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# Augustinian Intrusions in the *Queste del Saint Graal*: Converting 'Pagan Gold' to Christian Currency

DOLORES WARWICK FRESE

Galahad's literary debut in the Vulgate *Queste del Saint Graal* displays ley-lines extrapolated from Augustine's biography, theology, semiotic theory, and polemical controversies, suggesting that this retro-fitted prose fiction can be read productively as a specifically Augustinian confection. (DWF)

When the Cistercian author of the thirteenth-century *Queste del Saint Graal* created his revisionist romance of Arthurian knights searching for mystical bliss, and for the material object that would instantiate such subjective experiences of spiritual *jouissance*, the connection of writing and cosmos had long since assumed the status of an established textual trope.<sup>1</sup> Nearly a century had passed since Bernardus Silvestris composed his *Cosmographia*.<sup>2</sup> In this poetic allegory of creation's origin and animation, a tearful Nature petitions Noys, the Providential Mind of God, to create a more beautiful ordering of the elements than presently exists in Hyle, the unruly primal matter.<sup>3</sup> Concurrent with its metaphysical meanings, Bernardus's 'treatise on the totality of the universe,' as he calls it, carries the Platonic shadow of the writer himself, in the process of creating a more orderly text-world.<sup>4</sup> Centuries earlier 'Augustine the Reader,' as Brian Stock identifies the great Christian neoplatonist who 'reshapes everything that he reads,' had first proposed his influential theory of signs in the course of extended meditations on the ethics of reading; in the Augustinian rubric, textual encounters are seen to establish a signal bond between 'the sender, the receiver, and the sign (normally a word),' and, in the process, ineluctably link the reading of scripturally resonant texts to the possibility of theophanic apprehensions of the incarnate Christ, 'the basis for the concept of a sacred sign.'<sup>5</sup>

So we should not be surprised to find in the Old French *Queste* a dramatized continuum of miraculously inscribed objects—swords, ships, seats of danger,

stones, thrones, road-signs and cenotaphs—all of which arguably provoke recollections of Old and New Testament texts, and all of which serve as narrative and moral directives for the re-education of characters and readers alike. Both are in need of instruction in this prose fiction whose radically revised expectations Nancy Freeman-Regalado situates ‘between the generic motifs and discursive modes of romance and those of religious or didactic texts.’<sup>6</sup> Indeed, within its putative romance idiom, the author of the *Queste del Saint Graal*, like the revisionist Augustine ‘reshaping as he reads,’ likewise seeks to re-order the elements of an extant but often unruly cosmos, a text-world whose constituent elements are comprised of prior Arthurian myths and legends, many of them exhibiting what A. Pauphilet has described as ‘the deformed expression of ancient pagan beliefs.’<sup>7</sup>

One striking example of such ‘ancient pagan belief’ translated from the pre-Christian era into this most Christian of romances has been brilliantly analyzed by Joel Grisward in his discussion of tripartite color symbolism in the *Queste*’s interpolated account of the Legend of the Tree of Life as the Grail adventures near their climax.<sup>8</sup> Grisward focuses on certain post-edenic slips of wood carried out from Paradise by Eve, who in this mythopoetic account inadvertently holds onto a broken branch from the violated white Tree of Knowledge as she leaves the Garden. Taking root where she plants it, the white tree changes to green as Adam and Eve first have intercourse, and later to red when Cain kills Abel beneath its spreading branches.

Realizing that Augustine counted reading and writing ‘among the labours imposed on the first couple as a result of their disobedience in the garden of Eden,’ we can appreciate the *Queste* author’s Augustinian ingenuity as the sign-of-the-text supplied by this ingenious conversion of the ancient signifying colors into the present legendary account of the violated Tree of Life assumes the reader’s familiarity with the literal text of Genesis, even as it distinctly models the implied futurity of all writing.<sup>9</sup> For, millennia later, offshoots of these three preternaturally tinted woods will furnish material for the white, red and green posts of a magnificent antique bed found aboard a mystical ship by Galahad, Perceval, and Bors, the trio of successful Grail questers who model Augustine’s idealized reading community of a catechumenate whose members are all assumed to be literate.<sup>10</sup> In a recuperative revision of Eve’s disastrous counsel to Adam, Solomon, on the advice of his canny wife, has fashioned the tricolored bedposts as a prototextual way of communicating with his lineal descendant Galahad, whose future coming the Old Testament king has prophetically intuited. On this bed, moreover, the three knights find, not only Solomon’s crown and the sword of his father David, but a plenitude of text embroidered onto the rich coverlet whose letters supplement those inscribed on the sword hilt and scabbard, spelling out the cryptic message of predestination for the perfect knight who is to achieve the Grail

and heal the Maimed King, thereby bringing the 'adventures of Britain' to a definitive close.<sup>11</sup> Lancelot's son Galahad—who makes his literary debut in this fiction, arriving at Camelot on Pentecost Sunday simultaneously with the Grail itself—is that hero, designated to take possession of the signified textual plenitude of the sumptuous bed, along with its accompanying artifacts of warfare and kingship conserved on this mystical ship made of 'rot-proof wood.'<sup>12</sup> At one level, then, the *Queste's* orchestrated arrival of the Grail at Camelot on Pentecost Sunday involves a mythical substrate of linguistic plenitude, as the sacred vessel of plenty, which traditionally supplies each person with whatever food he most desires, now becomes fused with that original Pentecostal plenitude, signified by tongues of fire, whereby members of a multilingual audience for the original apostolic confession of Christian faith each heard those divinely inspired utterances pronounced in their own vernacular. In this neo-Augustinian world, the resurrected Christ, as God's Incarnate Word, thus instantiates a kind of incarnational vernacularity.

