The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages

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Published by Cornell University Press


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CHAPTER SIX

Moral Labyrinths in Medieval Literature

Quod evenit in labyrinths properantibus; ipsa illos velocitas implicat.

This is what happens when you hurry through a maze: the faster you go, the worse you are entangled.

Seneca, Epistulae morales 44

If the medieval visual arts typically stress the artistic labor involved in the domus daedali as an artifact in bono, many literary texts, influenced by the context of the Cretan myth, take the labor intus completely or partially in malo. The labyrinth becomes preeminently a temptation to moral error, an emblem of the world as an almost inextricable occasion of sin. Medieval meanings of error, reflected in vernacular cognates, suggest many pejorative possibilities, all of which we will encounter: instability and incertitude; sin; madness; false opinion or culpable ignorance; heresy; a straying from the right path.¹ Whether its architect is God or sinful man, whether it is really or only superficially attractive, whether its metaphorical transformations are based on the essential qualities of the labyrinth itself or on the mythical plot that surrounds it, the moral maze is intensely perilous, to be trodden carefully, avoided entirely, or escaped as quickly as possible. As with the visual mazes of Chapter 5, we are dealing here with rather a mixed bag of examples: not all moral mazes are completely evil any more than all visual mazes embody only admirable labyrinthine artistry. When the labyrinths that are moral arenas are created by God, they may be paragons of art like so many mazes discussed in Chapter 5, but when they are

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built by men or women, their artistry is more deceptive. In either case, danger is more prominent than artistry, even when that danger is disguised by beauty (and therefore the more treacherous). Like the intellectual labyrinths of Chapter 7, moral mazes may teach valuable lessons, but their chief purpose is not instruction. The labyrinthine quality most emphasized here, as in early Christian mazes in malo, is inextricability: moral mazes are fatal prisons unless special guidance or exceptional virtue circumvent their entanglements, and if learning is involved, it is moral rather than intellectual. These labyrinths accent moral choice, either at the point of entry or within. Although medieval writers seldom envisage moral mazes as specifically multicursal or unicursal, some completely bad mazes (mazes of heresy, for instance) are inherently unicursal, entailing only the choices to enter and then to persist or retreat, whereas more polyvalent mazes (e.g., mazes representing the world created by God) involve repeated internal choice. The duality characteristic of all mazes is present here as well. The most perilous prisons may seem most enchanting. If moral confusions lead to desperate ends, divine order is thereby asserted. If God builds a complex and multicursal world, men define their own course through it. If sinners become embroiled in means, paths, and processes, authors and readers have a privileged vision of ends, of the whole maze as complex pattern and product. These dualities, dependent on point of view, will become especially marked in some of the texts examined in the last part of this chapter.

I have divided this chapter into three sections. The first describes some particularly interesting mythographic texts—moralistic interpretations of the story of the Cretan labyrinth read in the context of other classical myths. Accounts like these would have been familiar to most medieval writers, and it is against this quasi-commentarial background that some of the more creative developments of the idea of the labyrinth can best be read. The second section offers a representative survey of nonmythographic texts that illustrate, with greater or lesser degrees of skill, common literary associations and uses of the maze. At worst, these examples illustrate labyrinthine clichés and give us a sense of what middle-brow audiences might have understood in the way of labyrinth references; at best, they show major writers treating the idea of the labyrinth with considerable originality, but usually fairly briefly or intermittently. The final and longest section offers readings of four texts that develop the idea of the labyrinth creatively and in a sustained fashion. Here the idea of the labyrinth begins to serve as a guide to our understanding of a work of art as a whole.

The mazes encountered in these three sections are metaphorical.

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2. In La Queste del Saint Graal, we shall see a rare occurrence of a hierarchy of mazes: pathless, multicursal, and unicursal.
Therefore it is important to recall that some medieval literary references to the labyrinth do not involve metaphor; especially in the later Middle Ages, there was a healthy concern with the literal status and interpretation of texts. Especially in commentaries on and retellings of the Cretan myth, the labyrinth is often simply itself, an historical building. Thus medieval commentators frequently gloss “labyrinthus” in Aeneid 5.588 in Servius’s terse words: “Labyrinth: a place in Crete with intricately entangled walls built by Daedalus, in which the Minotaur was enclosed.” If some literally minded commentators such as Anselm of Laon fleetingly raise the possibility of metaphor by adding that laborintus is derived from the ambiguous laborintus, they spell out no metaphorical elaborations. A similarly literal reduction of the labyrinth to a mere physical prop occurs in Chaucer’s Legend of Ariadne, which shares Ovid’s emphasis on the heroine’s misery after her abandonment. Chaucer gives a full description of the “hous . . . kryneled to and fro” (l. 2012) but only to show how important Ariadne’s help was to the ungrateful Theseus: the maze is mere scenery, even though it might easily have symbolized the intricacies and dangers of passionate love, and even though Chaucer elsewhere uses the metaphorical potential of the maze with inventiveness and subtlety. Some commentators derived from Servius, who believed that the Minotaur was really a pair of twins fathered by Minos and his scribe Taurus, demythologize the story, getting rid of the mysterious labyrinth altogether: glossing Juvenal’s first satire, William of Conches (ca. 1080-ca. 1154) tells of Pasiphaë’s love for the bull, Daedalus’s assistance, and the building of the labyrinth; but “this is the truth of it”: all Daedalus really built was a thalamus (bedroom or marriage-bed) for the queen and her paramour Taurus, by whom she had a child reputed to be Minos’s and hence called Minotaurus. When Minos found out, Daedalus was simply thrown in prison. So much for art! The debunking Servian tradition might have reduced the labyrinth to insignificance, but fortunately such was not the case, and many commentators who report Servius’s interpretation, if not William’s still more rationalistic reading, go on to find moral import in the myth: the story isn’t true, but we can still learn from it.

After all, many medieval writers shared a passion for exegesis, trying

4. Servius Grammaticus, In Aeneidos, I, 635; Anselm of Laon’s gloss reads, “laborintus: the house of Daedalus where the Minotaur was imprisoned, called laborintus from labor intus” (BL MS. Add. 33220, fol. 48r). Christopher C. Baswell’s dissertation, “‘Figures of Olde Werk’: Visions of Virgil in Later Medieval England” (Yale University, 1983), is an invaluable study of explicit and implicit Virgil commentaries.
5. Chaucer, The Legend of Good Women, 1886–2227. Gower’s version of the story (Confessio Amantis 5.5231–5495) is similar in emphasis and treatment. Both works follow Ovid’s Heroides 10 closely.
to find some scientific, philosophical, theological, or exemplary truth hidden beneath every item in the lexicon of the books of nature and authority, although exegetical attitudes and practices varied widely from century to century and even from author to author. In general, as Judson Boyce Allen notes, "medieval people... tended to be more interested in the mythologization than in the fact, more interested in the meaning of an event than in its bare material existence." More interested in mythical than in historical labyrinths, in fact. Thus most medieval mazes, visual or literary, carry heavy symbolic potential, functioning as a clue to a splendid array of meanings. More interested in mythical than in historical labyrinths, in fact. Thus most medieval mazes, visual or literary, carry heavy symbolic potential, functioning as a clue to a splendid array of meanings. Fascinating to medieval artists and writers as an historical object, the maze is still more captivating as a sign—in texts discussed in this chapter, a sign of the dangers of earthly life. In these examples, the maze functions metaphorically both as product and as process. Sometimes the labyrinth is a sign in itself, a metaphorically potent object, as we saw so often in Chapter 5; more often, it is the myth of the labyrinth, the story, that elicits the continuous metaphorical transformation of allegory.

The Mythographers

By far the richest store of explicit interpretations of the maze lies in the vast body of mythographic writing, including the many commentaries on classical and certain medieval texts (Dante's *Divine Comedy*, for one) that mention the labyrinth. These commentaries tend to fall into the two categories described by Brian Stock in discussing approaches to myth in the twelfth century: literal commentaries cover such matters as grammatical sense, etymology, historical background, and rhetorical devices; allegorical interpretations emphasize moral and philosophical significance, demythologize the text (as in euhemeristic readings), and unwrap cosmological or natural truths from their mythical *integumentum* by


8. For an example of the medieval symbolic mentality, see Alan of Lille, *Liber in distinctionibus*, *PL*, 120, 687–1012. Although any physical object might be interpreted allegorically in an astonishing number of ways, however, it need not be so interpreted. Just as the *distinctiones* show there were no set meanings for any item, so too no set formula, mechanically applied, would decode texts correctly: see Brian Stock, *Myth and Science in the Twelfth Century: A Study of Bernard Silvester* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), chap. 1; Edouard Jeanneau, "L'Usage de la notion d'Integumentum à travers les gloses de Guillaume de Conches," *Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Age*, 24 (1957), 35–100; and V. A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), for a brilliant demonstration of how medieval people may have read visual images.
means of “scientific” interpretation. Later we will consider how allegory itself constitutes a kind of labyrinth and embodies a labyrinthine aesthetic, but here I show briefly how a few fourteenth-century mythographers deal with the Cretan story as moral allegory. I do not pretend to offer a comprehensive survey of interpretations. Nor will I discuss the development of the mythographic tradition, its preoccupations, techniques, and practitioners. Instead, I have chosen a few influential texts to illustrate what kinds of significance the labyrinth might have within the larger context of the myth that engendered it—in other words, how the plot within which the labyrinth figures suggests and defines its metaphorical meaning. It is worth remembering that many medieval writers using the labyrinth metaphorically in their own works would have first come upon its story in a classical or mythological text (the Aeneid, the Metamorphoses, the Eclogue of Theodulus) with an accompanying commentary either in the manuscript itself or in the person of a teacher. As the visual form of the labyrinth helps shape its transferred meanings, so does mythological commentary.

Boccaccio (1313–1375) was an exceptionally learned secular mythographer whose monumental Genealogy of the Gentile Gods, Book 14, mounts an impressive defense of poetry and the allegorical approach he

9. See Stock, Myth and Science, pp. 32–33. Baswell (“‘Figures of Olde Werk’”) divides medieval Virgil commentaries into three groups, subdividing Stock’s second category: “humanizing” commentaries, the most numerous group, provide background information that helps a reader perceive Virgil in his own historical setting; allegorical commentaries see the Aeneid as an exposition of the ages of man or the stages of virtue; and moral commentaries see Aeneas as an exemplary model for human life and the classics as, among other things, a source of exempla for preaching; one thinks of the classicizing friars so sensitively analyzed by Beryl Smalley (English Friars and Antiquity in the Early Fourteenth Century [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1960]) and Judson Boyce Allen (The Friar as Critic [Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1971]). Especially in the later Middle Ages, all three approaches may coincide, as in the third commentary in London BL MS. Add. 27304 (Baswell, chap. 3).

deemed necessary to penetrate its praiseworthy obscurities.\textsuperscript{11} Drawing on some hundred and seventy-five sources, Boccaccio varies his approach to each myth as he sees fit; usually he provides humanistic historical and literary background, and his interpretations may be euhemeristic, moral, theological, and even naturalistic/scientific. The large exegetical repertoire at his disposal makes it significant that Boccaccio chooses to emphasize the Cretan legend's moral and psychological import. Having pondered the story and its interpretations for some time, Boccaccio tells us, he finally realized its true purpose: to teach us how bestial vice is begotten in the soul, signified by Pasiphae. Minos the law-giver is reason, who sets the soul on the right path, but Venus, or concupiscence, causes their separation: no soul can be a friend both to reason and to carnal desire. Pasiphae's passion for the bull shows how the soul wrongly loves mundane pleasures, which God meant us to use properly. Guided by Venus-sensuality, however, we abuse these gifts, fall prey to bestial lust, and couple with the bull, trusting more in ingenious craft (Daedalus) than in nature. Thus minotaurs are begotten as tokens of vice; the monster's dual form signifies that while sinners seem human, their acts reveal their true animal nature. Like the Minotaur imprisoned in a winding labyrinth, the wicked human heart is entangled in unspeakable desires. Only Theseus can kill this monster of depravity: he is the prudent man whose virility (Ariadne, on etymological grounds) teaches him to root out diabolical vice.\textsuperscript{12}

Clearly Boccaccio was sensitive to Virgil's and Ovid's hints that the labyrinth was built to cover the shame of lust and to the early Christian notion that the true path contrasts with the labyrinth's winding ways (cf. Ambrose and Prudentius); these ideas underlie his own reading of the myth. But Boccaccio's rather humanistic interpretation makes the labyrinth an emblem of the circuitous ways of sin in opposition to the "rectum iter" dictated not by God but by Reason (Minos). Implicitly a work of corrupt art as opposed to healthy nature, the heart's maze is inextricable for sinners but penetrable to the prudent, manly man. Later we shall see how Boccaccio develops this moral-psychological interpretation of the myth, blaming sinners for entrapping themselves in mazes of their own creation, as the thematic and narrative basis for the Corbaccio.

Writing at roughly the same time, Pierre Bersuire (ca. 1290–1362) was


\textsuperscript{12} Boccaccio, \textit{De genealogia} 4.10.
a somewhat controversial Benedictine prior and friend of Petrarch, with whom he discussed matters mythological. Bersuire's immensely popular *Ovidius moralizatus*, which went through several recensions, views classical mythology as a compendium of useful exemplary and allegorical knowledge, a guide to daily conduct in the courts of kings or popes and in moral and spiritual realms as well.¹³ His comprehensive explication of the Cretan myth is at once more practically and more theologically oriented than Boccaccio's; almost a *summa* of allegorical commentary, Bersuire's exegesis deserves extensive paraphrase. First he recounts the tale of Pasiphae and the bull, the Minotaur, and the labyrinth, twisted with *ambages*, created to entrap all comers as fodder for the rapacious beast within. In typically clerical fashion, Bersuire uses Pasiphae as an excuse to rail against female lasciviousness; he then proceeds from sociological editorial to moral reading. Pasiphae is the human soul married to Christ, who is estranged by her sinfulness; she couples with the devil and conceives monstrous affections. Alternatively, in the sphere of ecclesiastical government, Pasiphae is the Church, Minos an absent prelate, and the bull the devil, who leads the Church into sin and error; the Minotaur represents evil, which devours human flesh.

