Holy Spirit. According to Michael Welker (1989), the identity of the Holy Spirit can be “elusive, to say the least” (5). This descriptor recalls Merlin’s own words to Blaise saying, “I am a figure of secrecy to those I do not choose to enlighten,” which brings to mind the disguises of the woodcutter and “ugly deformed herdsman” that Merlin dons when he first arrives in Pendragon’s Kingdom to surreptitiously arrange a meeting with the King and his brother (78-79). To confuse the messengers who search for him, Robert combines Merlin’s incubus father’s impish impulses with his latent shape-shifting talent that his literary ancestor Myrddin developed in his sylvan days in the Scotland’s forest of Celyddon (79). Micha (2003) reminds us that Merlin often tends to work behind the scenes (304), like the Holy Spirit who is described in Matthew 12:18-21 as one who “shall not strive, nor cry; neither shall any man hear his voice on the streets.” Merlin owns the gift of prophesy, and Ownbey (1926) recalls one scene where Merlin “causes a red dragon to appear in the air as a signal for Pendragon and Uther to begin their fight against the Saracens” (9). The Bible discloses a corresponding verse in John 16:13 when Jesus reassures his disciples by claiming, “when he, the Spirit of truth, is come,

he will guide you into all truth [. . .] and he will shew you things to come.” In most settings in the romance, Merlin depicts the characteristics of the Trinity, and rightly so, because his task requires such power to succeed in his mighty task. As a being with the powers of the Trinity, Merlin must maintain constant vigilance over his human emotions, so he finds it best to remain distant and often leaves to join Blaise in a land called Northumberland.

Similar to the *Joseph* but more emphatically so in the *Merlin*, Robert continues to emphasize the impact of the written word as a necessity for the human validation of truth. Less than three years after Merlin’s birth, a trial is held to determine if Merlin’s mother will be burned at the stake because of her sin, bearing an illegitimate child (57). Since Merlin’s intelligence is exceptionally advanced at this young age, he serves as his mother’s legal defender, a scene that is all but impossible to imagine. As the arguments of the trial progress, Robert elaborately depicts people squabbling over truth; each scene labors through detail in determining “facts” in the case (57-61). It is satisfying to watch the surprised judge learn through Merlin’s omniscience that the judge’s own mother had an affair with a priest, revealing an unexpected paternal reality to the judge. The trial indicates that in this village, if a man writes down the date of intercourse as a precaution to determine if he is the legitimate father of a child, these written digits are taken as verifiable truth (58, 60), an act that Merlin shows to be relatively meaningless because people can unquestionably be deceitful in writing. Merlin’s mother is consequently acquitted, prompting Kate Cooper (2003) to claim that ironically in this case, the “writing which reverses the Judge’s position is also that which validates Merlin’s total knowledge” (327). In this culture, only the written word qualifies as truth because the spoken word is ephemeral; it has no lasting tangible authority, prompting Cooper to ask in her analysis of the romance, “What is the function of the written word?”—for her, “an important” question “in the narrative matter” (309). Robert asks the



same question since, like in the *Joseph*, within the spoken words of his text, doubt often interferes with the represented perception of the truth. And yet, in the time of the story, when one touches pen to paper, a questioned event based on memory is transformed into written truth. It is noticeable, then, that while Merlin seems urgently compelled to record the truth of his mother's trial in writing, he himself never writes down the words; instead he relays them to Blaise, his mother's confessor and Merlin's scribe of the *Book of the Grail* (61). This is the first clear indication that Merlin's documented truth is communicated differently, as God wordlessly communicates to mankind through the Holy Spirit. Robert's emphasis man's inability to create truth suggests he was familiar with the ideas of Richard of St. Victor who contends that "more emphasis must be placed on unction than on inquiry, on inner joy than on the tongue, on God's gift to humanity—the Holy Spirit—than on words and writing" (Burgess 1997, 74). As one who holds the powers of the Trinity, Merlin would most certainly communicate his knowledge to Blaise in the style of the Holy Spirit.