Astute readers have remarked variously on the significance of the three colors—white, green and red—in this episode; P.M. Matarasso, for example, glosses them as 'the white of purity, the green of piety and the red of sacrifice,' linking these symbolic colors to 'three essential facets of Christ's life on earth.'<sup>13</sup> Grisward, on the other hand, while noting how these colors had assumed the status of iconographic convention in both poetic and pictorial representations of the Trinity and the Crucifixion, traces a far more archaic genealogy of color.<sup>14</sup> He explicates in some detail the symbolic valence and structural deployments of *albat*, *russati*, *virides*, those respective white, red and green designators of sovereignty, force and abundance elucidated by Basanoff, de Vries, Dumézil, Gerschel, Lyle, and others as traditional markers of the functions and respective social classes of rulers, warriors, and agrarian cultivators in the Indo-European systems of the ancient world, although the latter agrarian plenitude is regularly replaced in the *Queste's* revised semiotics by the cultivated abundance of instructive textual artifacts.

Not by chance, then, do we find these three functions (rule, war, sustenance) iconically registered at the outset of the *Queste del Saint Graal* immediately after the departure from Camelot of one hundred and fifty sworn knights, only three of whom—Perceval, Galahad and Bors—will ultimately achieve the adventure of the Grail. When Melias, Galahad's newly knighted squire, naively attempts to appropriate for himself a 'crown of surpassing beauty' positioned on a 'magnificent throne' situated in the midst of a meadow surrounded by 'tables laden with delicacies,' he is chastised immediately by a knight who appears on a 'powerful charger,' critically wounding Melias with a lance tip that remains partially embedded in his flank, like some antique relic of prior myths concerning the Maimed King.<sup>15</sup>

Like numerous other adventures in the thirteenth-century prose *Queste*, this one involves an overwriting of earlier themes and scenes familiarized through the twelfth-century verse romance of Chrétien de Troyes's originary *Perceval, ou le Conte del Graal*.<sup>16</sup> The disabling thigh wound, which theatrically eliminates Galahad's newly knighted squire from the *Queste* while binding him to the wounded Fisher King in need of healing at Chrétien's mysterious Grail Castle, simultaneously allows Melias to stand in for Perceval, the earnest but untutored titular hero of Chrétien's earliest surviving Grail text. For when Chrétien's uncouth protagonist makes his way from the rural Welsh woods to King Arthur's court in search of knighthood, his first adventure likewise confronts him with irresistible icons of sovereignty, force, and abundance as he comes to a meadow displaying a gorgeous tent crowned by a golden eagle signaling imperial rule, a tent which also houses the food, drink, and beautiful damsel of a proud, punishing knight. Unlike the moral corrector in the *Queste*, however, Chrétien's pugilist returns to find his wines and pastries already consumed by the Welsh rustic who also has taken possession of the maiden with a series of kisses forced into her mouth and a violent seizure of her emerald ring which he twists from the weeping damsel's finger before departing.<sup>17</sup>

These oblique gestures toward Chrétien's naive Perceval which can be seen to shape Melias's inaugural adventure become even more unambiguous in the *Queste* author's ensuing representation of Perceval's encounter with the tent damsel.<sup>18</sup> Now the eroticized figure of abundance, presented in the stylized form of a beautiful woman, appears as a latter-day devil-in-disguise, one who turns the tables by seducing the hero, presently poised on a lonely mountain crag, depicted in a tableau of Christ-like prayer and fasting in preparation for his quest.<sup>19</sup> The she-devil arrives at the base of the mountain in a ship clad with conventionally ominous black sails and provides her own 'most magnificent silk tent' which she has her servants erect on the strand.<sup>20</sup> Under its covering shade the prose romancer's Perceval is divested of his armor and weapons, stripped of his tunic, and lulled to sleep.<sup>21</sup> Later, he wakes and is plied with choice dishes and strong wines in a scenic repetition and reversal of Perceval's lavish feasting at Chrétien's Castle of the Fisher King.<sup>22</sup> The retrofitted tent-damsel of the *Queste*—an inversion of Chrétien's beautiful Grail-bearer—then leads the bedazzled Perceval to a 'beautiful and luxurious bed' where her attempt at reverse rape is aborted at the last moment by the naive hero's seemingly chance observation of a 'red cross which was inlaid in the hilt' of his sword, abandoned on the tent floor: 'Directly he saw it he came to his senses. He made the sign of the cross on his forehead and immediately the tent collapsed about him and he was shrouded in a cloud of blinding smoke, while so foul a stench pervaded everything that he thought he must be in hell.'<sup>23</sup>