Next, Bersuire describes Theseus's arrival, Ariadne's love, and Daedalus's advice to take balls of pitch and of string into the maze to prevent the monster from biting when attacked and to help Theseus unwind (*explicare*) the labyrinthine *ambages*. The Minotaur signifies the devil, hell, and death, which have devoured human souls and bodies since time began: thanks to Adam, we are all Athenians subject to Minos-Lucifer. The maze of *ambages* is the abyss of hardships (*difficultatum*) so constructed that no one can return to its gates. But Theseus, a king's son, is Christ, who also accepted the lot of common humanity and therefore descended to the Minotaur; with the thread of divinity and the pitch of humanity, he overcame death, hell, and the devil, freeing himself from the maze of hell in the resurrection and taking with him Ariadne, or human nature. More practically, Theseus is any ungrateful person who casts off his benefactor (or abandons Ariadne); but she, deified by Bacchus (God), earns a heavenly reward.

After suggesting various interpretations of Theseus's return to Athens and his father's misguided suicide, Bersuire returns to Crete and the

industrious Daedalus, whose construction of the labyrinth is described in some detail. Ironically, Daedalus himself is imprisoned in his own work of art for having helped Pasiphae and Ariadne. With characteristic ingenuity, he concocts wings to flee the labyrinth and Minos’s tyranny. Here Daedalus is the sinner whom the devil-Minos imprisons in the labyrinth of vice and worldly goods, encircled by so many crimes that he cannot find the way out. There is only one way to escape the labyrinth of world and sin: don wings of contemplation and head for celestial realms, scorning the sea of worldliness and the labyrinth of time (saeculi). Moreover, Bersuire notes, Daedalus’s imprisonment shows that people who build labyrinths and involutiones for others will fall into them themselves.

Bersuire then discusses the fall of Icarus and the poetic justice of that fall (Daedalus had murdered his nephew Perdix by pushing him off a cliff). The story of Icarus teaches us to pursue the via media, depicts the disobedience of rebellious youth, and warns against earthly delights (the sea) and pride (the sun), which ruin spiritual wings (virtues) as well as mundane ones (earthly power and nobility). Perdix, clever inventor of the saw and compass, was saved by Athena, who honors intelligence; he now flies close to earth as a partridge (perdix), fearing another fall. Thus he rightly mocked Daedalus after Icarus’s death, when Daedalus dedicated his wings at the temple of Apollo at Cumae. This part of the story teaches that those who climb high through ingenuity will fall through envy; the wise man seeks humble station and welcomes the security of poverty.

Like all his other mythological interpretations, Bersuire’s readings of the various segments of the Cretan myth thus include practical, if cynical, advice for daily life as well as theological commentary; he treats mores, morals, and allegory in the strict sense. Compared to Boccaccio’s less ambitious and more coherent interpretation, however, Bersuire’s is full of inconsistency: Minos can be Christ or the devil, Theseus an ungrateful wretch or Christ, and Daedalus an envious craftsman or a true contemplative. It is as if the ambages of the labyrinth had become ambiguities in the text, or as if Bersuire had taken every interpretive path presented in Ovid’s multicausal textual maze. To use modern terminology, the myth of the labyrinth affords a network of gaps or indeterminacies to be filled in by preacher or reader at will in an attempt to generate a morally useful interpretation. Boccaccio interprets the myth as a whole (to be fair, he tackles less of the myth than Bersuire); Bersuire focuses on a series of quasi-independent episodes, each interpreted according to its immediate narrative context. But if Boccaccio’s single reading is selective and consistent, Bersuire charts a richer, more evocative course, suggesting how, in its Ovidian context, the labyrinth as a sign can appropriately convey multiple meanings in malo: shameful love, sin and vice, hell, death, the world and worldliness, time, and—to be utterly
pedestrian—any elaborate plot. These meanings take shape partly from Bersuire’s ingenuity, partly from the mythical context, and partly from essential labyrinthine qualities: *ambages* and involutions; the psychological and moral confusion they engender; and, most clearly, inextricability, although Bersuire makes much of the possible ways out—the help of a guide (Christ), careful instruction (by Daedalus, who helps both Theseus and Icarus), the wings of contemplation. Bersuire even hints at the connection between labyrinths and learning we saw in early Christian writings when he describes the labyrinth as difficulty requiring explication. Few single texts show the scope of the moral labyrinth’s metaphorical potential *in malo* so well as Bersuire’s, although none of his interpretations is unique.

Perhaps because Bersuire took the labyrinth so thoroughly *in malo* in his last recension of the *Ovidius moralizatus*, he hints only obliquely at the maze’s admirable artistry, a concept that was present, if downplayed, in the *Metamorphoses*. That artistry is highlighted in one of Bersuire’s sources, the anonymous French *Ovide moralisé*, which suggests other facets of the labyrinth’s metaphorical potential (8.1-1928). This early fourteenth-century poetic version of the *Metamorphoses*, presumably intended for aristocratic lay audiences, spends much more time recounting and embellishing the Ovidian stories than did Bersuire or Boccaccio, who wrote in Latin for the learned. Thus the *Ovide moralisé* offers a long description of Pasiphae, extended laments for Ariadne, and so on, more for dramatic impact than for moral instruction. But there are also didactic summaries of the lessons to be learned from antiquity, which, if they are less colorful than the poet’s brilliant evocation of Pasiphae’s deranged love for the bull, nevertheless concern us more. According to the moralization, God was so distressed at the presumption of the rebel angels that he created for them

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l’infernal cage
Qui tant et horrible et obscure
Et pleine de male aventure. (8.1418-1420)
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This cage is the labyrinth of hell from which none can depart, and so Daedalus is a figure for God, “li bons charpentiers / Qui est maistres de touz mestiers” (8.1431-1432). After the fall, man too was dispatched there as tribute to another horned beast, the devil. To ransom mankind, God fought fire with fire: against the double devil-minotaur he sent Christ-Theseus of “double-nature” (8.1476). The divinity and humanity that Bersuire represents by the two *pelotons* here reside in Christ-Theseus himself, whose divinity is “couverte / Souz l’ombre de l’humanité” (8.1480-1481). Thus Christ-Theseus is able to destroy the monster and lead his people to safety. This Theseus, however, is no ingrate: he
abandons Ariadne because she signifies the Jews whom God loved until they betrayed him, and Phaedra represents the faithful Gentiles.

This author's consistency in interpretation, contrasting with Bersuire's eclectic approach, leads us to expect a novel handling of the flight of Daedalus, and here too we are not disappointed. We are reminded that Daedalus signifies the Creator of heaven and hell, of sky, earth, air, and sea; Daedalus's imprisonment in Crete signifies Christ's stay in hell, after which he longed to see his homeland. God-Christ-Daedalus chose to return in such a way that mankind could follow, escaping the trammels of the labyrinth-world-hell. Thus God-Christ-Daedalus made wings, the right one indicating the love of God and the left, love of one's neighbors; thus we too can fly to heaven.

The poet's interpretation of the myth is consistent chiefly because he interprets the story in the light of the ransom theory of the atonement, whereby the fall of man gave the devil just title to human souls until such time as the devil should overstep his bounds by letting the sinless Christ die and enter hell under the cover of his human flesh (hence the significance of Bersuire's pelotons and our poet's "double nature"). But consistency has its downside: there are fewer interpretations than in Bersuire, who probably expected the preachers for whom he was writing to create their own coherence by using only part of the story at a time; and the poet gets into minor difficulties by equating both God the Father and Christ with Daedalus and having both Theseus and Daedalus signify Christ. He does, however, provide a marvelous vision of God the Good Carpenter, whose cosmos is implicitly a labyrinth containing the smaller prison-labyrinth of hell—a remarkable instance of the inherent dualism in bono and in malo of the maze. That a Daedalian God created a cosmic labyrinth, an idea we have already met in Gregory of Nazianzus and in the discussion of the Chartres maze, is highlighted in the fifteenth-century Ovide moralisé en prose (pp. 226-229). Or, as Bersuire put it in an early recension, "Daedalus the architect is God, who built the mundi machinam."14 As these examples show, even in the generally pejorative Ovidian context the maze may figure as product of divine artistry, but it is a dangerous piece of art all the same, a place where error is possible, indeed virtually inevitable.

In this brief account of several fourteenth-century mythographic moralizations of the Cretan story, then, we have seen how the legendary context and the author's purpose combine to shape the labyrinth's metaphorical meanings. Writers interested in the plot as a coherent and morally significant entity, like Boccaccio and the author of the poetic Ovide moralisé, create consistent interpretations by limiting the labyrinth's connotations to one or two major meanings—the toils of sin and lust in Boccaccio's comparatively humanistic interpretation or, for the more

theologically minded poet, the divinely ordered but dangerous cosmos containing an inextricable prison for those who fall prey to sin. On the other hand, Bersuire, providing a full array of the legend’s moral uses, sacrifices allegorical consistency in order to expand the symbolic potential of each important element in the story. Interest in the maze as story, as process, as syntax, generates one kind of retelling, and interest in the maze as object, as an item in a metaphorical lexicon, generates quite another. Both approaches contribute to the labyrinth’s metaphorical potential, which includes meanings based on mazy inextricability (lust, sin, hell, death, crime, vice, worldliness, the world, life, time), on complex artistry (the world, the cosmos), and on the moral and psychological confusion created by the maze’s ambages and errores. In most cases, the maze functions as a place where moral error is almost inevitable, an inextricable prison unless special aid intervenes. As in Virgil (Aeneid 6) and Ovid, the mythical context—the focus on story—virtually demands an interpretation in malo. Even if the labyrinth-world is God’s creation, full of the highest artistry, noble and attractive in its own right, it poses infinite dangers for the unwary, who may easily make the wrong choice and fall into that inner labyrinth of hell without the guidance of Christ—Theseus, the reason of Minos, or Daedalian wings of contemplation.

Moral Labyrinths in Other Literature

If the Cretan labyrinth’s explicit mythological context elicits a good deal of mythographic interpretation in malo by highlighting the maze’s seamy moral history and its dangerous inextricability, that same emphasis predominates in nonmythographic medieval works, whether they allude to the myth or simply to the maze as an image. This section briefly surveys representative passages where the labyrinth appears more or less casually as an image of potentially inextricable mundane errores; later we will examine several texts that make more extended, and often more innovative and allusive, use of the labyrinth and the Cretan myth as process and plot.

We have seen how often the maze signifies the vagaries of earthly life for medieval mythographers as well as classical and early Christian writers. This meaning of the maze is popular in other medieval literature as well. For example, Lydgate’s “Calendar” includes a prayer for aid in labyrinthine confusion: “Teche us to lyue wel, o bysshop Seynt Blase, / For pis wrecchid lyfe is but as a mase.” An inscription, probably from a tombstone, sees the world as a maze from which death offers rescue: “The beginning of April seized me from this labyrinth.”15 Both exam-

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People envisage escape from the world-labyrinth, Lydgate's by intercession and right conduct, the tombstone by death and, perhaps, the salvation of Christ-Theseus. In a lighter vein, the rhetorician Eberhard of Germany sees the teacher's life as an inextricable maze: "He sits in the snare of the labyrinth, the clamorous prison and mournful house," plagued by recalcitrant students who, perhaps, see their *magister* as a minotaur. 16

The view of the world as an attractive but dangerous moral labyrinth is handled far more subtly and pervasively in Langland's *Piers Plowman*. 17 Because I intend to discuss the poem's labyrinthine nature more extensively elsewhere, here I merely skim the surface. An allegorical lady, Holy Church, advises Will, the dreamer, how to proceed safely through the mundane labyrinth. Baffled by his dream of the fair field of folk who are "wandrynge as þe world asked" (B. Prol. 19), most of them up to no good in their pursuit of wealth, Will is in sore need of the exegesis that Holy Church can provide. She begins by asking, "sest ow þis peple, / How bisie þei ben aboute þe maȝe?" (B. I. 5-6). The maze is worldly life, dedicated to the pursuit of Lady Meed, and the labyrinth image is appropriate: the people on the field, immersed in the complexities of life, cannot see where they are really going, as one cannot see the end of a maze from within. It is only Will, looking down on the scene from the Malvern Hills, who notices on one hand the Tower of Truth and on the other the Dungeon of the Devil, and who sees that most people are moving toward hell. From this elevated perspective, Holy Church offers a clue to the labyrinth, but Will all too quickly forgets what he has learned once he is embroiled in the maze on the plain, subject to its bewildering profusion of temptations.

In a sense, the whole poem deals with the problems of a mazed character so confused by the moral *ambages* and apparently contradictory guides repeatedly confronting him that he cannot sustain the privileged vision from above the labyrinth that would allow him to orient himself: such are the intense difficulties of living in the world, difficulties Langland refuses to dismiss lightly. The quest in Passus 8 through 12 for Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest (the triad itself representing a maze-like trifurcation of a concept initially presented simply as Do Well) is particularly maze-like and bewildering, as Will journeys through the labyrinth of the mind to be directed by an overabundance of seemingly authoritative characters, each speaking according to his or her own perspective and


most offering too many (and too inconsistent) definitions of the exemplars Will seeks; as we shall see, excessive data that cannot easily be aligned create a mental maze of the worst sort. In many respects, it is this mental maze of the fallen mind that generates the perceptual handicaps and limited, fragmentary vision that make the world itself seem labyrinthine and so forcefully create the need for a reliable guide to help Will see where his true journey lies. It is only when Will runs a breathless race to find Jesus in Jerusalem (passus 15-18) that the myriad paths of the mundane and epistemological mazes become a straight path to Truth. But in the movement from clarity to confusion so obsessively repeated in the poem, the clear vision of Jesus—the way, the truth, the light, significantly shown freeing the just souls from hell—disintegrates all too quickly in the real world to which Will returns, and Will's (and the reader's) senses of direction, and of the order of the actual and moral universe, cannot endure. The poem ends where it began, in the maze of the world. Langland may have been a visionary who saw the cosmic labyrinth whole, but he was also a realist well aware that living creatures can never escape mortal mazes for long, whatever moral fables and classical myths claim.\(^\text{18}\)

Sometimes, as in the rota-rosa cathedral labyrinths, the world-labyrinth is closely connected to Fortune, a harsh and irrational mistress with inexplicable ways. Thus, for De Guilleville and his translator Lydgate, Fortune has a great tree (the world) on which influential people nest while those below “Loke vp-ward, and al day gaze, / As yt wer vp-on A maze.” Juan de Mena's *Laberinto de Fortuna* tells of the narrator’s voyage through Fortune’s great palace, where, without order but with apparently absolute power, she rules the “orbe universo / con toda la otra mun­dana machina,” the five zones of the earth and the seven circles of the planets, in which the narrator, safely guided by Providence, sees a num­ber of the Cretan characters as well as a Dantean galaxy of others.\(^\text{19}\) In both instances, the unpredictability of Fortune, the complexity of her

\(^{18}\) It would be impossible for Langland not to have known this, entangled as he was throughout much of his life in systematic revisions and retracings of the labyrinth of his own text.