Essentially, Merlin does not need to write, because like God, he is able to conceive and transfer an idea instantly. Jacques Derrida (1981) creates an analogy that is useful here. Using Socrates' "The Father of Logos," Derrida explains that Socrates attempts to show his student, Phaedrus, that there exists a "living word of knowledge" connected to the soul, and a written word which is only an image (75). In the analogy he creates a king called "God the king" who cannot write and therefore determines that the value of the commodity of writing is zero (76). The king summarizes by announcing, "God the king does not know how to write, but that ignorance or incapacity only testifies to his sovereign independence. He has no need to write" (76). The point is well-taken. Why would God write? For Robert's purposes, he links his Merlin to the Holy Spirit, who Leland Haines (2000) describes as "beyond the ability of the written

word” (2). The comparison is clear. Robert’s emphasis in establishing truth in a human forum through written words, by contrast asserts Merlin’s function as an authentic facilitator of God’s word to his people. Similar to Acts 2:1-5 when the Holy Spirit moves like a “rushing mighty wind” through the Apostles, the method of the corporal body of Merlin dictating his perceptions to Blaise imitates the process of the written word because Blaise now knows, intuitively, what to write as he documents Merlin’s truth for others to read. Here, Merlin acting as the Holy Spirit communicates fully with Blaise—beyond the ability of words—actively moving *through* the mind of the receiver of his message; according to Haines (2000), the Spirit must be “experienced, realized” (2).

Merlin’s spoken word, in its purest sacred form, does not suffice as truth, so he must work to develop trust with all future human encounters. His demon father is a problematic obstacle despite Merlin’s rejection of him and all he represents. It was even difficult for Blaise to ignore the potential evil that he once imagined simmering within the young mage. After all, the original purpose for Merlin’s conception was to generate an evil, prevaricating spokesperson for the demons – one who could speak misleading, encouraging words towards man’s devilish achievements and overall, “deceive men and women alike” (46). The purity of Merlin’s words and intentions, then, are called into question because of the illegitimacy of his origin or his odd appearance.

Eventually, Merlin does earn the trust of the Kings he works with, maybe because a softening in Merlin’s emotional armor gradually takes place, allowing his genuine capacity to respect and care for ordinary people to surface, especially with King Pendragon and his brother. Merlin is not all human, but because he inherits emotions from his mother, others do trust him because he is honest. In fact, it soon becomes evident that Merlin dearly loves King Pendragon

and Uther. Micha (2003) points out that Merlin “tells them so ‘very tenderly’ and they are touched to see him ‘humble himself so’” (304). For many years Merlin has guided them well, often with frank advice that has proven to benefit the kingdom. Because Merlin generally maintains an untouchable persona, this affectionate scene is a fine moment in the progression of the story; it is a revelation that changes the characterization of Merlin from this time forward.

Upon Pendragon’s death, his brother Uther, is now King Utherpendragon. Merlin keeps to his plan and guides him to create the Round Table, the final table of three, that will hold the promise of receiving Christ’s love (92). King Utherpendragon arranges a celebration of the Round Table at Carduel in Wales at Pentecost, the Christian festival celebrating the descent of the Holy Spirit on the disciples. Greco (1998) explains that the “lineage of the table is new material added to the legend by Robert” (44). Wace’s earlier table was different, claims Greco, as it “was round to avoid disputes among Arthur’s knights about who deserved the place of honor” (44). In this setting, the table of the Grail directed by Joseph fits in with the celebration. The Holy Spirit is clearly present at this Pentecostal feast as Welker (1989) describes his influence on those in attendance:

On Earth, human beings are distinguished and separated by languages, races, genders, and social stratification. That the spirit is poured out ‘from heaven’ means that such human beings, with each other and for each other, generate a trusting familiarity with God’s will and thus a trusting familiarity with the world, that they never achieve in their normal, finite, concrete perspectives. (13)

Like the experience at Joseph’s table, Uther’s knights and their families feel such a sense of grace in this place, they implore Utherpendragon thus: “Sire, we’ve no wish ever to move from here” (93). Through these moments of strategizing, guiding history, and even celebration, Merlin’s focus remains steadfast to assure all is in place for the success of the next prophesized keeper of the Grail, Bron’s grandson, Perceval.

One of Merlin's necessary tasks is to make sure that King Arthur will fully establish the Round Table for his knights, the best eventually seeking the Grail Castle, hoping for the honor of taking over as the new Grail keeper. Bringing Arthur into existence, however, becomes rather cumbersome, for Merlin must delve into his own disconcerting scheme of manipulation and deception that leads to the rape of Arthur's mother. The plan is elaborate and successful, but it takes a while to move past the discord of the event. Arthur is prophesized as the last, and thus the one, vital king in the sequence of events that will secure the safety of the Grail, so duplicity becomes a paramount necessity for Merlin to assure the establishment of the knights of the Round Table, the third table of the Grail prophesy with Arthur as king (112-113). Merlin acknowledges the sin of his actions and reveals that King Utherpendragon and Ulfen have been absolved, but Merlin needs the King to agree to have Arthur raised elsewhere to absolve Merlin from the role he played in the act. Therefore, Arthur does not appear in the story until it is time for him to become the king himself. Merlin also leaves "for a long time" until Utherpendragon is on his deathbed (106). Merlin sets the scene for Arthur's reign, and once more travels to Northumberland.