Beneath the subtle humor that constrains these scenic revisions with their knowing exploitation of Chrétien's courtly romance we can discern important theoretical issues at play in the generic transformations we have been reviewing. They involve 'the introduction of a new diction that does not undo but does subdue the force of the received concepts,' where conceptual changes involving 'epistemological and moral hypotheses' may be signaled by what Ralph Cohen has called the 'important indicator' of parody.<sup>24</sup>

The *Queste* author's parody of Chrétien's Grail romance thus inscribes a revisionist move cognate with those ingenious recontextualizations of passages from the Vulgate Cycle's Prose *Lancelot* where, as Elspeth Kennedy convincingly demonstrates, 'the same passage, without a word being changed within it, can be given a new meaning' when re-read in light of later events, once the romance in which it first appeared becomes incorporated into a cyclic romance that now includes the *Queste del Saint Graal*.<sup>25</sup> Among her exemplary specimen texts Kennedy includes those episodes where Galehot, Lancelot's friend, dies due to his separation from the hero, with Galehot's foreboding dreams, interpreted by one of the king's wise clerks, presenting the love of Lancelot and Guinevere 'for the first time in the romance as destructive and sinful.'<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in passages dedicated to Lancelot's winning of his name through the performance of marvelous feats in the cemetery of the Dolorous Guard, soon to be renamed Joyous Guard as the hero 'braves the perilous pit and other great dangers to take the keys of enchantment,' we learn that Lancelot's baptismal name had been Galahad (Galaaz).<sup>27</sup> As Kennedy notes, 'At this stage, the name Galaaz has no mystic significance in the text' and in neither these nor other of her cited instances are the passages, composed prior to the creation of the *Queste*, pointing 'forward to a Galahad not yet born who will surpass his father.'<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, re-read in light of that latter-day romance, we can appreciate the recreative *clinamen* or 'revisionary swerve,' a literary version of Lucretius's 'slight swerve of the atoms' which enables and energizes all of nature's cosmic innovations, and which, in the case of literary innovation, as Harold Bloom has argued, 'always must be considered as though it were simultaneously intentional and involuntary.'<sup>29</sup>

The infusion of theological orthodoxy that characterizes the *Queste* is thus to be understood as a conceptually profound revisionist move. It greatly tempers the mythic substrate smoldering at the heart of the Vulgate Cycle's manifold tales of Lancelot du Lac, his youthful nurturing in a subaqueous Otherworld by the quasi-divine Lady of the Lake, and his coming to the Arthurian court where supreme displays of prowess, service to the king and devotion to the queen have earned him the undisputed title of 'Best Knight in the World.' The swerve or shift of meaning attending the creation of the *Queste*'s moral cosmos necessarily strips Lancelot of this title, reassigning it

to his son Galahad, who makes his literary debut in this consummate 'retro' fiction.

Whether we view Galahad, as Pauphilet describes him, as 'a messianic figure,' or perceive him, as Matarasso notes that others have done, as a priggish 'cardboard saint' who 'seems too rarefied a figure'; whether his creation satisfies a fictional need for some 'long-awaited deliverer and the supreme hero of the quest,' or constitutes an 'unfortunate...burlesque on the conception of another and greater Messiah'—both positions suggested by Frappier as critical possibilities for the Prose *Lancelot's* culminating event—few would argue with Frappier's general assertion that 'the begetting of Galaad is the hinge on which the whole book turns.'<sup>30</sup>

Imagined as a literary rather than a literal 'conception,' we must then ask what particular imaginative circumstances govern Galahad's thirteenth-century creation. For this conception involves a carefully planned pregnancy, a deliberate *felix culpa* whose inventions are tied to needs more textual than sexual. Putting the key questions another way, we might imagine the blessed boy himself as paraphrasing the opening moral interrogations of the old Baltimore Catechism to ask 'Who made me?' and 'Why did he make me?'

In answering these questions, I propose that this fourth of the five fictions now comprising the Vulgate Cycle can be read productively as a specifically Augustinian confection. The intricate ties to Cistercian spirituality of this thirteenth-century tale of Grail questers have long been attended by a series of scholars ranging from Pauphilet to Matarasso.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, I am suggesting that this thirteenth-century introduction of Galahad into the Grail story also reveals foundational ley-lines extrapolated directly from the biography, theology, semiotic theory and polemical controversies that shaped much of the Augustinian canon. Nor should this be surprising, since the Cistercian influence of Bernardine mysticism that had emerged in the prior century represented a development that was 'nothing if not Augustinian.'<sup>32</sup> In Augustine's *Confessions*, *City of God*, *On Christian Doctrine*, and in a series of his writings against the Pelagians, the author of the *Queste del Saint Graal* found prime matter for his belated invention of Galahad.<sup>33</sup>