\(^{19}\) See De Guilleville, *The Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*, ed. F. J. Furnivall (London: Roxburghe Club, 1905), ll. 19571–19572, and Juan de Mena, *Laberinto de Fortuna*, ed. Louise Vasvari Fainberg (Madrid: Alhambra, 1976); the quotation is from stanza 32. The connection between fortune and labyrinth may also be expressed by a pun in stanza 63, which refers to “los muchos reveses del grand Laberinto,” where “reveses” can mean turnings or temporal reverses. The twelve areas of the cosmos correspond to the most common number of circuits in a medieval labyrinth. Juan de Mena lived from 1411 to 1456.

See Nepaulsingh, *Literary Composition in Medieval Spain*, pp. 109–124, for more extensive discussion and bibliography on the *Laberinto de Fortuna*, a work whose structural complexity in some ways exemplifies labyrinthine literary structure, and whose borrowings from Dante and Virgil indicate that its author was consciously working in the labyrinthine tradition to be examined in Part Three.
realm, and the inextricability of her prison for anyone without divine assistance and perspective are the qualities linking her with the labyrinth. Particularly in the \textit{Laberinto de Fortuna}, where Fortune's complex realm is simply one misleadingly confused face of the perfectly ordered kingdom of Providence, there may be an assumption that what mundane folk, with their imperfect vision, see as a labyrinth is in reality the splendid artistry of the cosmos. The contrast between providential and time-bound views of the world, implicit in cathedral mazes, as we have seen, will receive further attention later.

One of the most elegant and creative moral applications of the labyrinth myth, here referring not to the whole world but to the disreputable papal world of Avignon, comes in Petrarch's \textit{Liber sine nomine}, a collection of satirical letters, written between about 1342 and 1359, that condemn Avignon as the third Babylon and fifth labyrinth.\textsuperscript{20} Thematically unified by a continuing contrast between Avignon and Rome as cities of chaos and order, the collection repeatedly returns to the labyrinth as a perfect sign for the corruption and confusion that characterize the papal city of Avignon, where the Church lay in Babylonian captivity from 1305 until 1378 and where Petrarch felt himself imprisoned for scattered years throughout his life. Appropriately, the labyrinth myth threads its way through the letters, with constant indebtedness to Virgil, Ovid, and Pliny: “Whatever you may have read of the Babylons of Assyria or Egypt, of the four labyrinths, of the portals of Avernus and the forests and sulphurous marshes of the lower world, is all child's play compared with this hell. . . . 'here is Pasiphae coupled with the bull,' to quote Vergil, ‘and the mongrel offspring and two-formed progeny, the Minotaur, memorial of her foul love.' Finally, you may see here every disorder, gloom, or horror to be found or imagined anywhere” (Z67-68/D94-96). The image is most thoroughly developed in the tenth letter, where Petrarch offers an extended justification of his chosen metaphor:

You can indeed be surprised by five labyrinths when other authors, I believe, mention only four. They know of those in Egypt, Lemnos, Crete and Clusium in Italy, but they say nothing of the labyrinth of the Rhone, the most confusing and by far the worst of all, either because it did not yet exist,

\textsuperscript{20.} Parenthetical page numbers marked Z refer to Zacour's translation, cited in chap. 5, n. 26; numbers marked D refer to the Latin text edited by Ugo Dotti (Rome: Laterza, 1974). The \textit{Liber sine nomine} includes many more labyrinth references not noted here.

For an argument that “the labyrinth and its variations [e.g., images of the “difficult journey,” the Pythagorean Y, wandering, captivity, hell] constitute an important nucleus of Petrarchan imagery” throughout Petrarch's work, see Cipolla, \textit{Labyrinth: Studies on an Archetype}, chap. 2 (previously published as “Labyrinthische Imagery in Petrarch,” \textit{Italica}, 54 [1977], 263–289). Cipolla's discussion, which amply demonstrates Petrarch's literary obsession with the labyrinth, could have profited from a wider knowledge of the literary tradition; his Jungian bias prevents as careful an analysis of the texts as one might wish.
or because it was not yet known. I constantly refer to it—how justly, anyone who wishes to know may learn by coming here. Here is the dreadful prison, the aimless wandering in the dwelling place of shadows, tyrannical Minos, and the voracious Minotaur, memorial of forbidden love—but no healing medicine, no love, no charity, no promises worthy of trust, no friendly counsel, no thread as a silent guide to mark the twisted path, no Ariadne, no Daedalus. There is only one hope of salvation here, gold. Gold placates the savage king and overcomes the frightful monster; the guiding cord is woven of gold; gold reveals the forbidding doorway, shatters the bars and stones, bribes the stern doorkeeper, and opens the gates of heaven. What else? Christ is sold for gold. (Z72–73/ D110–112)

The image of Avignon as a labyrinth from which only Christ can guide one (letter 8) is too obsessive and too richly evocative for all its elements to remain stable in Petrarch’s interpretation any more than they did in his friend Bersuire’s comparably rich if slightly less classical reading. Letter 11, for instance, transforms the evil guiding thread of bribery into the more admirable “thread of a noble contempt” (Z76/D122). Avignon’s sexual perversions are fitly imaged by the Minotaur’s maze, but the idea to which Petrarch constantly returns is the futile inextricability of the place, an idea often enriched by other images of entrapment:

That’s the one place on earth where there is no room for thoughtful counsel, where everything goes round aimlessly and without purpose. And among all the miseries of that place, there is this final trick: that everything is smeared with birdlime, and is covered with hooks and nets, so that just when you think you have escaped you find yourself more tightly held and bound. There is no light anywhere, no one to lead you, no sign to guide you along the twisted paths, but only gloom on all sides and confusion everywhere. (Z91/D156–158)

Yet finally, as the stories of Theseus and Daedalus show, escape from this classically dark prison, which Petrarch likens to the underworld in the Aeneid, is possible: in 1357, Petrarch writes to his friend Francesco Nelli,

You have escaped; you have broken out; you have swum to safety; you have flown free. Well done! . . . I knew that the “descent to Avernus was easy,” the gate of the labyrinth was wide, and that the way out was hard and difficult to find. . . . As soon, therefore, as you return to this soil [Milan] which had lent you to the lower world, you will consecrate your propellant wings to Christ—not Phoebus, as Daedalus did—and take heed never to look again upon Knossos. (Z118/D218)

For Petrarch, then, the labyrinth of Avignon is a blind cesspool of sin, home of two-formed lust (lechery and avarice), especially confusing to the innocent, a place of error and danger, an earthly hell from which
escape is impossible without countless attempts and divinely inspired contempt for the world—or at least, for that world. Despite Petrarch's reliance on Pliny, there is no artistry in this maze: Daedalus appears only as a potential guide who flew above the maze on wings of contemplation and celebrated his escape by dedicating his wings to a god. The labyrinth as sign for the endless corruption of earthly courts overcomes its potential significance as artistic order, as in Bersuire's last recension, which also blends morality with political cynicism. True order, for Petrarch, is the antithesis of the labyrinth. In this he is typical of many medieval writers, for whom the labyrinth had developed so many connotations in malo, thanks to its mythical context, that it was hard to accept the more positive idea of the labyrinth as splendidly ordered complexity that confuses us only when we cannot comprehend its underlying system.

Worldly labyrinths are often labyrinths of sin, as many of the texts here and in Chapter 3 suggest. Two kinds of moral error are most commonly seen as labyrinthine: lust, which engenders minotaurs and mazes, and heresy, which entraps the ignorant first in errores and finally in damnation. Both kinds of sin involve serious mental confusion and impairment: earthly love is often a kind of madness, medieval writers tell us time and again, and heresy implies a more intellectual and systematic confusion. We turn now to several representative texts describing these mazes of sin. Later we will study the most extensive and vitriolic medieval development of the labyrinth of love, Boccaccio's Corbaccio; for the moment, less extreme and far more graceful examples must suffice.

We have seen how Petrarch associates the maze with sexual and moral corruption in the Liber sine nomine; he uses the image much more delicately in the Canzoniere, as is appropriate to his ambivalence toward love there. The Canzoniere describe Petrarch's progress through the labyrinth of earthly love from his "first youthful error" through the succeeding prisons, nets, knots, and entanglements of love, to the liberating knowledge, fostered by his spirit-guide, the dead Laura, that he must "reprimand my soul / For that error of mine that nearly slew / The seed of virtue" (364) and turn from his beloved to the Virgin (366). Although the idea of entrapment in error is recurrent in these sonnets, the labyrinth appears explicitly only toward the end of the sonnets in vita. In sonnet 211, Petrarch describes his dependence on Love, who is "treach-


22. Canzoniere 1; except for sonnet 224, I quote Anna Maria Armi's translation in the dual-language Petrarch: Sonnets and Songs (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1968). For the Italian, I follow Le rime, ed. G. Carducci and S. Ferrari, introd. G. Contini (Florence: Sansoni, 1899). For a psychoanalytic reading of the labyrinths of the Canzoniere, see also Cipolla, Labyrinth, chaps. 2 and 3; the latter chapter equates Laura with the Great Mother archetype, seeing both as mistresses of the labyrinth.
rous and blind,” who makes the senses rule reason, who fastens the lover to limed boughs. The cause of all this?

In thirteen hundred twenty-seven, I
At the first hour, in April's sixth day,
Entered the labyrinth and lost my way
[Nel laberinto intrai: né veggio ond’esca].

After some twenty years (see Canzoniere 212), the poet finally recognizes the true nature of his prison: his life has been “a long wandering through the blind labyrinth” (224; my translation). Why love should be a labyrinth is clear, especially in the context of these poems with their endless images of entrapment: love is blind, futile, filled with error, seemingly inextricable; that is the moral equation. Yet Petrarch, humanist that he is, seems also to draw on Pliny's description of the labyrinth as admirable art and witness to fame, connotations avoided in the darker world of the Liber sine nomine. Read as a moral and psychological narrative process, the Canzoniere constitute a guiding thread through the dangerous labyrinth of love, from obsession with an earthly woman to devotion to a heavenly Ariadne, the Virgin. Seen entire as a work of art, however, they resemble the labyrinth as magnificent artifact, for they constitute a complex, well-structured monument: to the fame of the lady so ornately described and metaphorically entombed within, and to the glory of the Daedalian poet seeking laurels.Filled with complex poetic structures and characterized by oxymorons and antitheses that mimic stylistically the ambiguous choices within the maze, Petrarch's magnificent, ordered artistry accomplishes what Pliny's ancient labyrinths and architectural cathedral mazes do: perpetuates the fame of the inspirer and builder.

23. It may be significant that Sonnet 211, composed earlier in Petrarch's life, was given final placement in the Canzoniere only in 1369. F. J. Jones suggests further that the calendrical date of this sonnet within the sequence corresponds to November 2, All Souls' Day; perhaps it is fitting that Petrarch speaks explicitly of his own entry into the labyrinth on the day of the commemoration of the dead, when he might well be thinking of Laura's exit from the labyrinth of life. See Jones, “Arguments in Favor of a Calendrical Structure for Petrarch’s 'Canzoniere,'” MLR, 79 (1984), 579-588, esp. 581-582.

24. On the Canzoniere and the theme of fame, see Mariann S. Regan, “The Evolution of the Poet in Petrarch's Canzoniere,” PQ, 57 (1978), 23–45; on the elaborate order of the work, see Thomas P. Roche, Jr., “The Calendrical Structure of Petrarch's Canzoniere,” SP, 71 (1974), 152–172, and Jones, “Arguments in Favor of a Calendrical Structure for Petrarch's 'Canzoniere.'” Giuseppe Mazzotta also sees the labyrinth as structurally important: “The Canzoniere and the Language of the Self,” SP, 75 (1978), 271–296: Mazzotta writes, “It is the metaphor of the labyrinth . . . that best describes the Canzoniere: it designates a monadic structure in which the parts are a series of communicating vessels simultaneously proximate and disjointed and in which each partition leads to and separates from another. The metaphor is particularly apt because it also suggests the poet’s experience of being locked in a cosmos of his own creation from which there are no exits (as sonnet 89 dramatizes) and where the only thing left for the poet is to call and make his voice resonate” (p. 295).
Thus Petrarch's labyrinthine works, probably quite unintentionally, reflect the characteristic duality of the maze. The inextricable and wholly immoral labyrinth of Avignon in the *Liber sine nomine* finds a sweeter, more poignant counterpart in the *Canzoniere*'s labyrinth of earthly love, through which the narrator finds the transcendent love of God. And within the *Canzoniere*, there is a contrast between the maze as process, a sequence of partial, limited views amid the *errores*, and the maze as artifact, the whole sequence as a work of labyrinthine art and grandeur. If Petrarch escaped the mazes of ecclesiastical corruption and sensual passion, the man who sought laurels as ardently as he did Laura may never have escaped the labyrinthine implications of the lust for fame. Be that as it may, if most medieval moral labyrinths ignore the maze's artistry or replace it with specious artifice, the *Canzoniere*, far less obtrusively moral, incorporates labyrinthine magnificence of form and complexity of language.

Another use of the psychological labyrinth of love within a collection of poems labyrinthine in their metrical complexity and linguistic obscurity occurs in the fifteenth *chanson* of Richard of Fournival (1201–1259), poet, surgeon, and chancellor of the cathedral of Amiens. The *chanson*’s narrator avoids love because he knows full well that it is a trap in which those who want to escape only entangle themselves the more (stanzas 1 and 2). In stanzas 4 and 5, this trap is identified as the inextricable “maison Dedalu.” Theseus had a thread to guide him out, the poem says, but the narrator has none; far be it from him to be more daring than Theseus! This graceful, lighthearted little lyric shows that the labyrinth need not be sinful whenever it signifies the psychology of love.