Outside of the church one Sunday soon after, the people find "a miracle" (107). Ashe (2006) points out that it is Robert who first "introduces the famous test that establishes Arthur's right to be king—an anvil and a sword thrust down through it into stone" (118-19). The carved words on the stone read: "Whoever can draw the sword from the stone will be king by the choice of Jesus Christ" (107). To appease the people, Robert includes these engraved words to provide unquestionable authority to the legitimacy of the pronouncement. Kathy Cawsey (2001) suggests that paradoxically, although the inscribed words are unauthorized, that fact implies the statement was placed there by God; "the writing gives meaning to the scene" (90). It is still a challenge to

convince the people that young Arthur is the chosen one, however, and it takes three postponements and three more displays of Arthur's unique ability to extract the sword with ease before the community is willing to set the coronation date, which occurs befittingly on the Celebration of Pentecost.

Throughout the *Merlin*, Robert emphasizes Merlin's complete immersion in this life-long commitment to have one of Arthur's knights locate the Grail Castle and the Grail that holds Christ's blood, relieving the rich Fisher King of his duty after witnessing the mystery of divine Communion. Imagine the spiritual power set aside for this one vital purpose. Merlin's entire exalted life has been devoted to this cause, acting as God on Earth, directing and guiding people and events so they line up perfectly according to the prophecy of the Grail set down by the Holy Spirit. Merlin worked through the time of four Kings, and then he left.

The truth of Merlin's story is much greater than words, and Merlin knows that. For Cooper (2003), the key element is the "hidden discourse"; it is "[t]hat which always remains immanent in the holy stories, that which cannot be expressed" which serves as a "chain of meaning" in Blaise's book (317). It is possible then to justify Merlin's role here as a representative of God in three parts, because he mirrors the actions of God, beyond the ability of the written word, as he guides Blaise's hand. Merlin knows that words are not needed to attain a true Grail experience, an actualized understanding of the sacred communion experience. Merlin knows, but most people do not; therefore, it is for them that he relays Robert's *The Book of the Grail*.

### **Part Six: The *Perceval***

In Robert's work, the Grail represents a concrete symbolic link to the divine mystery of the Christian Eucharist and provides the impetus for Merlin's life from the time of his birth. Merlin has secured Arthur as King, seen the completion of the round table of the Grail served by fifty of the finest knights, and left Arthur with clear instructions regarding the siege perilous, the seat at the Round Table left behind by Judas and Moyes. Arthur is a benevolent ruler who seeks comfort for his people and celebrates the comraderie of his knights. It is satisfying to witness Arthur enjoying his reign during the exhilarating tournaments held at Logres. The focus now moves to Perceval, a gallant knight, frequently touted as the greatest knight in the world. The story of Joseph and of Merlin prepared for what Maddux (1985) calls "the potential heyday of the Round Table, a pseudo-historical glorification of chivalry" (43). Frederick W. Locke (1960) defines what the Grail quest may have meant to the knights of Arthur's round table saying,

"among the archetypal images of mankind, the image of a spiritual quest is fundamental, and for this reason is one of the most profound of all the literary themes. It is the return to whatever is nearest to the heart of each man that sets him on his quest. It is the search for the ultimate foundation of his being, for that which lies behind all the images of reality and which creates for him those images." (3)

Locke precisely describes the spirit of the quest, the heart of the journey that Merlin embodied to prepare for its fulfillment. Merlin, the life of the romance, makes rare appearances in the *Perceval*, and without his guidance, events quickly regress into haphazard redundancy. Without doubt, the Quest for the Grail is born of a sacred inspiration, but this final, anonymously redacted episode is not at all gratifying as a conclusion in Robert's trilogy, because Perceval simply does not grasp Locke's concept of sacred profundity that must reside within the very soul of the Grail seeker.

The essence of Merlin lingers long enough to withstand the introduction of Perceval's character. We learn that Alain li Gros, as a young man described in the *Joseph* as one "blessed with so much of God's grace that no man could have more," has recently died (42). Perceval therefore takes himself to Arthur's court to become a knight. One of the first of many inconsistencies comes to light during Perceval's first tournament at the feast of Pentecost. Upon Arthur's denial of Perceval's request to sit in the empty seat at the Round Table, Perceval threatens to leave the court, causing mighty King Arthur to acquiesce even though Merlin warned Arthur that only the one knight deemed "the most renowned knight in all the world" may take that seat (119). When the seat cracks and the sky grows dark, the audience secretly hopes for a more serious consequence for Perceval. In every way these events are repulsive. The audacity of Perceval, the son of a man touched by God, and the weak spirit of Arthur simply defy the sense of grace we have become accustomed to in the first two episodes of the trilogy, especially at Pentecost.