Many of Galahad's specific chivalric undertakings as he brings the so-called 'adventures of Britain' to their close while restoring the 'Maimed King to health' can be seen to carry forward by elegant acts of fictional rapprochement the textual agenda of the Augustinian canon. What follows will sketch in an exemplary rather than exhaustive fashion the surprising breadth and depth of the *Queste's* imaginative debt to Augustine's writings. This is a debt whose payment lies largely in the hands of Galahad, as the *Queste* repeatedly exposes the glamour of Camelot's secular heroics as less-than-sufficient. This general trajectory, and the agonized narrative dilations that record the painful confession, tearful repentance and peristaltically slow moral ascent

of Lancelot—imagined here, like Augustine, in recovery from decades of sexual addiction—conform the new fictional silhouette of Lancelot to the autobiographical outlines Augustine records in his *Confessions*.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, the very act of Lancelot's begetting of Galahad on the daughter of the Fisher King (described in the cyclical Prose *Lancelot*) when Lancelot, drugged and deceived, believes his amorous tryst to be with Guinevere, may now be contextualized, in the manner of Kennedy's 'retrofitted' fictional effects, as an Augustinian act of deluded confusion concerning the ultimate object of his love. Such a reading also supports the strong Augustinian inflection of the *Queste*'s seemingly over-determined conclusion when Lancelot's specular child is taken from earth by an early death, just as Adeodatus, the boy begotten by Augustine upon his unnamed Carthaginian mistress, was destined to die young.<sup>35</sup>

Deliberate Augustinian resonances appear as well in those latter-day episodes of the *Queste* where chivalric father and son—first brought together by this author under the auspices of Pentecostal feasting, when both Galahad and the Grail appear simultaneously at the Arthurian Round Table—now enjoy a final reunion, permitted 'more than half a year' together.<sup>36</sup> This reunion, dedicated to the pursuit of marvelous adventure and spiritual conversation, takes place on board a boat whose description as having 'neither sail nor oar' identifies this singular craft as a vessel of faith as well as the Church itself: *ecclesia est navis*.<sup>37</sup> It is likewise an adventure marked by Galahad's touching acknowledgement of Lancelot's natural paternity: 'Upon God's name,' Galahad says, 'I have desired to see and be with you beyond all men alive. And it is only natural that I should, for in you is my beginning.'<sup>38</sup> While Lancelot and Galahad dedicate themselves to 'living a life wholeheartedly vowed to the service of Our Lord,' the *Queste* author thus ingeniously recuperates, for purposes of fictional surplus, that brief but intense post-Pentecostal experience of religious community narrated by Augustine in *Confessions*, as that father and son dwelt together in Thagaste from late 388 AD until some time in the following year, when Adeodatus, baptised along with his father in the prior Eastertide, was to die in the flower of his youth.

In similar fashion, when young Galahad is summoned to leave the mystical ship, he parts with Lancelot, kissing his father while lovingly commending him to Christ. When a voice from heaven announces that 'neither one shall see the other more until the dread and awful day when Our Lord shall render unto each his due,' Lancelot asks that Galahad petition the Master that he not 'let me quit His service.' Readers of the *Queste* will recognize 'the Master' as an appellation whose ubiquitous presence typically serves to mark moments of particular doctrinal significance. But the term also recollects Augustine's own treatise entitled *On the Teacher* [*de Magistro*]. Not surprisingly, then,



Galahad, ever an orthodox theologian, answers, 'Sir, there is no prayer so efficacious as your own. Be therefore mindful of yourself.'<sup>39</sup>

In this moment of pre-Wordsworthian role reversal, where Galahad-the-child serves as spiritual father to Lancelot-the-man, we are invited to recall Augustine's own valorization of Adeodatus as a spiritually precocious son, a 'boy...born of me in the flesh, out of my sin. Well had you made him [O Lord my God]...and in power of mind he surpassed many grave and learned men...Creator of all things, and most powerful to reform our deformities, to you do I confess your gifts. For in that boy I owned nothing but the sin. That he was brought up by us in your discipline, to that you and none other inspired us.'<sup>40</sup>

Recently, Robert R. Edwards has written an acute analysis of 'Desire in Saint Augustine's *Confessions*,' attending closely to this foundational 'story of spiritual conversion structured by providence yet working through desire,' where '[f]riendship, another cognate of desire, develops from a classical ideal of reciprocity to a metaphor of the soul's union with God.'<sup>41</sup> Edwards sees Augustine's narrative structure as being organized around 'his story of demand and repletion,' where '[d]esire can be distinguished from concupiscence in the sense that concupiscence applies to both what we have and what we do not have, whereas desire is for something absent.'<sup>42</sup> This distinction sheds important light on the *Queste* author's revisionist assessments of the previously valorized love of Lancelot for the Queen, as well as illuminating the thematics of friendship between the Arthurian community in general and that of the three successful Grail questers in particular—Galahad, Percival, and Bors—who, alone of the many who set out, finally achieve the object of desire.