An equally graceful but more serious treatment of the labyrinth of earthly love appears in the allegorical poem *Les Echecs amoureux*, written by an anonymous early French humanist in 1370–1380. In this attractive work, the first French poem to receive a near-contemporary prose translation, ca. 1410, *Reason and Sensuality*, ed. Ernst Sieper, EETS, e.s. 84, 89 (1901, 1903), which I quote. The substantial prose commentary on the poem, extant in five manuscripts, was translated by Joan Morton Jones: “The Chess of Love” (diss., University of Nebraska, 1968).
commentary in French, Nature advises the narrator to avoid the path of sensuality, winding from west to east to west, and to choose instead the path of reason, which twists in the opposite direction toward God. The motif of choice continues when the poet meets Venus, Juno, and Pallas and reconfirms the Judgment of Paris. Venus directs the narrator to the Garden of Deduit, identified by the fifteenth-century commentator as the garden of this world. On the way, Diana warns him against this garden from which no man returns (I quote from John Lydgate's translation):

For thys the house of Dedalus
With the clowthy [clue?] and the threde,
Dedly perilouse, who taketh hede.
It is so wrynkled to and froo
That man not how he shal goo,
For who hath onys ther entre,
To com ageyn yt wyl nat be. (3604–3610)

What the lover eventually finds in this garden, a direct descendant of the gardens of the thirteenth-century Romance of the Rose, is labyrinthine in a moral-psychological rather than a physical sense, although the images of choice associated with multiscual literary labyrinths persist: for instance, after being checkmated in the garden, the poet is urged to reject sensuality and choose the path of Reason, itself double in that it leads to the Contemplative Life of Pallas and the Active Life of Juno (marriage, child-rearing, and so on). The poem is finally incomplete, and in a sense it disproves the warning of Diana: with appropriate instruction, with a guide to the larger labyrinth of life, one may return to the path of Reason from the maze-like garden of which the commentator says, "as one did not know how to get out of this house of Daedalus when one got too far into it, so mad lovers cannot withdraw from the garden of Mirth when they are too far involved" (p. 629). Les Echecs amoureux, like the Ovide moralisé, seems to imagine a double labyrinth: worldly life is implicitly a maze of choices for good or evil, and it contains the still more perilous explicit labyrinth of love, from whose error and madness Reason offers rescue—and more choice. The inherent duality of the maze reasserts itself. One might also detect here the typical medieval reluctance to call a good labyrinth by its proper name: although the world of the poem is just as labyrinthine—as full of doubtful choices and winding paths—as the dangerous garden, only the garden is explicitly called a labyrinth.

If sensual love is one avoidable maze of moral error, heresy is another, as we saw in Chapter 3. Since error—wandering, deviating from the true path—is the word most usually applied to heresy, what better image is there than the labyrinth, whose very structural principle is continuous
error? The labyrinth of love receives delicate treatment in many texts, and that is appropriate: sensual love is most dangerous when most attractive. Labyrinths of heresy, however, are presented more savagely. Thus Abbo of Fleury (ca. 950–1004), schoolmaster turned abbot, complains bitterly: "Under sheep's skins wolves take refuge in the monastery, hide themselves on the lower branches, and, whenever they find time, do evil, agitating the more simple brethren with false circumventions, deceiving the unwary with alluring smooth-tongued ruin, and casting those corrupted by the poison of their iniquity into the labyrinth of their error."27 Such men are hard to root out, as Henry, abbot of Clairvaux (late twelfth century), complains: heretics "have no certain paths and walk in circular ways, and most savage monsters are hidden in the labyrinth of fraud."28 Both the heretics and the damnation they teach seem to be represented by the Minotaur here, and the "circular ways" are heretical modes of argument which baffle unsophisticated listeners. The most serious dangers lurk when these Daedalian heretics are themselves great doctors, such as Berengar of Tours, whose "subtle speeches" drew many other "perversi" into the "labyrinth of error," as Durand of Troarn (d. 1088) complained, or those whom Walter of Saint Victor (d. ca. 1190), in a futile protest against Aristotelianism, labels the "four labyrinths of France" (Peter Abelard, Peter Lombard, Peter Pictaviensis, and Gilbert of Poitiers).29 In references like these (and there are many), the process of the labyrinth—its complexities and ambiguities—is stressed; its victims are confused by subtle arguments they cannot follow or refute, and their chosen guides are deceptive. These mazes, in short, involve psychological or intellectual error, like the philosophical mazes Augustine feared he was creating for Licentius in the Contra academicos. Labyrinths of heresy are dangerous for two reasons: they are practically inextricable even though they are often conceived as unicursal in themselves, leading inevitably to theological error; and their goal is damnation. I might have discussed these labyrinths, involving the abuse of intellect, in the next chapter, which focuses on verbal and intellectual mazes of difficult process, but I include them here because labyrinths of heresy conceal no profit in their difficulty; their confusing passages are designed to bewilder rather than enlighten, and the harm they cause is moral and spiritual. Metaphors comparing heresy to labyrinths are probably the least innovative and the most mechanically applied of all medieval maze metaphors; hence, no more need be said of them.

27. Abbo of Fleury, Epistolae, PL, 139, 429; cf. a mention of the labyrinth of error as a way around perjury, col. 433.
29. For Durand, see Liber de corpore et sanguine Christi: Contra Berengarium et eius sectatores, PL, 149, 1417; for Walter, Excerpta ex libris Gualtieri de S. Victore contra Quatuor Labyrinthus Franciae, PL, 199, 1127.
Readings of Selected Texts

Since this book is meant to cast light on literature involving the idea of the labyrinth as well as to extrapolate the medieval idea of the labyrinth from literature, art, and formal principles, I turn now to several texts that make creative and extended use of the idea that this world is a treacherous labyrinth, inextricable without careful guidance. In all these works, the setting is, explicitly or implicitly, a labyrinth in which one may learn how to lead a moral life, and thus the idea of the labyrinth may serve as a useful interpretive tool. In two texts, the Queste del Saint Graal and the tale of Gardinus from the Gesta Romanorum, the idea of the labyrinth is used so freely that the maze is not mentioned explicitly at all. Yet I will argue that the Queste's setting (an often trackless forest full of unknown and ambiguous paths) and its action (repeated moral choice in ignorance of where that choice will lead) conjure up the idea of the labyrinth very effectively; intentionally or not, the Queste describes the moral labyrinth that is this world. It does this so impressively, and demands such extensive analysis, that I use it as this section's capstone even though it is chronologically the earliest work. Moreover, it serves as an ideal transition to Chapter 7, which deals with texts as labyrinths, not merely as containing labyrinths. I realize that this violation of chronology may distress some readers, but the logic of books about labyrinths, like the logic of labyrinths themselves, sometimes demands that the first shall be last. In the Gesta tale, the Cretan myth and the idea of a mundane labyrinth inspire a Christian homily in the spirit of the Ovidius moralizatus. Two other works—Boccaccio's Corbaccio and the anonymous Assembly of Ladies—name the labyrinth explicitly and ring their own elaborate changes on its theme. The Corbaccio directs the labyrinth's myth and image toward a savage condemnation of women, whereas the Assembly of Ladies develops the idea rather than the story of the maze.

The Gesta Romanorum

The story of Gardinus the Emperor comes from the Gesta Romanorum, a popular and influential collection of moralized exemplary tales that was probably compiled in Latin by an Englishman around 1300 and then translated into many other languages. This tale is based on the Ovidian legend of Theseus, Ariadne, and the Cretan labyrinth, but neither the

30. The Early English Versions of the Gesta Romanorum, ed. Sidney J. H. Hertrage, EETS, e.s. 93 (London: Oxford University Press, 1879), no. 31, pp. 111–121. I quote the Harley 7333 translation, made ca. 1440. This work, which exists in over 165 manuscripts, was once attributed to Pierre Bersuire (pp. x–xi); Boccaccio, Gower, Chaucer, and Hoccleve were among the authors influenced by it (p. xviii). The Gesta tales were probably intended for preaching purposes, like Bersuire's Ovidius moralizatus.
characters nor the labyrinth, here transmuted into an inextricable garden full of labyrinthine perils, figures by name. If traditional moralizations of Ovid derive morality from the classical legend, this romantic tale of Tiriust and the princess goes a step further, reshaping the myth to justify the elaborate moral deduced from it. Although it is not technically mythography, the Gesta tale embodies the mythographers’ didactic spirit and method of recounting a narrative in order to extract its moral significance.

To win Gardinus’s beautiful daughter, young Tiriust must face the dangers of Gardinus’s fair but inextricable garden and its harmful denizens: a ferocious lion, three men who lead him from the right path, seven fruit trees, and so on. He is aided by the princess and by a mysterious Lady of Solace, who gives him two presents: a magic ointment that, smeared on his armor, will make the lion’s teeth fall out, and a ball of thread to help him find his way out. Tiriust dispatches the lion but succumbs to other dangers and loses the precious ball of thread. The Lady of Solace helps him retrieve it, and he emerges from the garden unscathed to marry the princess. The resemblance of this romantic exemplum to the classical myth is sporadic but marked: the emperor is a kind of Minos, Tiriust is Theseus, the princess is Ariadne, the Lady of Solace plays a Daedalian role in teaching Tiriust to solve the labyrinth-garden’s dangers by the ointment (cf. the ball of pitch) and the clue of thread, and the lion is the first incarnation of the Minotaur in this story, which elaborates on the classical version by adding other dangers—three ruffians, fruit trees.

The reasons for the author’s expansion of the classical myth emerge in the moralization. The emperor is Christ and his garden is the world, in which everyone has been slain by sin. The Lady of Solace is Mary, who lives in the forest of Holy Church; the clue of thread is the law of God, and the thread itself represents the sacraments: one ties the thread to the garden gate by baptism and then navigates the world with sacramental aid. The lion is the devil, defeated by the armor of the works of mercy and the ointment of alms-deeds. The trees, predictably, are the seven deadly sins, and the three men are the world, the flesh, and (again) the devil, who lead men astray. With Mary’s help, even a sinner can retrieve the thread of virtue and “fynde passages” to escape and win the princess (eternal life). Thus the dangers of the traditional labyrinth—the Minotaur and the inextricable errores—proliferate, generating additional symbols of serious threats to Christian life, and the events of the classical myth multiply, offering an ampler outline of Christian Everyman’s passage through the labyrinth of life.

Just as the story owes a great deal to the classical myth, so too the interpretation is indebted to traditional moralizations of that legend: if the labyrinth often represents world, flesh, and devil, here those enemies of mankind inhabit the garden; if the labyrinth symbolizes sin and
worldly pleasure, the garden maze is festooned with fruit trees; if the labyrinth is inextricable without a guide, so the garden entraps anyone unaided by the Lady of Solace. Classical plot, medieval exegeses of the legend, and popular Christian images whose symbolic meanings coincide with those of the Cretan props are blended into an attractive new whole. By taking salient features of the myth and its traditional moralization and using them as the basis for a new story, the unknown author is able to avoid the inconsistencies that characterize commentaries like Bersuire’s and create a moral exemplum that to an unlearned audience might well have been more appealing than the Ovidian legend. And by transforming the labyrinth into a deceptive garden, an occasion for sin and virtue, the author effectively suggests the perilous beauty of the world, divinely created as an excellent place, harmful not in itself, like the Ovidian labyrinth, but because of evil inhabitants who use the seductive garden to befuddle and disorient the wanderer. Thus the author of the Gesta fuses the labyrinth’s pleasing artistry with its horrible inextricability far more effectively than most mythographers. If the Gesta did not tell popular audiences anything specifically about labyrinths, it tells us a good deal about how creatively the idea of the labyrinth could be developed. In a sense, the anonymous author has created a new story not from the traditional myth but rather from a moral commentary on that myth: myth, new text, and commentary interpenetrate in the most intimate, and most typically medieval, fashion.

Il Corbaccio

If the Gesta author wove a charming moral tale in the mythographic tradition, Boccaccio, mythographer extraordinary, tapped his learning to create something altogether nastier. His exegesis of the labyrinth of lust in the Genealogy of the Gentile Gods equates the Minotaur with the human heart deformed by depravity and entangled by worldly delights. This interpretation is fleshed out in Il Corbaccio, the “atrabilious cautionary tale” also known as Il laberinto d’amore. A typically ill-tempered remedia amoris and Boccaccio’s last fictional narrative, the Corbaccio is in Anthony Cassell’s words “thematically and structurally . . . a puzzling and intriguing book.” But the Cretan myth provides important clues:

31. The succinct description of the work is Thomas G. Bergin’s in Boccaccio (New York: Viking Press, 1981), p. 199. Parenthetical citations in my text are to Anthony K. Cassell, The Corbaccio (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975); I have also consulted Tauno Nurmele’s edition (Suomalainen Tiedakatemian Toimituksia: Annates Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae, ser. B, 146 [Helsinki, 1968]), on which Cassell’s translation is based. The Corbaccio is dated variously from 1355 to 1365 and is thus contemporaneous with the De genealogia, on which Boccaccio worked from ca. 1350 on.
32. Cassell, p. xi. Cassell goes on to describe the book’s structure as defined by the conventions of the dream vision genre.
as the Gesta author used the myth as a basis for his own elaborations, so Boccaccio does here.

The title may or may not be part of the clue: we do not know whether “Il laberinto d’amore,” appearing in several manuscripts, was Boccaccio’s own title, but even if it was not, it reflects medieval scribes’ perception that the work is labyrinthine and thus conveys important information about the reception of the text. V. M. Jeffery’s conjectures on the etymology of corbaccio also hint at labyrinthicity. Normally the word means “ugly, ill-omened crow,” but it may play on two Greek words meaning “region” and “frenzied,” so that corbaccio (“mad, disordered place”) and laberinto d’amore are ingenious synonyms. If the title also alludes to the fable of the crow decked out in peacock’s feathers, a figure of the absurd feminine vanity characteristic of the widow in Boccaccio’s work, Boccaccio’s single-minded treatise has an aptly polysemous title; we shall see later how labyrinth and widow are integrated in the text. However one reads the title, the labyrinth suggests setting, plot, and much of the work’s imagery. The best way to show this is to summarize the story, accenting its labyrinthine process and qualities but remembering that other influences, including the opening of Dante’s Divine Comedy and the conventions of dream vision, are also important and that they coincide in many ways with the typical labyrinth experience. As Boccaccio’s title suggests many meanings in one word, so the work fuses several traditions into one narrative.

