



5-2007

Searching for the Feminine: The Women of the Holy Grail

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Recommended Citation

Lopez, Teresa Marie, "Searching for the Feminine: The Women of the Holy Grail." Master's Thesis, University of Tennessee, 2007.
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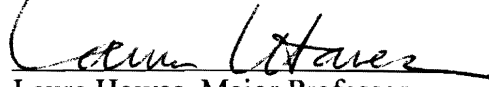
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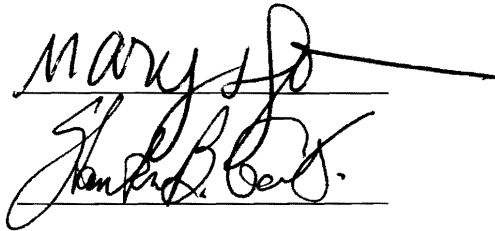
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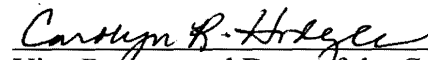
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SEARCHING FOR THE FEMININE: THE WOMEN OF THE HOLY GRAIL

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Teresa Marie Lopez
May 2007

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank all those who helped me complete my Master of Arts degree in English. I would especially like to thank Dr. Laura Howes for her assistance and guidance through all parts of my graduate studies. Also, Dr. Mary Dzon and Dr. Stanton Garner were an invaluable help to the success of my thesis as my committee members.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family and friends for their all their support and encouragement.

Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to study the specific condition of female characters in the literature of the Holy Grail. While these women do not occupy a substantial portion of the narratives, they exude a feminine authority over the test and its progression. The female characters of Perceval's sister in both the Vulgate's *Queste del Saint Graal* and Malory's "Tale of Sankgreal" and Sigune and Cundrie of Wolfram's *Parzival* play integral roles to the ultimate achievement of the Grail by their male counterparts. By contextualizing these characters within the medieval Christian tradition, as presented by Caroline Walker Bynum, it is evident that they participate in a large convention of the unique female religious experience of the time. This special feminine spirituality allows them both autonomy and control over the story's events.

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Introduction

Female characters are few and far between in the Grail stories of the medieval period. Finding a woman who engages more than a marginal space within the text is even more difficult. In fact, the medieval romances of Arthur are usually conceived as primarily male-oriented and women carry the same amount of authority in the text as they do in life. Geraldine Heng's discussion of feminine characters in Malory's work suggests that while women are necessary to the narrative, they are, by necessity, considered merely ancillary to their male counterparts:

The image of knightly culture on which that civilization is posited must assume feminine presence and assistance for its completion, yet also constitute the feminine in essentially a subsidiary relation to masculinity. Because the female is read as adjunctive (though necessary), a specifically feminine point of view in the work is never fully recovered, but remains only an inchoate potential, subsumed and dispersed within other discourses. (97)

It is this liminal quality of feminine discourse in the stories that makes it difficult to uncover the female perspective and authority. However, it is possible to see the women of the Grail myth as occupying a necessary, authoritative, although marginal role in the works. With the limited amount of textual evidence provided by the author's depiction of the characters, "A subtextual reading is needed to extricate and identify the outlines of that view, and restore thereby a certain equivalence" (Heng 97). Understanding of the religious, literary, and social conditions contributes to a complex reading of the role of these female characters.

In reading the texts, it is important to understand the condition of women during this period, particularly with regards to their religious presence. The Grail myths, over time, have become Christianized with obvious Biblical and religious overtones.

Considering that female characters like Perceval's sister, Sigune, and Cundrie are valorized for their intense spirituality, their place in this literary tradition is directly affected by contemporary opinions of female religious experience. While most female characters of this period and genre are considered evil, lustful, and corrupt, these three female figures resist the contaminating effects of their gender. They are not considered "daughters of Eve" and symbols of Satanic temptation, but spiritual guides for the Christian knights.

During this time, feminine Christian experience underwent an intriguing and empowering change. Caroline Walker Bynum's texts explore medieval Christianity, often from the feminine perspective, as it changes from century to century. Most interestingly, she notes, "In contrast to the central Middle Ages, in which few female monasteries were founded, the twelfth- and thirteenth-century search for the *vita apostolica* attracted so many women to a specialized religious life that contemporary chroniclers themselves commented on the phenomenon, sometimes with admiration and sometimes with trepidation" (Bynum *Jesus* 14). Women were attracted by the spiritual devotion of their local priests and monks and sought to join this expression of religious piety, although not merely through joining convents. As Bynum recounts, "These women set themselves apart from the world by living austere, poor, chaste lives in which manual labor and charitable service were joined to worship (which was not, however, rigidly prescribed as it was in convents)" (Bynum *Holy* 17). Detaching themselves from worldly possessions (although they more than likely had few), women devoted themselves to prayer and charitable service. However, their lives were not merely ones of subservience.