As Edwards notes of Augustine's 'complex reflection' on the topic of desire in *Confessions*, and its binding presence as a 'powerful thematic structure' that passes beyond surface events to form a 'vast, connecting metaphor extending to the desire for God,' this drive for post-erotic fulfillment surpasses the reductive pursuit of 'mere blind appetite.'<sup>43</sup> Indeed, as I have suggested earlier, the linguistic latency that attends the Grail's arrival at Camelot at Pentecost, along with the arrival of Galahad, fuses the traditional 'gift of tongues' to the post-resurrection mystery of Christ the Incarnate Word, to celebrate and fictionally articulate an analogue of Augustine's own inscribing of the transcendent moment with Monica at Ostia shortly before his mother's death. Here, as Edwards notes, '[t]he two of them rise up "ardentior affectu" ("with our affections burning"),' as 'their ascent combines the interior silence of infancy ("interius cogitando") with the sociability of speech ("loquendo"), and they reach "regionem ubertatis indeficientis, ubi pascis Israhel in aeternum veritate pabulo" ("that region of never-failing plenty where *Thou feedest Israel*").'<sup>44</sup> Augustine's supremely transcendent moment, and those moments

in the *Queste* where human seekers are allowed to approach, and in the case of Galahad, to finally achieve the Grail's plenitude, are ineluctably linked verbal occasions.

Furthermore, Augustine himself supplies an explicit textual precedent from his own writings for a fictionalizing of Adeodatus, along with a subtle reading directive to that text, when he tells us that 'There is one of our books which is entitled *On the Teacher* [*de Magistro*] and in it he [Adeodatus] speaks with me. You know that his are all the ideas which are inserted there, as from the person of the one talking with me, when he was in his sixteenth year. I had experience of many still more wonderful things in him. To me his power of mind was a source of awe. Who except you [O God] is the worker of such marvels?'<sup>45</sup>

If the *Confessions*, then, supplies both a biographical template and a textual precedent for the fictional conception of Galahad, Augustine's *City of God* similarly furnishes a model for the *Queste*'s two cities of Camelot and Sarras. These are the secular and sacred locales that come to circumscribe all of Galahad's literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical adventuring in the *Queste*. The two theopolitical kingdoms function in the *Queste* like Augustine's 'City of God' and the secular 'City of the World,' detailed throughout *City of God*. Arthur's Camelot, accordingly, is a civic enterprise whose time-bound theatre of secular concern centers chiefly on power and glory in this world. Like Augustine's Rome, Arthur's Camelot is destined to fall. The sacred city of Sarras, on the other hand, transcends history and geography while incorporating all their temporal phenomena of time and space into its own eternal design.

As such, Sarras serves as a virtual model for the Christian church whose members, according to the moral cosmos articulated in Augustine's *City of God*, continuously experience the living reality of Christ's life in their individual and collective lives. In a number of ways, then, the City of Sarras in the *Queste del Saint Graal* serves fictionally to instantiate aspects of Augustine's *City of God*, a work that Thomas Merton has in fact characterized as 'the autobiography of the Church written by the most Catholic of her great saints.'<sup>46</sup>

Church history further constrains fictional imagination as Sarras initially enters the *Queste* as a vaguely Middle Eastern first-century locale. Here, as we learn from a White Knight and from monastic holy men instructing the Grail questers as they offer them hospitality on their journeying, the infidel King Evelach had undergone Christian conversion through a fortuitous encounter with Josephus, son of Joseph of Arimathea, imagined as moving slowly toward Britain with the relics of Christ's passion.<sup>47</sup> Evelach will later take Christian baptism, the new name of King Mordrain, and the redemptive identity of the Maimed King, a staple character in prior pagan grail legends. These fictions

are themselves undergoing a process of literary conversion, made cognate to the fictionalized Christian conversion of the King himself.

The anonymous author of the *Queste* thus bears dramatic witness to Augustine's assertion, in the treatise *On Christian Doctrine*, that the 'translation' of such 'pagan gold' from the pre-Christian textual tradition to the redeemed Christian milieu is not simply an authorized, but a divinely mandated activity. Unlike his contemporary, Jerome, who confesses to a dream vision wherein a divinely commissioned agent flagellates him for his continuing attachment to the pagan textual tradition, the literary appropriation of pagan and/or secular fiction is thus, for Augustine, to be creatively carried out in a manner analogous to the despoiling of their Egyptian slavemasters by the Israelites; they appropriated their clothing, vases, and ornamental gold and silver, says Augustine, 'as if to put them to a better use,' that is, the Christian reader and/or writer 'should take this treasure with him for the just use of teaching the gospel.'<sup>48</sup> This, I suggest, is precisely, and self-consciously, what the thirteenth-century author of the *Queste del Saint Graal* has set out to accomplish with his preservations, recontextualizations, and Augustinian amplifications of inherited, often archaic, materials, for purposes of evangelical display.