Rejected by the widow he loves, the narrator-dreamer tempers despair by recalling that worldly fortune is unstable in comparison to divine realms. Like Boethius, whose Consolation is echoed here, he thinks he has moved from blind self-pity to clear-sightedness. His imagined moral progress foreshadows his dream, in which he actually succeeds in moving from the confusion of the labyrinth to the mountain top with its enlightened perspective on the maze below. As the dream begins, he follows a “delightful and beautiful path” that suddenly is choked with brambles and fog so he cannot retrace his steps. In utter darkness, he senses a “desolate wilderness . . . without any track or path, and surrounded by rugged mountains” (p. 6). Unable to escape and terrified by howling beasts, he repents “having entered there without foreseeing
where I was to end up” (p. 7) and calls on God. So far, then, we have simultaneously a variation on conventions of dream vision, extensive allusions to Dante in the dark wood, and entry into a labyrinth full of potential minotaurs, as dark, dangerous, inextricable, and disorienting as any ancient maze but still more terrifying in that it is not merely confusing but completely trackless.

As usually happens in dream visions and moral mazes, the narrator’s prayer is answered by the appearance of a guide, the old man whose widow is the dreamer’s beloved. She it was who led the dreamer to the treacherous path that only seems beautiful; “although the entrance to this place is very wide for anyone who wants to enter it through madness and lust, it is not easy to leave again” (p. 10). The dreamer’s education begins when he asks where he is and whether “anyone who enters . . . can ever leave by himself” (p. 10). The guide answers that the valley has many names: the Labyrinth of Love, the Pigsty of Venus, the Enchanted Valley, the Valley of Sighs and Woe, the Court of Love. The howling beasts are “wretches—of whom you are one—who have been caught in the net of false love,” and the place is a labyrinth “because men become as trapped in it as they did in that of old, without ever knowing the way out” (pp. 10–14). Escape is impossible without divine aid and personal wisdom and fortitude.

To nurture this wisdom, the guide elicits an account of the dreamer’s entry into the labyrinth of love. The imagery of entrapment expands as the dreamer admits that he has “entangled myself in the snares of love” and “shackled and given my liberty and subjected my reason to the hands of a woman” (p. 20). Finally he accepts his guide’s diagnosis: “you yourself were the origin of your own error” (p. 21). In other words, the maze is man-made, woven by sins; as in the Genealogy, the lustful man entangles himself in the windings of his own desires, becoming a beastman and turning his heart into a labyrinth. Love, that maze-like “thing without reason or order” (p. 23), hardly befits a middle-aged scholar like the dreamer.

Having retraced his steps in memory, knowing how he got in if not how to get out, the dreamer ponders the nature of the labyrinth in which he finds himself. Here the work becomes so venomous a catalogue of antifeminist clichés that at least one critic sees the Corbaccio as a satire on misogyny rather than an example of it. But since Boccaccio’s writings

36. Cassell lists related passages in the Divine Comedy and Boccaccio’s own commentary (Esposizione sopra la Comedia) but ignores the echo of Aeneid 6.126–129 and Dante’s biblical source, Matthew 7:13–14, a passage with which Prudentius does much. Cf. the association of Aeneas’s descent into hell with entry into the labyrinth in Petrarch’s Liber sine nomine, epistle 19.

37. See Jean-Pierre Barricelli, “Satire of Satires: Boccaccio’s Corbaccio,” Italian Quarterly, 18, no. 72 (1975), 95–111. Bergin (pp. 196–203) and Cassell (pp. xvii–xxvi) also discuss the problem of tone, Boccaccio’s place in antifeminist tradition, and the incongruity of certain features in the work.
are crammed with antifeminist sentiments, most likely his virulence here is intended as the wisdom that leads one out of the maze. This supposition is justified by further developments of the labyrinth image, which show how the corbaccio of the title is also the labyrinth itself in more ways than the etymological.

As the entry to the labyrinth seems pleasant but then reveals its true ugliness, so too with women, who seem fair because cosmetics and clothing mask their true deformity. These superficial adornments correspond to the Daedalian artifices that bestial minds prefer to nature in the Genealogy. The labyrinth of lust found in sinful hearts shifts its anatomical location: we hear of the “blind and dismal prison he falls into who stumbles beneath their [women’s] sway” (p. 34), and in the ad feminam satire that follows, the guide reveals his wife’s inmost secrets, stripping away artifice to reveal nature and shedding pitiless light on the labyrinth’s classical darkness. He describes his wife’s vagina as an “obscure valley” (p. 42), and what follows is a grotesque effictio of female genitals, described as great gulfs, enormous ports accommodating many ships at once, gaping mouths, and so on (pp. 55–56). These are among the metaphors recommended by the Bolognese rhetorician Boncompagno da Signa in his extravagant list of apt metaphors for the genitals—a list that also suggests “a putrid lake, a press for feces, a labyrinth of shame.” Boccaccio does not make this last comparison explicit, but it may have been in his mind: if the “obscure valley” of the genitalia is also the gulf and the terrible river, surely they are also to be equated with the dark valley in which the dream itself takes place—the enchanted valley, the pigsty of Venus, the labyrinth of love. The fourteenth-century physician Bernard of Gordon recommended curing foolish love by forcing besotted lovers to anatomize an old whore and look at rags covered with menstrual blood, a remedium more or less pursued by the guide here, and consequently the Corbaccio’s message differs only in verbosity and tone from that of the Old French Lay of the Lecher, in which the court of love is built on one foundation: con.

38. In this context, one is struck by the guide’s comment that the Virgin, one of only eleven wise women in the history of the world, was remarkable for her natural beauty, which, unlike the artificial beauty of fourteenth-century women, was not carefully calculated to arouse lust (p. 33).

39. Boncompagno, Rhetorica novissima (1235), ed. Augusto Gaudenzi, Biblioteca iuridica mediae aevi, vol. 2 (Bologna, 1892). If the female genitals are often linked with the labyrinth, as Santarcangeli suggests (pp. 209–213), so too are the intestines: see Vindicianus (late fourth century) in Theodorus Priscianus, Euporiston, ed. Valentine Rose (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1894), p. 477. For the association of the female genitals with the labyrinth in India, see Kern, pp. 384–385. Others may have suspected the connection between genitalia and labyrinth in the Corbaccio: Jeffery notes that some critics find “a second obscene meaning” in the title and suggests that “manly delicacy” has prevented its publication: MLR, 28, 195.

the dreamer, “if you did not abandon your error, you should be considered more bestial than any other foolish beast” (p. 57). Thus the dream’s pleasant path becomes the mental valley-labyrinth of love, which in turn is revealed as the obscure valley and shameful labyrinth of the female genitals once disguising artifice is cast aside. Such is your beloved, Bernard would say to the lover; such is the end of lust, and such the beast found in the foul labyrinth of love. Beneath the lady is the corbaccio, the old crow, the labyrinth of chaos; the work’s title rings its changes.

Like Swift in Celia’s closet, the dreamer is cured: “These things . . . have so completely reversed my opinion and changed my mind, that without any doubt at all, I now think the opposite of what I thought before” (p. 71). He is ready for the grace that will lead him “outside of this labyrinth” (p. 73). He promises to reverse his course (as one naturally does at the center of a labyrinth) and help the widow achieve salvation the best way a poet can: by exposing her in his book. By enumerating the labyrinths of love, the poet extricates himself, his book becoming the thread to free his readers from similar mazes. Finally he can “see the way clear” and will “never stray from the path of light” (p. 75). He leaves “not a valley but a thing deep as Hell, gloomy, and filled with darkness” (p. 76) to warn those “who, with eyes closed, set out without a guide through unsafe places, trusting too much in themselves” (p. 77).

Distasteful as the Corbaccio may be, it offers an extravagant portrait of the labyrinths of love, a portrait heavily dependent on medieval ideas about mazes, sin, and women and, at the same time, a coherent arrangement and expansion of those traditions. The labyrinth, I would argue, is the work’s unifying theme. As an image of inextricability, it represents the world of the lover: his heart imprisoned by sin, his confused mind and darkened vision, and the real cause of his entrapment—the treacherous labyrinth of his beloved’s genitals. As a story, the Corbaccio suggests the myth’s dramatis personae: the widow, mistress of Daedalian artifice, corresponds to the labyrinth’s first mover, Pasiphaë, bereft of her reasonable husband just like Boccaccio’s widow; the bestial denizens of the maze are minotaurs, mongrels who only seem human; the guide is part Minos the law-giver and part Daedalus, the man who knows the labyrinth and the way out; the dreamer, of course, is Theseus, the prudent man who learns to see the foul truth beneath fair appearances. He gains insight in the darkness of the maze and learns to reverse not merely his steps but also his conduct to free himself from the errors of a labyrinth completely in malo. The only duality in this labyrinth is the contrast between feminine artfulness and blunt reality.

The Assembly of Ladies

In remarkable contrast to the Corbaccio, The Assembly of Ladies, a charming if somewhat uneven Middle English poem of the mid-fifteenth cen-
tury, uses the idea of the labyrinth of life with unobtrusive delicacy and tact, and its secular focus is unusual among medieval works about moral labyrinths. In Chapter 5, I used this delightful and often realistic allegory to illustrate the experience of being in a real garden labyrinth. Here we see how the poem uses the literal setting and mental experience of a maze to describe the moral labyrinth of this world.

Like Il Corbaccio, The Assembly of Ladies is a dream vision, but unlike that work it belongs to the courtly tradition of love poetry. Familiarity with similar works by Chaucer and other late Middle English writers creates a readerly expectation that waking and dreaming activities and settings will be closely related and that there will be a blending of allegorical content with realistic and even comic detail, and such indeed is the case: the maze the dreamer treads before she falls asleep has symbolic and realistic aspects, and the framing maze journey is reiterated by the dream-quest. Throughout, the social function, physical description, psychological effects, and symbolic potential of the maze are handled with the easy grace that led C. S. Lewis to describe this poet as “the lost Jane Austen of the fifteenth century.”

One September afternoon, as the narrator and other gentlefolk stroll in a garden, a young man asks the narrator what she is doing. She replies that she wants “To walke aboute the mase, in certeyn te, / As a woman that nothyng rought [had no cares]” (17-18)—a paradoxical response, for certainty is the last quality normally associated with mazes. Pressed by his questions and urged not to defer an answer, she responds, “Abide” (24), she will speak in due course: as the maze is a delaying process that (if unicursal) inevitably leads to a conclusion, so the story of her maze-adventure will be long and circuitous. Although the narrator describes herself as “the symplest of alle” (7), her experiences are, then, a puzzle, a maze to be explored at leisure. She then tells her adventure. One afternoon, having nothing better to do, she and her lady friends walked the maze, following whatever paths they liked and reacting to the experience as their temperaments inclined them (see p. 110 above). What her account subtly reveals is an array of attitudes toward and

41. C. S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition (1936; New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 250. I follow common practice in referring to the author as “she” because the narrator is female—and because there are so few recorded women authors in the Middle Ages that I seize any plausible opportunity to turn “anon.” into a woman. I like to think that this one was named Ariadne.

Parenthetical line references cite D. A. Pearsall’s edition of The Floure and the Leafe and The Assembly of Ladies.

Comparatively little has been written about the poem. The fullest discussion is by John Stephens, “The Questioning of Love in the Assembly of Ladies,” RES, n.s. 24 (1973), 129–140. I have not seen Judith Davidoff’s article, forthcoming in M&H.

42. “In certeynte” might be a line-filler, but I agree with Stephens that the phrase is significant, not least because it is so astonishing in context.
courses through the maze of life, not merely a vividly imagined report of
wandering in a garden labyrinth. Some people, like the folk on Lang­
land's fair field, have no sense of direction at all, being sure they are
walking one way when in fact they are moving in the opposite direction;
others are hesitant observers, looking on rather than choosing a path;
still others—the last shall be first?—seem to lag behind but suddenly
find themselves near their goal. One group of optimists is “so mased in
theyr minde” (38) that any path is fine with them, and others are so
frustrated that they climb over the rails, refusing to endure the maze at
all. The narrator, in contrast, tires and finds her way to a pleasant arbor
for a nap. No lessons are drawn from these various ways of coping with a
maze; like so much else in this gentle, understated poem, moralization is
left to the reader.

After the realism of the maze, the poem moves, as John Stephens has
noted, to the more overtly symbolic realm of the enclosed arbor with its
turf-benches and turning wheel: all its flowers—pansies, forget-me-nots,
and so on—are traditionally associated with love, but they would not all
be in bloom in September. We are in a locus amoenus, an idealized land­
scape that may lie at the geographical center of the maze or that is at
least an appropriate reward for the narrator's persistence and cleverness
in finding her way: after labor intus, rest. Here she dreams of a journey to
the court of Lady Loyalty, who will hear, but not resolve, bills of com­
plaint presented by the dreamer, her friends in the maze, and other
wronged ladies.

The dream journey recapitulates the frame journey through the
maze. Here too the dreamer travels in solitude, although her friends
eventually join her (they are a little behind her in the dream just as they
seem to be in the frame maze). Both journeys are long and tiring, requir­
ing the labor and involving the confusion that give labyrinth and maze
their respective names. Both demand persistence: the maze does so by its
very nature, and in the dream Lady Perseverance summons the dreamer
to Loyalty's assembly while Lady Diligence guides the anxious heroine,
who is reluctant to set forth because “ther is none of us that knoweth the
way” (128), as in an unfamiliar maze. Diligence and the dreamer set off
at dawn, worried that they may be late, and they pray to Saint Julian, not
merely the patron saint of hospitality but also, particularly in England,
the patron of maze-walkers, or so I conjecture. Both journeys involve
delays, the maze structurally, the way to the Assembly because of numer­
ous comically realistic pauses as the dreamer changes her clothes and
 frets about her appearance (253-256), waits for her tardy friends (285-
371) and for further instructions from Perseverance (372-406), explains
why she alone has not come with an identifying motto (309-315 and 411-

43. See the discussion of Julian and turf-mazes above, chap. 5.
413), and endures the ministrations of seemingly infinite allegorical functionaries at Loyalty's castle, euphemistically named Plesaunt Regard but in fact a Bleak House of bureaucratic delays. If some of the dreamer's companions jumped over the rails of the frame maze "for verrey wrath," she herself becomes remarkably testy now and then, as when she urges Perseverance to make haste: "Grete cost alwey there is in taryeng, / And long to sue it is a wery thyng" (419-420).