Bynum definitely clarifies that, “Women were not only followers, manipulated and circumscribed in their religious ideals by powerful clerics, they were also leaders and reformers” (Bynum *Holy* 15). Women having positions of clerical power is quite shocking to consider in a time when most women had few choices other than marriage. These movements were alarming to the men of the church who attempted to curtail the popularity of female religious movements. Bynum’s writings clearly display how women could circumvent the patriarchal forces that sought to undercut their agency. Yet, despite these obstacles, “The period from 1100 to 1400 saw not only the creation of new types of religious life for women but also an increase in the number of female saints – a clear indication of the growing prominence of women both in reflecting and in creating piety” (Bynum *Holy* 20). Women of the period were attracted to religious callings by an influx of wandering preachers and could not be stopped from gaining autonomy and authority through religious experience. Choosing chastity, fasting, and asceticism over the traditional expectations of their sex, women controlled their lives instead of being controlled.

This same sense of agency is clearly visible in the characters of Perceval’s sister, Sigune and Cundrie. Disregarding marriage and family, they remain on the outskirts of the narratives, but are indicative of female power in the religious world. In my examinations of these Grail myths, I found these characters the most intriguing based upon their expression of the specific examples of feminine Christian expression found in Bynum’s work. In the French, German, and English versions of these myths, there are similar characteristics in these female characters. They have rejected the notion of being passive participants in the Arthurian romances as they are not merely desirous objects of

courtly love. It is through their religious devotion that they maintain a strong presence in the narrative. Through their sacrifices, commitment, and charity, they each become a model of piety for the male characters. In a way, each woman saves the men in the story from failure. Whether it be Galahad's need for the sword and scabbard or Parzival's lack of humility, the women assist these men in achieving their ultimate goal – the Grail.

As Heng notes, “In Malory's text...is a subtext of feminine presences – direct and indirect manifestations which together inscribe a range of play that perhaps yields, in the fullest sense, what has been called the recovery of a possible operation of the feminine in language” (108). Although she specifically refers to Malory's romance, the feminine figures of each narrative exist in both the text itself and within this larger historical/religious tradition. In uncovering this subtext to their stories, each female character is given a voice that proclaims her ability to drive the narrative and her specific power within the world of the Grail.

The Vulgate Cycle, *The Launcelot-Graal*

From 1215 to 1235, a compilation called the *Launcelot-Graal* or the Vulgate Cycle emerged as one example of the increasing Christianization of the Grail story. The work “is an extensive rewriting of the many versions of the Arthurian story that precede it” (Mahoney 21). The sections of the work entitled *Estoire del Saint Graal* and the *Queste del Saint Graal* continue and rework the story of the Grail given by Chrétien de Troyes in *Le Conte du Graal*. In this story the Grail is called Holy, and it is given direct links to Christ. Joseph of Arimathea visits the place where Jesus held his Last Supper and takes the dish “from which the Son of God and two others had eaten, before He gave the twelve disciples His flesh and blood to take in communion” (*Estoire* 10). After finding Jesus dead on His cross, Joseph takes His body and uses this same communion dish “to gather as much blood that dripped out as he could” (*Estoire* 10). Joseph places Jesus’ body in his own sepulchre, but is punished for his kindness by being imprisoned for forty-two years. After his release, Joseph embarks on a new holy mission: to spread the word of God, bringing the holy vessel with him to England. It is through Josephus, his son, that the prophecy of the Grail quest is given. An angel appears to Josephus and tells him that the lance itself symbolizes the great quest that will occur in the future:

“This is,” said he, “the beginning of the marvelous adventures that will take place in the land where God intends to lead you. There the great marvels will occur, and the great deeds will be demonstrated. And then the true earthly feats of chivalric exploits will become heavenly.... You may be sure that the marvels inside the Grail will be seen by only one mortal man, and he will be full of all the qualities that can or should be in man’s body and heart, for he will be good to God as well as to the world. On earth he will be very good, for he will be filled with every prowess, beauty and bravery; he will also be good to God, for he will be filled with charity and great religion, and he will be the master key of all chastity.” (*Estoire* 51)

There is but one truly great knight who will be allowed to see the Holy Grail because of his goodness and chastity. This prophecy sets up Galahad's eventual achievement of this vessel of Jesus. Indeed, this narrative works to set up the events that unfold in the *Queste del Saint Graal* as the reader waits for this glorious knight that will be pure enough to obtain the Holy Grail.