There is considerable adaptive activity, for example, in his byzantine redeployments of the traditionally Christian insignia associated with the imperial presence of the Emperor Constantine III in Roman Britain, and hence with the proto-Arthurian historical time-frame associated with the early history of Christianity in the British Isles, as the Christian sign-of-the-cross—said in legendary accounts to have appeared in the fourth-century sky the night before Constantine's Battle of Milvian Bridge, accompanied by the famous motto '*In Hoc Signo Vincit*'—is a sign made to reappear proleptically on the shield of the beleaguered King Evelach.<sup>49</sup> Like Constantine, Evelach has been promised victory under the sign of the crucified when he goes to battle against the pagan King Tholomer. A cross of sendal, fashioned by Josephus, son of Joseph of Arimathea, for Evelach's shield metathesizes into the image of the bleeding body of Christ. This embodied image, in turn, dissolves on the occasion of Evelach's baptism, to be replaced later by the rationalized heraldic device of the Red Cross, traced onto the now-blank shield with the living red blood of the dying Josephus.<sup>50</sup>

This Red Cross, in turn, becomes the blazon for Galahad, even as the shield of the now Christian King Mordrain will become Galahad's shield, preserved for centuries in the abbey of white monks who are saving it for the knight destined to bring the 'adventures of Britain' to an end. The first and last Christian Kings of Sarras—Mordrain and Galahad—are thus made semiotically present to one another, even as the mystical City of God is made to participate in the iconography long associated with mytho-historical

legends of Christian conversion in pre-Arthurian Roman Britain. The same aesthetic operation that deliberately collapses historical time for purposes of semiotic representation here and elsewhere in the *Queste del Saint Graal* thus involves a quintessential feature of Augustine's own theology of time which accommodates both temporal and eternal realities into the life of the Church.<sup>51</sup>

Construing Sarras as a site that is simultaneously literal and mystical, and hence a textual sign designed to accommodate the Augustinian concept of the 'City of God,' we can better appreciate the *Queste* author's conjoined image of the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant, as these are vested in the single figure of Galahad. Undeniably the book's best pugilist, Lancelot's son is nevertheless committed to Augustine's just-war theory: in one particularly vexing incident which Matarasso deems striking 'at the very heart of the author's method,' Galahad is seen to spare the lives of the Seven Deadly Sins when these combatants, appearing as seven antagonistic brothers, are found besieging a Castle of Maidens.<sup>52</sup> As the Seven flee the scene of their rout, Galahad refuses pursuit, and then eludes detection by Gawain and Owein who are trying, vainly, to catch up with the Good Knight whose company they desire for all the wrong reasons.

When Gawain and Owein, who prize rather than deplore aggression, subsequently come upon the Seven Brothers, they hack away at their bodies in a festivity of violence, leaving them for dead on the field. Their delusional triumph, however, is roundly condemned by a holy hermit who construes this as vicious rather than virtuous behavior, and explicitly contrasts their aggression with the psychologically and theologically superior model of Galahad: 'He whom you seek, Galahad the Good Knight, did not act thus: he overcame without destroying them.'<sup>53</sup> Augustine's explicit deploring of armed combat is made liminal in this episode to an astute allegorical representation of sin's place in the redemptive scheme, an Augustinian concept reflected in the thirteenth-century meditations of Julian of Norwich, a mystic who learns from Christ's 'Shewings' that sin is 'behovabil,' that is, it 'behooves' us in ways that elude ordinary comprehension.<sup>54</sup>

In the *Queste*'s one instance depicting Galahad as having slaughtered a group of knights who wrongfully occupy a castle, the hero chides his companions-in-arms for rejoicing in their death, even as he rejects the post-Albigensian argument of Sir Bors that 'Our Lord...did not want them to remain alive; and so He sent us hither to destroy them.' 'That,' says Sir Galahad, 'is a most inadequate explanation.'<sup>55</sup> Galahad thus enacts consistently Augustine's demanding critique of all wars—even those so-called 'just wars'—whose necessity, Augustine insists, the wise man will 'rather lament...if he remembers that he is a man.'<sup>56</sup>

In the creation of the two cities of Camelot and Sarras, in Galahad's pacifism, and most dramatically in the remarkable 'Legend of the Tree of Life' which the *Queste* author intrudes into the story of Arthurian adventures, Augustine's *City of God* and his polemical controversies with Pelagius surrounding the doctrine of Original Sin, continue to cast their long shadow over the *Queste del Saint Graal*. For despite its encyclopedic inclusiveness, which (like the Arthurian legend itself) includes in its beginning an account of the fall of Troy, the heart of Augustine's *City of God*, as Thomas Merton notes, can be found in Books 14, 19, and 22.<sup>57</sup> These deal, respectively, with the origins of the City of Man, founded upon the acts and consequences of Original Sin (Book 14); with a laying out of Augustine's elaborate theology of peace—personal, familial, national, global, and cosmic (Book 19); and finally, a treating of the communal vision of the elect in Paradise (Book 22).