After further delays, Lady Loyalty hears her suppliants' complaints; her own motto, appropriately enough, is *A endurer* (489). In fact, one begins to suspect the poet of falling into the fallacy of imitative form, so long is the reader's struggle through the delays of this maze-like dream. Finally the dreamer herself speaks of her extreme melancholy and of lacking reward commensurate with her deserts, but, although Lady Loyalty promises a remedy, justice will not be served quite yet: all the cases are bound over until some later date, when another journey must be made to another assembly. If the reader does not yet suspect that the journey is a dream-transformation, and perhaps the underlying meaning, of the treading of the frame maze, the analogy between waking and dreaming actions is confirmed when the narrator awakens "al amased" (739), as bewildered by her long and inconclusive dream as by the garden maze, but apparently reassured by the promise of an eventual solution and justice.

Just as finding a path through a multicursal maze is a maze-walker's responsibility, so interpreting the poem's garden maze and labyrinthine dream journey is left to the reader. Stephens suggests that the frame maze and the endless seeking it involves are "a metaphor for a state of mind" (p. 132) and, less cogently, may be related to the traditional labyrinth of lust; he further argues that the poem's subject is the instability of earthly love, a problem insoluble in this life. I suggest instead that the maze experience portrayed in the frame and metaphorically traced in the dream demands another, broader medieval interpretation: the maze is the labyrinth of earthly life, full of delays and uncertainties, where the only sure counsel for maze-walkers is the motto of Loyalty, the implicit message of the labyrinth: *A endurer*. With guidance from Perseverance and Diligence, wandering and questioning may cease and justice may prevail, though perhaps not in this life (even Minos, judge of the underworld and founder of labyrinths, rules in an afterlife). As the narrator's patient treading of the garden maze leads to a pleasant arbor and sleep, if not necessarily to extrication from the maze, and as the tedious journey to Loyalty earns the promise of reward, so too the careful walking of the world-labyrinth leads to peace after labor, order after chaos; and perhaps the knowledge that there is an end toward which all paths converge is what produces the dreamer's paradoxical "certeynte."

In a sense, then, the allegorical lesson discreetly embodied in the
Assembly of Ladies is a secular version of the moral of the Gesta story: happiness, or at least relief, awaits maze-walkers who follow the advice of a lady of solace. If the Assembly appeals more to modern taste, perhaps that is because of its experiential emphasis, its lack of explicit moralizing, and its refusal to resolve issues that poets often find less pat than preachers do. Although both poet and preacher are working with the tradition of the world as a moral labyrinth, the preacher sees the maze and its symbolic content as artifact, God's complexly crafted design, where the poet is concerned with process, with the limited vision possible inside a maze. Although the frame maze seems to be multicursal, the poet does not emphasize the need to choose one path or another within the dream; persistence, not intelligence, is the issue. Good guides, and stoical endurance of the maze of this world, will somehow lead to a peaceful arbor; perfect understanding is beyond human powers. All we can finally choose is our attitude in treading the maze, wherever it leads; all we can learn with certainty is patient perseverance.

La Queste del Saint Graal

One of the finest and most elaborate treatments of the idea of the labyrinth is found in La Queste del Saint Graal, written anonymously in about 1225. This is a work of labyrinthine artistry and complexity, a circuitous, ambiguous literary process carefully designed to afford transcendent enlightenment to readers who stay its course, participating in its characters' confusions and learning as they learn. For the moment, however, I focus on the moral labyrinths within the work rather than on the work itself as an intellectual labyrinth. I cannot prove that the author had the labyrinth in mind in constructing the Queste, for he never mentions the word; but the work draws upon so many labyrinthine qualities and connotations that the idea of the labyrinth, as understood in the Middle Ages and inherent in the unicursal and multicursal forms of the maze, informs and is fully embodied in the work. If there is a shaping image in the Queste, I believe it is the labyrinth, a visual analogy that


So much has been written on the Queste that I have not tried to survey the secondary literature. Works I have found helpful on the ideas of paths and patterns include Susanna Greer Fein, "Thomas Malory and the Pictorial Interlace of La Queste del Saint Graal," UTQ, 46 (1977), 215–240; Sandra Ness Ihle, Malory's Grail Quest: Invention and Adaptation in Medieval Prose Romance (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983); Charlotte C. Morse, The Pattern of Judgment in the Queste and Cleanness (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978); Tzvetan Todorov, "The Quest of Narrative," in The Poetics of Prose, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 120–142; and, more generally, Vinaver's The Rise of Romance.
includes path and interlace but goes far beyond them to unify important themes, images, and patterns.

The Queste tells a well-known story: the search for the Holy Grail, a spiritual adventure bringing success to a few and failure to most, a harbinger of and moral justification for the imminent fall of Camelot. Chapter 2 showed that quests and labyrinths have much in common: they are journeys pursued individually, if sometimes undertaken jointly, in search of a prized goal; they involve conscious choice to engage in a difficult process, full of obstacles, delays, and setbacks—there is labor of all sorts intus. Success depends on internal virtues such as persistence in adversity as well as on external guidance.

But quests that are particularly rather than incidentally labyrinthine have important features not necessarily common to every journey. Unusual circuitousness will be an essential part of the design. Both moral and physical error will probably be involved. The darkness of the classical maze and blindness or the partial vision induced by the path’s recurrent twisting may figure thematically. The labyrinth’s characteristic duality will appear somehow: the difference between unicursal and multicursal modes of movement may be highlighted, for example, or contrasting points of view—process-induced ignorance versus transcendent understanding of a grand design. References or parallels to the Cretan myth may be detected, and the sens of the work will overlap substantially with metaphorical meanings normally associated with the maze. Explication—the physical unwinding of a path and the intellectual unraveling of problematic meaning—will be demanded, for the maze’s impenetrability and inextricability will play a role in the action and its significance. The quality of the journey will be specifically labyrinthine: practical and moral choices among paths may be involved, and so will a kind of passivity: maze-walkers operate within constraints established by the architect’s design and are not free to go exactly where they choose. Finally, quests that are truly labyrinthine will have an architect who frames the grand design within which the questers move to enact or subvert the overarching pattern by their choices and persistence. What seems to be chance or aventure in a labyrinth is really providence, human or divine, when viewed from the right perspective. With these things in mind, let us see how the Queste is specifically as well as generally labyrinthine.45

45. Many works, including numerous epics and romances, are labyrinthine in general and specific senses; four are considered in detail in Part Three. The generally labyrinthine nature of the Queste has been recognized by scholars including Matarasso, Vinaver, Ihle, Todorov, and Fein. But to my knowledge no one has systematically explored the theme; even Fein, who repeatedly speaks of the maziness of the Queste (pp. 217, 218, 219, 221, 233), is concerned to show that the Queste is a “pictorial interlace”—as I argue in chap. 7, a less useful and inclusive analogy—rather than a labyrinth, although we draw on much of the same textual evidence. What Fein sees as interlace, I see as the idea of the labyrinth in the Queste.
The goal of the grail quest is “to learn the truth of the Holy Grail” (P61, my translation): it is paradoxically an intellectual and spiritual journey pursued by physical wanderings, a search for what is both known (the veiled grail appears to Camelot at Pentecost) and unknown: “This is no search for earthly things but a seeking out of the mysteries and hidden sweets of Our Lord, and the divine secrets which the most high Master will disclose” (M47/P1g). Like the impenetrable labyrinths of Gregory of Nazianzus, Vegetius, and imperial robes, the physical and spiritual complications of the grail quest protect what is valuable from the unworthy, whose physical errores represent and occasion inextricable moral error. For the chosen and well-choosing few, the labyrinth is penetrable, bestowing enlightenment and transcendence of mundane things; for the ill-choosing many, it is endless error and spiritual blindness. But for everyone it is an unknown path of ignorance in which means and end—the patterned roads and the knowledge of the Grail—are laboriously unfolded, even though we know from the start who will succeed and who will fail: one of the author’s strategies is to provide characters and readers alike with moments of privileged vision that usually prove unsustainable in the real world, at least for the characters.

The knights’ choice to pursue a common goal—to enter the maze, as it were—is difficult, but once the choice is made, each knight goes his own way, “striking out into the forest one here, one there, wherever they saw it thickest and wherever path or track was absent” (M52–53/P17). The place of testing and significant choice, then, is the trackless forest wasteland, in itself not unlike other landscapes described as labyrinths: Boccaccio’s valley, Ambrose’s wilderness, Jerome’s ocean, Gregory Thaumaturgus’s forest and swamp—all impenetrable, inextricable, and unpatterned. The forest of the Queste is repeatedly described as having “ne voie ne sentier,” as in this significant first description, and errant knights—whether wandering physically or erring morally—constantly plunge into the opaque unknown in their quest for the still more unknowable grail. Yet despite recurrent references to its pathlessness, its “desvoiable” nature, the forest paradoxically contains many paths, forks, and crossroads: for some seekers, infinite ambiguity is narrowed to crucial choices between morally significant alternatives, so that if the forest is a wilderness-labyrinth, it is also a multicursal maze with well-defined channels. The apparently careless inconsistency between pathlessness and too many paths is reconciled by the labyrinth tradition, which categorically includes both alternatives. Both pathless wastes and complex patterns of interconnecting roads confuse wanderers because they contain no direct, unambiguous track to the desired destination. They differ in that wastelands manifest no inherent pattern; they have potential but no form, no guidance. Or, to look at it another way, the labyrinthine forest, like the world it signifies, offers an infinity of courses to be de-
defined by errant knights whose passing establishes a path, but within that
infinity better and worse ways have already been conceived, and possibly,
as we shall see, there is a single correct road, a unicursal path superim-
posed on deceptive multiplicity, as in the writings of Prudentius.

How, then, do the knights of the Round Table define their interwoven
paths through the maze and consequently determine their own success
or failure? Arthur, who tries to dissuade his men from the enterprise,
refuses to enter the labyrinth at all; for the tragic monarch of the mate-
rial world, the forest is impenetrable. He defines no path for himself or
for others. By analogy, in the spiritual context of this romance he is
timorous Aegeus who will not join his people in the maze; the end of his
reign is inevitable, and his authority will pass, albeit briefly and in an-
other kingdom, to the Thesean Galahad, himself limited to defining a
path only a few can follow. Arthur deserves what he most fears—that
none of his knights will return, that the quest will prove endless. Those
who do enter have different opportunities for choice. Many confront
bivia, the forked roads that, in sequence, delineate a multicursal laby-
rinth. The squire Melias fails at the first and most clearly marked bivium
in the tale: despite a warning that the left-hand road is only for the best
knight in the world, he chooses the sinister path of pride and is dread-
fully wounded. As he learns later, when the bivium is explained in one of
the internal glosses that constitute ex post facto guidance and permit one
to learn from one’s mistakes, so it is with those who are blind to “la
chevalerie celestiel” and choose “la seculer” (P 45): they proceed willfully,
discounting unambiguous guidance and the obvious symbolism of left
and right. But labyrinths are by definition unpredictable to those within:
thus Gawain, well-meaning but lacking in persistence and impervious to
advice, twice chooses the right-hand path and yet goes awry. Gawain’s
boon companion Hector reaches Corbenic and the grail, but, having
followed the right path in the wrong spirit, he is turned away, and he
plunges “into the forest there where he saw it thickest” (M267/P261). For
him, the mystery remains impenetrable. In the labyrinth of this world,

46. It is a convention of Arthurian romance (as well as practical politics) for the king to
stay home while his knights seek adventure. Nevertheless, Arthur’s reluctance to partici-
pate in the Grail quest seems to go beyond convention.
47. Having chosen to follow the path of Galahad, Gawain takes the right-hand path after
wrongly killing seven knights at the Castle of Maidens (M78/P53); he misses Galahad but
learns of his own sinfulness, although he disregards advice to do penance and embark on a
more fruitful path. Later, he and Hector are directed along a steep, narrow path to their
right (M166/P151), but on the way Gawain kills Owein. When they finally take the right
path to Nascien the hermit, seeking “to be enlightened where we were in darkness and to
receive assurance where we are in error” (M169/P155), they are told how and why they
have failed, but they do not profit from Nascien’s guidance. Gawain, indeed, sets off
intending to return when he has more leisure, but he never retraces his steps, and the
earthly labyrinth is inextricable for him.
those without grace cannot achieve holiness even if they follow what are in a literal sense the right roads; unless they do so spiritually, the long-sought transcendent goal turns to wilderness and chaos. The maze is inextricable to anyone whose blind conduct and perverse self-will deny the existence of roads and architect.

The good knights choose better. Bors, for instance, finds moral and literal choice coinciding when he comes to a crossroads where he must decide whether to save his brother Lionel or rescue an abducted virgin (M187/P175). Having taken the only door among many that leads to Christ by a full confession (M176–177/P162–163), having unconsciously absorbed the moral of a puzzling dream, he chooses correctly. If Bors can find his way through a multicursal maze of choices, Lancelot faces an even more complex process, and since he travels the most complicated and comprehensive maze of all, it is worth looking at his experiences in detail, for some aspect of them is shared by every other quester.

After Galahad has defeated his father Lancelot and Perceval in battle, signifying that they are still imperfect, Perceval suggests, “We would do better to retrace our steps, for if we go astray [desvoier] at this point I fear it will be long before we find our road [droit chemin] again.” Instead, Lancelot pursues Galahad. In itself this is an admirable ambition, but Lancelot’s manner of proceeding is ominous: “keeping to neither track nor path, but following where fortune [aventure] led” (M81/P57). For a sinner like Lancelot, this is rash action indeed, like that of the fools who leave the right path to find a shortcut through Ambrose’s moral wilderness. In the darkness, Lancelot sees nothing “by which to steer his course,” and when he comes to a bivium the inscription is illegible. In the shadowy forest maze that mirrors his spiritual blindness, he can neither guide himself nor decipher the means of guidance. Ironically, thanks to the workings of aventure, he arrives precipitously at his goal, a chapel where the grail heals a sick knight. But the doors are barred, and when the grail appears Lancelot is paralyzed: he has not come in the right spirit, with the right preparation. It is as if he had followed the first stretch of a labyrinth that leads almost directly to the innermost circle, from which he is granted a vision of the goal he cannot reach until he has traced the twisting paths out to the very edge again and earned access to the center. Acknowledging his moral blindness, Lancelot seeks guidance from a hermit and confesses his faults, couched in terms of the bivium: “I have gone to my death down that wide road which . . . is the portal and the path of sin. The devil . . . hid from my eyes the everlasting woe that lies in store for him who treads that road to its end.” The hermit holds out hope: “Just as you may see a man wander at times from his path when he falls asleep and retrace his steps at once on waking, so also it is with the sinner who falls asleep in mortal sin and veers from the right way; he too returns to his path, which is his Maker, and directs his steps
towards the Most High Lord who ever cries: ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life’” (M88/P65). Here Lancelot begins his penitential tracing of a better track through the multicable maze; the hermit's guidance, his own virtuous impulses, and the aid of the Holy Ghost who will “make you a path” (P116) help him choose as he could not at the dark bivium, and he asks God “to lead him back into a path which would profit his soul” (M136/P118). At least one moment of hesitation between alternatives has been overcome.