Once the actual quest for the Grail is announced, it becomes evident that Robert's influence has disappeared for good, except for a few surprising, but necessary, appearances by Merlin, a few of which also defy the expectations of the next Grail Keeper. For example, Merlin appears twice to relay the proper procedure for securing the right to guard the Vessel holding Blood of Christ. Once inside the Grail Castle and seated at the table, the knight must "ask what the Grail is for and who is served with it" (120). As Lang-Sims (1984) reminds us, however, "the questions asked with a pure motive is a sign of readiness [; . . .] the point of such questions is that they must arise spontaneously from the heart, evoking a response" (147). If Merlin needs to twice remind Perceval of the specific words, his eventual role as Grail Keeper holds less value.

The redactor does not effectively maintain the same level of inspirational grace established in the *Joseph*. Once the quest begins, we witness a sharp decline in any sense of the sublime because of Perceval's inability to focus. The elevated spiritual purity established by Joseph and Merlin seeps away into frustration watching Perceval slog through forest after forest. Le Gentil (1959) does give the redactor some credit when he asserts, "there is a certain vagueness as to what his merits are and as to the benefits which his achievement of the Grail quest will bring. Otherwise, his exploits are not consistently haphazard" (261). Respecting Le Gentil's opinion, it is possible to view Perceval's ability to "disentangle himself from the mistress of the chessboard by pleading his commitment to the Grail" (262) as a positive moment, and it must be acknowledged that the land is filled with enchantments, but at this point he has been wandering in the woods for almost ten years and only finds the castle because Merlin points to the specific path he must travel. Even at this moment, when Merlin tells Perceval it will take him one more year to arrive, his ungrateful response is, "Can't you get me there sooner?" (154). Much comfort lies in the knowledge that once Perceval does relieve Bron from his duty, he is filled with the Holy Spirit and that grace assures he will serve God well.

The redactor does deserve recognition for bringing closure to the romance. Even though the ending section, *Mort Artu*, is essentially a summary of Arthur's war with Rome and his death in 542 A.D. borrowed from Geoffrey's *The History of the Kings of Britain* (233-261), he properly ends the reign of Arthur.

Of course, we cannot forget Merlin, our guide through the tale of Robert de Boron. Along the way he provided us with his unique perspective of the Grail's origin and impact of its precious contents through the eyes of the Holy Trinity. He visits Perceval one last time to bring the news of Arthur's death and announces that after he visits Blaise so that he can complete *The*



*Book of the Grail*, “the Lord did not want him to appear to people again, but he would not die until the end of the world” (171). He and Blaise will complete the final chapter in a book transcribed by Blaise that will, if nothing else, remind willing listeners of the limits on human communication as it relates to truth.

After experiencing Robert’s trilogy, his audience can no longer view the chalice of the last supper or the even the chalice of the mass as simply a sacred object. Robert transformed the vessel into an iconic representation of a human connection to a divine Christian source, Christ’s Blood, allowing believers to experience a unique closeness to God. Robert reignited a spiritual practice that had begun long before his own day when people became aware of the significant spiritual potential of a vessel touched by God. No other writings of Robert de Boron have been found. Profoundly inspired in the late Twelfth Century by the Holy Trinity, Robert developed a story that transformed the Biblical record of the Christ’s vessel used at the Last Supper into a Christian relic, a story that holds currency in modern times. Robert insightfully included the popular King Arthur into his romance, now intrinsically connected to the sacred Round Table, in Robert’s hands a gathering place for Arthur’s chivalrous knights seeking the glory of God, and the third and last in a series of tables that began with Christ’s last supper. He assigned authority to his version by giving voice to Joseph of Arimathea’s direction, which originated from God himself. A plan of this magnitude would require an overseer, a character with deep roots in Christian understanding, and one with mystical power of the Holy Trinity, particularly relevant in the Catholic Church during Robert’s time. Robert established a Merlin who brought out the Celtic Myrddin origins, one who not only held a deep-rooted capacity for love, but also carried himself with an air of disciplined purpose to assure the safety of the Holy Grail holding the Eucharistic symbol inherent in the Blood of Christ.

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