Just as Augustine's *City of God* closes with its teleological vision of Paradise, Galahad experiences a concluding vision in the final Grail Mass, celebrated at Sarras at the end of the *Queste*. In this concluding fictional scenario, where Josephus himself presides over Galahad's sublime translation to Heaven, the son of Joseph of Arimathea is described in episcopal garb as one might, indeed, iconically imagine Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, presiding at the conclusion of his own textual adventures as 'the venerable man who stood in bishop's robes before the altar.'<sup>58</sup>

Equally suggestive of deliberate Augustinian resonance is the *Queste*'s imaginatively engaging, if somewhat bizzare, envisioning of an early post-edenic act of sexual intercourse, a command performance of copulation divinely decreed and ordered to be carried out, albeit in flaming shame while cloaked with a merciful cover of darkness, beneath the violated Tree of Knowledge. For here we find a fictional distillation of many of those remarkable dilations in *City of God* wherein Augustine hypothesizes various models of sexual intercourse as it might have been had there been no Fall, with the male member, which is now 'moved in his body only by lust,' then being 'moved only at will' as easily as some now wiggle their ears, move their scalps, sweat, shed tears, or musically break wind at will, with semen introduced into the woman's womb then as easily as now 'the menstrual flow of blood can be emitted from the womb of a virgin.'<sup>59</sup>

Furthermore, in the divinely designed conception of Galahad, begotten in sin and darkness but perfected by grace building on corrected nature, I believe that we have a neo-natal fiction whose specifically Augustinian intrusions act out with considerable sophistication the theological positions articulated by Augustine's anti-Pelagian treatises. In these writings, the polemical Bishop of Hippo responds to Pelagius's heretically condemned assertion that 'a man can be without sin and easily keep the commandments of God, if he wishes,' since Adam's sin 'injured only himself and not the human race.'<sup>60</sup>

I suggest that the creation of Galahad, and the moral cosmos brought into being to support his advent, has been specifically ordered according to Augustine's refutation of this heretical proposition and its highly nuanced ramifications. Accordingly, Galahad—who alone among the questers is never depicted as experiencing fear, fatigue, hunger, thirst, anger, or overmastering sexual impulse—is not simply the new 'Christ-figure' for which Matarasso has argued with such eloquence and scripturally supported force and conviction.<sup>61</sup> For Christ, the Incarnate Word, as a consequence of Adam's sin, shared fully in the post-lapsarian frailties of human spirit and flesh. Rather, in a bold excursion of typology-in-reverse, Galahad represents the *Queste* author's innovatively Augustinian construction of 'what might have been the human condition,' had Adam never sinned.<sup>62</sup> Consequently, fallen Lancelot's peerless son, introduced into the Arthurian milieu whose literal-historical time frame was fifth-century Britain, fictionally instantiates the issues central to the fifth-century controversies that engaged Augustine in his passionate disputes with the British Pelagius concerning the reality of Original Sin and its consequential effects on human nature. Galahad, then, represents a version of perfectly redeemed Adamic man, one whose gratuitously restored 'natural' possibilities include the freedom to schedule his own departure from this world. In this connection, it is useful to note Augustine's description in the *City of God* of original man, prior to Original Sin: 'He lived without any want,' suffering neither hunger, thirst, age, nor disease, and possessing the power to prolong this felicity for as long as he chose.<sup>63</sup>

Accordingly, the *Queste's* Galahad is given a similar opportunity to choose his own moment of translation from this life to the next. During a nocturnal prayer vigil, a magisterial voice speaks to the holy hero who, as new King of Sarra, now desires nothing but union with God: 'Be not down-hearted, Galahad, for Our Lord will do thy pleasure in this matter: at whatever hour thou shalt ask to die in the body it shall be granted thee, and thou shalt live in the spirit and have joy everlasting.'<sup>64</sup>

We are not allowed to imagine that Christ-like Galahad's special spiritual status is something constructed outside the operations of human will, which is always free to choose wrongly as well as rightly. We hear a holy hermit telling Galahad that '...your coming must be compared to the coming of Jesus Christ, in semblance only, not in sublimity.'<sup>65</sup> Elsewhere, Lancelot learns from a holy hermit that Merlin's prophecy predicting the arrival of the Perfect Knight who is to 'exemplify the sum of earthly chivalry' is also a doctrinally constrained prophetic utterance: 'None the less, for all it is true that this knight has now a greater share of valour and hardihood than any other, you may be sure that if he gave himself to mortal sin—from which

Our Lord preserve him in His pity—he would get no further in this Quest than any other ordinary knight.<sup>66</sup>