Unlike Gawain, Lancelot knows he must seek moral (and directional) guidance from others. His next hermit-guide also uses the imagery of paths and choices. Once Lancelot had the rectitude (droiture) that “holds to its unwavering course so steadfastly that no eventuality can shift it from that path.” Yet Guin evere led him from “the path of righteousness [droite voie]” into a blind “path of lust,” which left him “unable to hold to track or trail.” Donning a hair shirt, Lancelot sets off in a submissive spirit “where fortune takes me. For I have no notion of the whereabouts of what I seek” (M142–146/P124–129). Fortune or “aventure” is what providence sometimes looks like in the mundane maze; it last led Lancelot to the frustrating encounter with the grail that was for him a moral turning point. Now, humbled, he willingly submits to aventure and good advice, knowing he cannot find his way through the labyrinth by prowess and intelligence.

Lancelot’s progress is next assessed by an enigmatic maiden who knows what he seeks and who tells him, “You were once closer to it than you are today, and yet are closer now than ever you were before, if you hold fast to what you have embarked on” (M146–147/P130). She means, of course, that he was physically closer to the grail at the chapel of the sick knight, but that he is spiritually and temporally closer now. As it describes Lancelot’s wanderings, however, the paradox evokes the visual image of a labyrinth. At first its course may lead straight to the center, but then it twists away to the periphery before eventually turning back to the goal. At the periphery, then, one may be closer to the goal in time—that is, nearer to the end of the path—than when one is geographically close at the start (cf. plate 5). Lancelot fails to understand because he is in the maze, ignorant of its pattern; but if he perseveres on the right path, he will achieve transcendent understanding, if not of the grail itself then of the grand design that leads to it. The maiden’s cryptic words succinctly describe the labyrinth experience and reflect the dual perspective inherent in the idea of the maze.

Encouraged, Lancelot follows the same path until it forks. This time the cross at the bivium has no inscription: perhaps, in a state of comparative grace, Lancelot needs none, being able to choose correctly on his own. He sleeps and dreams of Christ, who reveals the spiritual significance of the motif of choice: “It is for thee to choose whether I love or
When Lancelot awakes, he prays he should not stray from the “droite voie” and proceeds on the path he had followed the day before. We are not told whether this is the right or the left fork, perhaps because his state of mind almost guarantees that whichever path he takes will be morally right. As if in confirmation of grace, he defeats a knight who had earlier robbed him, yet he charitably ties up the knight’s horse for him to find when he revives.

Still another hermit interprets Lancelot’s dream and urges him to continue as he has begun. Lancelot rides off, “following neither track nor path, for his thoughts were wholly on his life and his soul’s weal” (M 155/P139). However laudable his meditation, however, he has left the path and gets into trouble: happening upon a tournament between black and white knights, he supports the black underdogs and is taken prisoner by the white forces, who free him when he promises to do their will. Wisely, he leaves by a different path. These events, and indeed Lancelot’s progress throughout the quest, are explicated by the anchoress whose dwelling he finds to his right. Her words, like those of all holy interpreters in the work, reassert the contrast between the limited perceptions of one caught in a maze and the transcendent vision available to those who know its true nature: the white and black knights were real knights engaged in earthly jousting, but they are also heavenly and sinful forces, respectively, and Lancelot chose wrong because his perspective was terrestrial. She continues in familiar imagery: “the hermits and religious . . . set your feet upon the path of Jesus Christ, which quickens with life and greenness like the forest. . . . And when you had left them, you shunned the path you had followed earlier, the mortal sins which were your former habit” (M 159/P144). She urges him to stay on the path of truth in the forest, so “vast and labyrinthine [desvoiable] in its depths” (M 160/P145).

But Lancelot reaches an impasse where he is left passive, dependent on grace. A black knight slays Lancelot’s horse, leaving him “hemmed in at all sides: in front flowed the [Median] river, to either side rose the cliffs, and at his back lay the forest. With whatever attention he considered these obstacles, he could see no salvation here below” (M 161/P146). The labyrinth is inextricable without external aid, and here the Queste abandons Lancelot to narrate other knights’ adventures. Much later we return to Lancelot, still “hemmed in [enclos]” by river, cliffs, and the forest so “vast and tortuous and mazy [desvoiable]” (M 254/P246), waiting for the grace that arrives in the form of the ship.

This interpretation of the forest as life-giving and self-renewing suggests that seeing only a “forest of error” (Fein, p. 225) is too limited. If the forest seduces and deceives, it also tests and makes worthy, like an instructive maze penetrable to the elect. As we shall see, the forest contains three different kinds of labyrinth, each with different moral implications.
carrying Perceval's dead sister. So long as he is on this ship, Lancelot moves as God wishes; as in so many medieval works, the boat without sail or oar has Grace as its invisible helmsman, and those guided by grace are on a unicusural path of truth. In token of Lancelot's renewed virtue, and perhaps of his proper choice not to choose at all in the terrible valley, Galahad joins him on the ship for half a year. Eventually Lancelot is carried to Corbenic and a vision of the grail that leaves him paralyzed but in spiritual bliss for twenty-four days. That Lancelot explicated these events himself confirms that he has achieved transcendent vision, however partial and ephemeral it may be. Unworthy of sustained company with the grail, Lancelot returns to Camelot, one of only four to have reached the goal.

Thus Lancelot undergoes the most complex labyrinthine experience of any knight. At the start, and later in a significant relapse, he charges through the sinful labyrinth of trackless waste decried by Ambrose; but both times his offense is mitigated by his good intent—finding Galahad and then saving his own soul—so that, after major and minor humiliations, he receives guidance and mends his ways. He also passes with many hesitations (and for him, hesitation is an improvement) through the more formally multicursal moral labyrinth of the world; confronting repeated bivia, he gradually learns how to make the moral choices those physical bifurcations signify in the many-leveled landscape of the Queste. Aware of his own inadequacies, he welcomes guidance from hermits and maidens who see the labyrinth whole. He makes mistakes, leaves the right path, chooses new roads, and for a time finds the labyrinth inextricable. In this romance, so insistent on the necessity of grace, moral choice can take you only so far, leaving you in a dark, impassable valley. But Lancelot negotiates the intricacies of the world-labyrinth well enough to merit the best guidance of all: on the ship of Perceval's sister, he abandons conscious choice of direction and goes as God wills. Essentially, he enters a unicusural maze, or at least the true path defined by God

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50. None of the ships in the Queste is under human guidance, though only this ship, built to carry Perceval's sister, is specifically described as being without sail or airon, usually "oar" (M245/P246-247); the white ship that carries Bors, Perceval, and Galahad to the Ship of Solomon and that ship itself have sails, but God and aventure as steersmen (cf. M133/P119). That all these ships correspond to the rudderless boats common in medieval literature is made clear by a conversation between Bors and a priest: when Bors says, "A man's heart is the helm [aireron] of his ship and steers it where he lists, to harbor or to hazard," the priest responds, "At the helm [aireron] there stands a master who holds and governs it and turns it where he would; so it is too with the human heart. For a man's good works proceed from the grace and guidance of the Holy Ghost, the evil from the enemy's seduction" (M178/P165). Thus God and grace provide both impetus and direction to those in the holy ships of the Queste. It is also worth remembering that for Jerome the ocean is a labyrinth to be navigated only with God's help.

For other steerless boats in medieval literature, see Kolve, Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative, pp. 325-340.
in a multicursal terrain. Lancelot fleetingly attains his goal, and he has wisdom and grace enough to wend his way back through the forest to Camelot, bearing news of his vision. If he does not completely transcend the worldly labyrinth, he charts it thoroughly, becoming an exemplary Everyman, as Charlotte Morse has argued.\(^{51}\) What and how he learns explains why a circuitous path may be necessary to achieve instruction: steps must be retraced, literally or intellectually (as when his experiences and visions are explicated); and the long way round may be the only way to become worthy of the goal. Thus Lancelot teaches us by taking no path, the wrong path, and the only path—the three structural options of the medieval idea of the labyrinth. He chooses his way with the devil's guidance, his own misinformed free will, and divinely inspired aid, finally learning patience and his own limitations and submitting to the sure, silent control of adventure and a providential ship.

Less experienced than Lancelot, Perceval is wiser, always acknowledging his need for guidance: while Lancelot plunges into the forest after Galahad, Perceval knows they cannot find the Good Knight, so he decides to retrace his steps to a good anchorress. Significantly, he can find "no path to take him there direct. However, he steered the best course he could" (M94/P72). Aiming lower, accepting his limitations, Perceval traverses the wilderness with care; good sense, good intent, and, presumably, grace guide him to his anchoress aunt, who proves his patience by making him wait for an interview and then for his departure. He is rewarded with the information that the Round Table images "the roundness of the earth, the concentric spheres of the planets and of the elements in the firmament," and that Galahad is a figure for Christ (M99-100/P76-78): he learns, implicitly, that he is moving through the well-planned labyrinth of the cosmos and that Galahad may function as Christ-Theseus—indeed, that he will do so for Perceval, if Perceval remains chaste. With directions to find Galahad, Perceval sets off, turning always to the right to find an abbey and then, in a chapel without an entrance, to find Mordrain, sick, blind, and ancient, who had approached too near the grail (M103/P81). Perceval's course recapitulates and corrects Lancelot's path to the adventure of the sick knight, as is proper: the knight entrapped by the labyrinth of lust cannot accomplish what the chaste knight can. If Perceval's right turns do not bring him directly to the grail, neither does he experience Lancelot's failure in finding the grail when unprepared. A slower, steadier, more circuitous approach fares better.

Later, a demonic horse carries Perceval to an island where he barely resists sexual temptation, instinctively chooses right, receives further guidance, and boards a providential white ship. He is instructed to "go

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wheresoever adventure leads thee," in assurance that God will guide him
(M133/P115). Having patiently proven his spiritual worth, he submits to
God's will and is led thenceforth, however circuitously, to the grail. Per­
ceval's time in the wilderness and the multicursal maze is limited; in fact,
he confronts no obvious bivia, though he must repeatedly choose be­
tween good and evil on the island, and his virtue and submission earn
him unicursal passage to what he seeks.

If Perceval's course shows what Lancelot's might have been, Galahad,
who needs no perfecting, defines the ideal unicursal path by recapitulat­ing
Christ's. He is the Theseus of this world-labyrinth, repeatedly rescuing
his fellows and showing the right path even though no one can keep
up with him until they have been purified by confession and trial. When
Galahad can be found at all in the earlier parts of the Queste, he is often
on a distinct path, moving as aventure and his path lead him.52 He arrives
where and when he is needed, without making any conscious choices to
find his way.53 Thus, told to find the Castle of Maidens, he thanks God
for guidance (clearly moral rather than physical) and arrives almost
immediately (M72/P46). We are not surprised that he of all knights goes
right: he is perfect, "li Bons Chevaliers," and he has been sent in token of
Christ to banish folly and error (M64/P38). Like Christ, he walks the true
path, defining a unicursal course through the multicursal maze of this
world, almost without active volition: thus he, even more than Bors and
Perceval, spends much of his time in ships, passively accepting God's will
and going where God sends him.54 This passivity, echoing Christ's pre­
eminent virtue of patience, extends to Galahad's whole career: we are
constantly reminded that he is foreordained to achieve the grail and to
perform certain miracles on the way; his course is charted from the start,
and he fulfills almost as many prophecies as Christ himself. Significantly,
one of his first adventures, purging the Castle of Maidens, signifies the
harrowing of hell, the event in Christ's life foreshadowed by Theseus's
penetration of the labyrinth. No wonder, then, that Galahad so easily

52. Thus, while his companions head into the wilderness upon leaving Camelot,
Galahad's path leads him directly ("droit") to the abbey of the Shield (M53/P26); we are not
told that he takes either path at Melias's bivium, but later he arrives to save Melias "com ses
chemins l'i amena" (M68/P48). And after rescuing Perceval, he takes the "wide road"
through the forest "come aventure le menoit" (M207/P195). After wounding Gawain in
a tournament, he leaves "as fortune shaped his course" (M209/P197), and when he leaves
Lancelot on the ship, again he follows "where chance shall take you" (M259/P252). For
Galahad, the right path and aventure are synonymous: Providence lays down his path.

53. As Todorov puts it, "With Galahad, hesitation and choice no longer have any mean­
ing: the path he takes may divide, but Galahad will always take the 'good' fork"—"The
Quest of Narrative," p. 140. Actually, Galahad never is shown taking one or the other fork,
even at Melias's bivium.

54. Ihle also comments on Galahad's passivity: Malory's Grail Quest, p. 76. More generally,
she notes, "In order to have adventures in the Queste, a knight must submit himself entirely
to God's will and live in a state of preparedness and penance. Passive acceptance of God's
will, rather than reliance on one's own prowess, determines success" (p. 71).
finds his way; he is already marked as a figure of Christ, and here some medieval readers might see him as a new Theseus destined to unwind the worldly labyrinth. Galahad never experiences the inextricability that plagues his fellows and forerunners: Lancelot in the valley, Perceval on the island, or the Maimed King who “had pushed too deep into the forest to find his own way out, being unfamiliar with its paths” (M220/P209), and who can be cured only by Galahad, master of all paths.