Following this expository narrative of the Grail's origin, the holy object makes its first appearance in the Arthurian Court. Its presence in the court and the mythology it possesses seem to belong to an exclusively male realm. King Arthur's court is disrupted by a vision of the Holy Grail as a loud noise interrupts the quiet reverie and a burst of light shines through the court heralding the appearance of the Holy Grail

Then the Holy Grail entered the room, covered with a white silk cloth, but no one could see who carried it. It entered through the main door of the hall. And as soon as it arrived, the room was filled with a delicious fragrance, as if every earthly spice had been strewn there. The Grail traveled through the room, around the dais. And as it passed the tables, each place setting was filled with the food its occupant most desired. When everyone was served, the Grail left in such a way that no one knew what became of it; nor did they see which way it went.
(*Queste 7*)

This scene uses imagery commonly associated with the Mass and reinforces the strong Christian symbolism present in this story. Differing from other adaptations of the Grail myth, the *Queste del Saint Graal* makes the importance of Christianity evident from its opening history and with this first appearance of the Grail. Filling the castle with the light of the Holy Spirit, filling the air with a wonderful aroma, and feeding its witnesses with their favorite foods, the Grail is a true expression of the glory of God for these knights. It is interesting to note that this vision of the Grail does not appear to the court until after the ladies have departed. They are essentially excluded from this quest from the very

beginning of the story. In this quest, it is only Galahad, Perceval, and Bohort who seem worthy to even come close to finding the Grail. The knights all agree that they will seek out the Grail so that they may “see the Grail clearly” (*Queste* 8). As word of the knights’ departure travels, a wise old man comes to advise the knights,

This is not a quest for earthly goods. Rather, it should be understood as the search for the great secrets of Our Lord and the great mysteries that the Almighty will reveal openly to the special knight he has chosen from among all others to be his servant. The Lord will show this knight the great wonders of the Holy Grail and allow him to contemplate what mortal hearts could never imagine or human tongue describe. (*Queste* 8)

The man makes it clear that these knights should not be accompanied by their wives or lovers and should begin this quest with a pure heart and motive. Not only have the women not experienced this first vision of the Grail, but they are also completely forbidden from joining the knights on this spiritual quest. The story is already being set up as though it will be a completely male-oriented tale. There are no earthly spoils or riches to win, but rather a spiritual reward and deeper understanding of God. This narrative “replaces the earthly loves of Launcelot and the Round Table knights with a spiritual love – a celestial chivalry – in the service of God. The chosen knight is no longer Perceval, as in Chrétien de Troyes’ *Conte du Graal*, but the spotless Galahad” (Kibbler 2). Galahad’s purity and impressive ancestry set him up as the chosen knight instead of Perceval. However, Perceval is not completely excluded from this tale. His adventures bring in interesting female character that has a great influence on the story – his sister.

In the *Queste del Saint Graal*, the inherent distrust of the female body is clearly expressed. From the moment the knights decide to embark on their quest for the Holy Grail, it is made clear that no women should join them on their journey. As the women

beg to be allowed to accompany their knights, the wise man sends a warning to the knights: “The hermit Nascien sent me to tell you that anyone taking a lady or young lady along on the Quest will fall into mortal sin” (*Queste* 8). This command reflects a monastic view that is quite disturbed by the presence of women and a priestly tradition in which only the priest can celebrate Mass. The linking of the Grail with Eucharist accentuates this priestly role. It is too great of a temptation to have women near the knights. In embracing the conventional beliefs about women of the time, the speech “excludes women from the Grail world not, as individual knights will be, on the basis of any personal sin or failing but because they are women and their very existence threatens the integrity of the Grail quest” (Aronstein 215).

According to Echols and Williams, in the medieval tradition, women fall primarily into one of two categories: the mother or the temptress. It is the Ave and Eva dichotomy that is commonly found in medieval literature: “In philosophy and literature, womankind occupied either the pit of hell with Eve or the pedestal of heaven with Mary. Woman’s literary presence in between those two extremes was rare...” (Echols & Williams 3). However, these authors are inaccurate in their placement of Eve because after the Crucifixion Eve is no longer in hell but has been taken by Christ to heaven. In most medieval texts, Eve is not only a representation of all that is sinful and corrupt but more of a moral guide for Adam once they are both banished from Paradise as well as the key to mankind’s eventual salvation through Jesus. But, it is this stereotype of the medieval woman that makes it impossible for any of the wives or lovers of the knights to join them. Misogynistic trends abound in medieval writings and the Grail’s female ban plays into this tradition. Alcuin Blamires explores the various sources of antifeminist

writings from Ovid through Chaucer in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*. As the introduction notes, not only were women considered physically and morally defective, but their presence posed a real threat to men's spiritual health:

As the Church struggled gradually to establish a fully celibate priesthood, bidding its clerics to 'shun the two-legged she-beast', it is not surprising that there was a hardening of the inclination among those same clerics to see woman not merely as a sexual snare employed by the devil, but even as a voluntary one. (Blamires 4)

In allowing themselves to be seen, women knowingly "slayed" the moral strength of men. The presence of women on this quest would seem a danger to the chastity of the knights searching for the holiest of relics.