This Grail quest, whose ‘final cause’ consists of the anagogical achievement of union with God in heaven, is also assigned a ‘formal cause’ which specifies that the newly created Arthurian hero will bring the ‘adventures of Britain’ to a close while healing the Maimed King. Like the apocalyptic figure in medieval legends of the ‘Last Roman Emperor,’ Galahad’s apotheosis transpires in the Holy Land where he surrenders his royal office to God surrounded by a supernatural aura as the Grail artifacts are translated from their earthly setting, never to return.<sup>67</sup> Galahad’s adventures, as I have been suggesting, repeatedly involve his engagement with appropriations from the errors of Pelagius, condemned as heretical. Commonly designated as ‘the British heresy’ and bearing the name of Augustine’s own doctrinal opponent at the Synod of Diospolis held in Palestine in 415 AD, Pelagianism thus seems implicated directly in those ‘adventures of Britain’ that dramatize departures from Augustine’s orthodox positions on Christian grace, free will, predestination and wounded human nature.<sup>68</sup>

The ‘Briton Pelagius’ is that same heretic excoriated by Bede in his *History of the English Church and People* for having so ‘presumptuously belittled the grace of God’ while having ‘spread far and wide his noxious and abominable teaching that man had no need of God’s grace.’<sup>69</sup> Bede, in fact, attests to a long-standing literary as well as a religious and historical tradition of Pelagian errors and Augustinian refutations of them, when he cites heroic verses by Prosper the rhetorician that satirize the ‘British heresy’ and its founder: ‘Against the great Augustine see him crawl, / This wretched scribbler with his pen of gall!’<sup>70</sup>

Furthermore, Bede’s specific contextualization of the introduction of Pelagianism into Britain makes sequent entries of the fifth-century British victories of Ambrosius Aurelianus against the Angles and the simultaneous introduction of the Pelagian heresy that had ‘seriously infected the faith of the British Church.’<sup>71</sup> Bede thus rhetorically dramatizes the fifth-century time-frame associated with both the historical heresy and the mythical Holy Grail, explicitly naming the collateral ancestor of King Arthur—Ambrosius Aurelianus—as a prelude to denunciatory accounts of the heresy’s recurrent intrusions into the life of the English church with its perennial claims of human perfectionism that persisted for centuries thereafter, like a wound that refuses to close.

Bede’s subtle featuring of historical dates associating Arthurian legend and the Pelagian heresy calls further attention to the *Queste* author’s notable over-specificity—what Michael Riffaterre designates as a textual ‘ungrammatically’—concerning the date of both Galahad’s and the healing Grail’s simultaneous arrival at Camelot on Pentecost.<sup>72</sup> Lancelot reads out the



'freshly traced' letters on the Siege Perilous, while noting the singularity of the adventure, stating that 'this is the first Pentecost to follow the span of four hundred and fifty-four years' since the Passion and Resurrection of Christ.<sup>73</sup> What are we to make of this inscription of 454 years, a dating which silently requires the addition of the conventional 33 years of Christ's life on earth prior to the first Pentecost? Why, in short, has the *Queste* author chosen to dramatize the number 454, in the course of invoking the implied date of 487?

Aware of the potential for over-ingenuity in what follows, but encouraged by Augustine's own insistence that 'no one doubts that things are perceived more readily through similitude,' while 'what is sought with difficulty is discovered with more pleasure,' I venture the suggestion that these convolute rubrics of dating appear to be a deliberate device of temporal similitude, designed at the narrative outset to usher readers into an Augustinian fiction of great semiotic sophistication.<sup>74</sup> Discussing the cipher of numbers written into sacred scripture, Augustine notes that 'numbers and patterns of numbers are placed by way of similitudes in [the sacred] books as secrets which are often closed to readers because of ignorance of numbers.'<sup>75</sup> Accordingly, it is tantalizing to observe that the inscription of 454 (+33, or 487 years), written on the *Queste*'s Seige Perilous, supplies the centennial date for Augustine's baptism as a Christian Catholic in 387 AD.<sup>76</sup> At the same time, Lancelot's explicit noting of the term of 454 years, read as a signal associated with Galahad's first appearance at Camelot, can be imagined as a simultaneous way of registering the centennial date for Augustine's birth in 354 AD. In ways that are simultaneously indirect and over-specified, the *Queste* author thus constructs a convolute connection between signal Arthurian and Augustinian dates. Furthermore, in ciphering these numbers the reader is ingeniously brought to the fact—surely not lost on Augustine—that the span of years between his own birth and baptism numbered 33, initiating him into the Christian life at exactly the age conventionally attached to the completion of Christ's life on earth.

Whether or not one is persuaded of the involucral signs of recursive number here, it seems clear that the Cistercian author of the thirteenth-century *Queste del Saint Graal* entered deeply into the symbolic chivalric mentality of Bernardine Cistercianism and felt himself to be a textual combatant on behalf of the Bride of Christ. Centuries earlier, Augustine had taken up his pen as the defensive weapon of choice against his heretical adversary, Pelagius. Centuries later, making his own theologically corrective intervention, the thirteenth-century author of the *Queste* chose to position his own remarkable chivalric fiction squarely within the terms of the original Augustinian polemic, and in the process succeeded in rewriting the moral cosmos for an entire world of pre-existent Arthurian fictions.



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## NOTES

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