The imagery of path and choice in the Queste is shaped into a highly sophisticated development of the idea of the labyrinth. Normally, as we have seen, there is no hierarchy among the various forms of the maze, which, indeed, most writers do not even distinguish one from another. Yet Prudentius and Ambrose imply that a single path, whether through a wilderness or a multiplicity of choices, is best, and unicursal cathedral labyrinths that define the path of Christ-Theseus, like those at Auxerre and possibly at Chartres, may make a similar point. The author of the Queste goes still further: he makes systematic distinctions between three forms of maze and links each with a moral state. First, there is the thick, trackless waste without guides (though aventure may operate behind the scenes); those who rush into it are in a morally perilous condition, unable to see the paths that may actually be offered. In avoiding paths, or in failing to see them for what they are, such people deny the existence of a grand pattern and the architect into whose plan they fit. In a very real sense, they take themselves out of the running. The multicursal path, full of bivia, dead ends, and backtracking, contains abundant if sometimes misleading guidance: ambiguous signposts, inscriptions, dreams, visions, explications, and exhortations of holy advisers, which the wanderers are free to accept or reject. This is the probative world of moral choice where providence looks like fortune, the one where most other romances take place. Neither good nor bad in itself, this multicursal maze is precisely what one makes of it. Yet because the multicursal maze intrinsically emphasizes individual choice, activity, and self-reliance, it is dangerous: success may foster independence and pride. The multicursal maze is implicitly Pelagian: by choosing right, one can apparently merit salvation even without grace. The fates of Hector and Gawain show what the author thinks of that proposition. In the Queste, as in so many works of Christian heroism, the elect—those who are chosen rather than those who choose—move beyond multicursal choices and individual volition to a wise passivity: submission to God's will as expressed by aventure, rudderless boats, and the single path of Christ or Galahad laid out in prophecy. This is “the path of Jesus Christ, which quickens with life and greenness like the forest,” for it is found within the forest and leads to regeneration, transcendence, penetration of and extrication from the maze. Galahad is on that path from the beginning,
and he need not even choose whether to continue; the only guide he needs is *aventure*, the shaping hand of the architect. Of those tested by the difficult process of multicursal options and found worthy, Perceval attains the security of a unicursal path rapidly, Bors more slowly, and Lancelot with the utmost difficulty; others find it not at all as they wander aimlessly, without grace, *aventure*, or willing participation in a cosmic pattern.\(^{55}\) Thus in the *Queste* an individual's moral worth determines not merely his passage through the labyrinth but also what kind of labyrinth he must tread. And possibly, just possibly, the interwoven subplots of the work are developed from these three forms of the labyrinth.

All paths in a maze are circuitous, digressive; that is one thing that differentiates them from ordinary paths and helps us distinguish true mazes from interconnected roads. In the *Queste*, paths are remarkably roundabout. When Perceval wants to retrace his steps to the anchoress, there is no direct route; you can get here from there, but not vice versa. Early in the romance, we suspect that digression may be the right path when we learn that Christ set Joseph of Arimathaea on the road of wandering (M58/P32). Galahad frequently wanders almost randomly, now here, now there, now ahead, now behind (M207, 269/P195, 262), always arriving where and when he must. In one of the work's most astonishing passages, “a passage which audaciously boasts its narrative non-sense” according to Tzvetan Todorov, Galahad, Bors, and Percival journey to the sea in obedience to Christ's instructions to conduct the grail to Sarra. “The three of them covered so much ground that they came to the sea in less than four days' riding. They would have got there sooner still save that, being strangers to those parts, they did not take by any means the shortest route.”\(^{56}\) For Todorov, “the ‘unnecessary detail’ is perhaps, of all details, the one most necessary to narrative.” Perhaps; yet I suggest that in this extraordinary circuitousness we are dealing with a meaningful signal: the most direct route is not necessarily the correct route in moral and spiritual matters—or, for that matter, in labyrinths. The forms must be obeyed, and certain kinds of disorientation may be the prerequisite for the truest orientation.\(^{57}\)

Circuitous routes and complex processes may be best for several reasons. Lancelot's direct approach to the grail fails, and only his stumbling,

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55. Todorov makes a simpler but somewhat analogous distinction in contrasting Galahad's "ritual ordeals," demonstrating his worthiness, with Bors's and Perceval's "narrative ordeals," through which they become worthy: “The Quest of Narrative,” p. 131. One might also detect an independent trace of the same idea—that right motion through a multicursal maze brings the peace of unicursal guidance—in *The Assembly of Ladies*.

56. Todorov, “The Quest of Narrative,” p. 137; and M278/P273.

57. One is struck, also, by the fact that the three days it takes Galahad and his companions to extricate themselves from the labyrinth of Logres correspond to the three days Christ-Theseus spent in hell before liberating the just. Judicious patience and passivity characterize both Christ and his true knight.
hesitant passage teaches him what he desperately needs to know, whereas Perceval's delays instruct him in patience. Galahad's roundabout rovings conform to God's time and direction, not ours, reminding us that there is a difference; in the cosmic labyrinth as in non-Euclidean geometry, the proper, even the shortest, distance between two points may very well not be a straight line. As in the forest, so in the tale as an artistic construct, as has often been noted, the narrative digresses from one knight to another, backward and forward in time, always accentuating the sudden change in direction with a reference to "li contes" and its vagaries: "the tale now turns aside a while from the mainstream of its subject [de sa droite voie et de sa matiere]" (M221/P210). Internal digressions abound, as visions, events, prophecies, and the history of the grail are explicated. Some things, it seems, cannot be learned without preparatory delays, digressions, and interpretations that enforce a second or third covering of the same ground, as in labyrinthine theory of learning outlined in Augustine's De magistro. In labyrinths and learning alike—in the world-labyrinth as in the text-labyrinth—the longest way round may be best. Complexity—moral, spiritual, physical, intellectual—requires subtle, careful tracing rather than direct statement; people see, hear, and understand only what they have been prepared for. As Todorov has said of the systematic reduplication of the errant knights' and our own experience in the Queste, whereby so often dream or prophecy heralds an event that much later acquires explanatory commentary, "we arrive slowly at comprehension of what was given from the beginning";58 delayed comprehension, understanding gained only through confusion, is what a labyrinth is all about. Morally, too, the delays imposed by circuitous processes are important: if choice proves you, patience makes you almost perfect, as actor and as reader.

Circuitousness and repeated explication, then, help make one morally worthy to find a way—or, rather, to be conducted by grace in its various forms—out of the inextricable/inexplicable labyrinth of this world. They also help one penetrate the mysterious labyrinth of the grail, to move from the darkness of forests and mazes into the light of truth. As we have seen, being inside a labyrinth entails partial vision, from here to the next turning. This partial vision afflicts many of the characters in the Queste, and references to blindness are common.59 As Morton Bloomfield said of romance in general, "Something is happening about which we cannot be clear. In the eyes of God, in another dimension, all these episodes are no doubt explicable, but to human eyes, in the human dimension, something puzzling is going on. The center of the story is not

59. See, e.g., Ihle, Malory's Grail Quest, pp. 84–88. One of Ihle's themes is partial vision, although she associates this characteristic with Gothic architecture in general rather than with mazes.
within the tale but beyond it. . . . One is driven to assume that if he were to see the events from above or from another center the inexplicable would be explicable."60 That is why we need guides, prophecies, and explanations. The very presence of interpreters who clarify the inner meaning of dreams and visions illustrates the dual or multiple perspectives implied by mazes, which can be seen in part (from within) or whole (from above, or through memory and insight). That the questing knights need their services reminds us of the limited vision inherent in the maze forest, and the interpretations—privileged word from above, as it were—help us locate events within the overall pattern that we and the wanderers sense but do not see. They remind us of the goal and the process necessary to reach it; they also reassure us that the twisting roads have meaning, that there is a great architect who planned the labyrinth in which readers and knights find themselves. Nowhere is this clearer, of course, than in the prophecies concerning Galahad and the digressions on the history of the grail, which forcefully assert that there is order in chaos, that providence guides the wheel of fortune-aventure, if we can only see it. As Morse has emphasized in her felicitously entitled Pattern of Judgment, "the Queste recounts the beginning of history in Paradise and, in the advent of Galahad and the judgments on Carcelois and the leprous lady, foreshadows its ending," thereby "placing the Round Table fellowship in the pattern of sacred history" (p. 68). The pattern of adventures justifies the pattern of judgment, reflecting the circular labyrinthine patterns of providence echoed in the circular Round Table and the cosmos it figures (M99/P76). The work as a whole, then, remedies partial vision and allows a transcendent view of the whole design of human history as patterned by God the great architect, even though some mysteries remain ineffable; if the labyrinth of the world becomes transparent, the labyrinth of God, the full meaning of the grail, does not.61

I have argued that the Queste del Saint Graal is a labyrinthine work of art showing the world as a moral labyrinth in which humans work out their destinies by making moral choices with the aid of privileged explanation (and inexplicabilis is an adjective almost as commonly descriptive of mazes as inextricabilis). This world-maze is an admirably complex work of divine art, wrought by a Daedalian God, patterned by moral laws of cause and effect, and bound together temporally by prophecy and fulfillment. Those within the labyrinth must navigate confusing and circuitous ambases and errores to attain their goal of salvation, or else be doomed to imprisonment in error. But the labyrinth leads those who
solve its windings to a transcendent understanding of the patterns of individual and human history even as those entrapped within are subject to continuing blindness and partial vision. In depicting the world as a labyrinth, the Queste draws on the vast medieval store of labyrinthine qualities and connotations. It combines the ideas of inextricability and impenetrability with subtle ingenuity; it alludes to the ancient idea of the labyrinth as a pathless waste for those whose lives deny the existence of a moral order, and it shows how the repeated choice and special guidance demanded in the multicursal maze develop and illustrate moral rectitude. It also draws upon the peculiar characteristics of the unicursal maze to illustrate that those who persist in the path of righteousness may move beyond choice to enjoy the careful and circuitous direction of grace. Thus, perhaps, the Queste not only suggests an unusual hierarchy of labyrinths but also transcends the aporia that may be inherent in the two visual models of the maze to demonstrate how individual effort and divine grace, free will and predestination, are compatible aspects of divine order. Overlaying action with commentary, providing what Todorov calls a “double narrative,” the work repeatedly exemplifies the dual perspective implied by the labyrinth’s simultaneous embodiment of process and product. Indeed, the maze’s characteristic dualities pervade the Queste: blindness and insight, chaos and order, confusion and clarity, path and plan, unicursality and multicursality, vision from within time and from eternity. The work draws on conventional meanings of the labyrinth: as lust (for Lancelot and perhaps, indeed, for all, given that chastity is an absolute prerequisite for success); as fortune/providence; as sin; as a place of violent death; as a learning process. Even the narrative line is labyrinthine, turning now here, now there, in the story of the quest.

Texts may be superlatively labyrinthine in effect whether or not authorial intention is brought into consideration. Speculation on intent is always tricky, and particularly so in the case of anonymous authors, but a few words on the subject may nevertheless be profitable. If the author consciously used the idea of the labyrinth in shaping the Queste’s form and content, as I am almost convinced he did, it is easy to see why: the

62. Todorov, “The Quest of Narrative,” p. 123. See also E. Jane Burns’s discussion of the multiple perspectives within the narrative voice of the Estoire del Saint Graal, whereby “the unitary voice of God is subtly displaced by the plural and all-powerful voice of li contes,” producing “a text which weaves in and out of time,” “insisting on a plurality of temporal modes”—“The Teller in the Tale: The Anonymous Estoire del Saint Graal,” Assays, 3 (1985), 73–84. Though Burns’s analysis refers primarily to the Estoire, it suggests yet another way the text of the Queste is as labyrinthine as its imagery.

63. At times, the work seems almost to allude to the Cretan myth; at least, those with obsessively labyrinthine mentalities may detect parallels between Arthur and Aegeus or between Galahad and Theseus, for instance, or one may find the hair sacrificed by Perceval’s sister, one of the most important explicators of all, oddly reminiscent of Ariadne’s thread.
tradition of the labyrinth provided an amazingly rich and varied image that might lend coherence to many concepts important in the work, not least the reconciliation, or at least the containment, of crucial dualities: grace and merit, fortune and providence, limited vision and transcendent understanding, and the relationship of all these ideas to a search for the best path through a complicated world. The labyrinth is, after all, the place that best incorporates error, and the Latin word’s Old French derivatives suggest how much that is pertinent to the Queste’s themes can grow from a single linguistic root. Errer describes both physical and moral or behavioral voyaging and conduct—literal journeys through the forest and spiritual ways of life. Errorer means “to go astray, to err.” Erre means “way, path,” errement may signify “adventure; order, disposition; legal process,” and error refers to ardent desire, confusion, difficulty, suffering.64 A definitive labyrinthine attribute, error, thus implies real and moral journeys, a true path and a way of error, desire to attain a goal and the confusion and difficulty of getting there, individual volition and customary procedure, chaos and order. In these derivatives of error, in labyrinths, and in the Queste, human wanderings and confusion may, from another point of view, manifest divine order, and the choice of path and mode of proceeding may constitute a process of justice. No wonder an author might choose the image of the labyrinth to show patterns of judgment for chevaliers errants.

What is not so easy to explain is why the author would then have left the image inexplicit. I can offer two suggestions, neither completely convincing. The Queste was written in the vernacular, presumably for the laity; since the classicizing friars had not yet done their work, an early thirteenth-century author might have felt that the labyrinth was too exotic an image, let alone too unfamiliar a word in French,65 for a comparatively unlearned audience to comprehend easily, and perhaps inappropriate as an explicit concept in a deeply Christian work about Arthurian knights. Alternatively, the word labyrinth, at least in Latin, may have carried so many purely pejorative connotations that the monastic, if not Cistercian, author may have thought its significance in malo would overshadow the meanings in bono employed in the Queste. Labyrinths were often associated with heresy in this period, as we have seen; indeed, two of the four so-called labyrinths of France, Peter Abelard and Gilbert


65. I have not been able to identify the earliest use of labyrinthe in French. Much later than the Queste, the term maison Dedalus was used to translate labyrinthus in 3p12 of Boethius’s Consolation of Philosophy: cf. Jean de Meun (ca. 1300; Dedek-Héry ed., p. 231); the mid-fourteenth-century translation in Bodley MS Douce 352, f.46r; and the anonymous Benedictine translation (ca. 1380), Bodley MS Douce 298, f. 51v. This term, highlighting the human artificer, might have struck the Queste author as inappropriate for so spiritual and Christian a vision of the maze.
of Poitiers, had been violently opposed by that great Cistercian Bernard. The word may thus have been too loaded, its meaning too narrow in popular usage, to allow the considerable freedom the Queste author took with the idea behind it. I would have liked to prove that the labyrinth was consciously chosen as the central image in the Queste, but I will be content if I have shown that the idea of the labyrinth organizes and unifies the text—a good deal of the imagery, concepts, and structure—and that it does so better than the image of the forest or the concept of interlace, which receive further discussion in the next chapter.