In this narrative, as is displayed in common antifeminist tracts, women are judged by how men will perceive them. It is the male's reaction to the feminine that is the problem in the Grail quest. The knights must remain pure of heart and the women are too great of a temptation for weakness. They represent the "sexual insatiability" of the worldly woman. In the *Queste del Saint Graal*, this fear regarding female sexuality is clearly expressed from the very opening of the story: "One characteristic that distinguishes this Grail quest from its predecessors is its highly charged ambivalent attitude toward women, an ambivalence exemplary of difficulties encountered by those Christians whose service to the Church demanded celibacy" (Rossignol 52). Purity is essential for the knights, and women are a clear threat to that chastity, as evidenced by their representations in the story.

Perceval encounters the dangers of femininity during the quest. As the knight continues the journey he encounters a maiden who attracts his attention:

As he looked at the young woman, she seemed so beautiful to him that he felt he had never seen anyone of equal beauty... He talked of this and that until he finally asked for her love; he beseeched her to be his and pledged to be hers. She resisted as much as she could, since she wanted to increase his desire and passion, and he continued to entreat her. When she thought he was sufficiently aroused, she said, "Perceval, I assure you that I cannot do as you ask unless you promise to be mine: to protect me against all men and to act only on my orders." Perceval readily agreed. (*Queste* 36)

The maiden seduces the knight and toys with his emotions, arousing him until he will agree to anything just to be with her. Her blatant use of sexuality and sexual games reinforce the reasoning behind excluding women from the quest. Her characterization is very much like the evil temptations of Eve who convinces Adam to disobey God's orders. It is only because Perceval sees the cross engraved on his sword that he breaks out the fog of her seduction. He does not know the depth of his peril until he meets the hermit again. He is told that this woman "is the devil, the master of hell who has power over everyone" (*Queste* 37). In the guise of a woman, Satan has cunningly devised a plan to trap Perceval in mortal sin. The hermit makes reference to the fall of Adam and Eve with their "sin of covetousness" (*Queste* 37).

The parallels with Eve and the young maiden are clear in her temptation of Perceval to remain in the tent and feast on earthly delights. This encounter with the feminine seems to justify the earlier apprehension about women joining this quest. It proves that Satan is wily enough, and men weak enough, to be seduced by the erotic image of the female, and thus be inclined to sin. This fear of lechery makes it necessary to exclude women from the religious experience of finding the Grail. This episode displays the lack of complexity for female roles in the story. As Rossignol notes, "It is hardly surprising, then, that all of the *Queste*'s women fall into one of two categories'

they are either evil temptresses, recalling Eve, or handmaidens to salvation, like the Virgin Mary” (52). The maiden, the evil Eve character, is a stark contrast to the tale’s virginal heroine.

In spite of the warning of Nascien, a feminine character does appear to guide the male questers. Her actions and characterization seem to contradict the typical medieval representation of the woman as temptress. Perceval’s quest with Galahad, Bohort, and Launcelot leads him into much peril. After narrowly escaping temptation with the maiden and confessing his sins, Perceval boards the Ship of Solomon, guided by his sister:

“Be assured that I am your sister, daughter of King Pellehan. And do you know why I have revealed my identity to you? So that you will more readily believe what I have to tell you. I will say first of all,” she said, “to you whom I hold dearest that unless you believe fully in Jesus Christ, you cannot enter this ship, or you will perish immediately. The ship is such a lofty place that no one marked with evil vice can stay in it without facing danger.” (*Queste* 64)

Like Sigune in Wolfram’s *Parzival*, it is Perceval’s female relative who holds the greater spiritual knowledge and directs the faith of the knight. She is in control in this situation although she does not occupy much of the Grail quest. The young woman makes great sacrifices for the sake of the knights’ quest. Only Perceval’s sister can remove the magic sword from its scabbard: “It can be removed only by the hand of a woman, daughter of a King and Queen. She will replace it with another belt made from the thing on her person she values most. And it is important that the young woman be a virgin for life, both in desire and in deed” (*Queste* 65). The demands for the woman are great; but Perceval’s sister proves her worthiness and purity once again to the knights. She offers a belt made of her most treasured item, her hair: “I had the finest head of hair that any woman has possessed. But as soon as I learned that this adventure awaited me and that I would have

to undertake it I had my head shaved and fashioned the tresses you see here” (*Queste* 72). She understands the price of this mission and accepts the sacrifices she needs to make. The knights are thankful for her help, but she has yet to make her greatest sacrifice.

Perceval’s sister gives her blood to heal a princess stricken with leprosy. However, the gift of her blood causes her death: “She held out her arm so that they could open the vein with a small, razor-sharp blade. The blood spilled forth immediately as Perceval’s sister crossed herself, commended herself to God, and said to the lady, ‘I have come to my death, lady, to heal you’” (*Queste* 76). Her body is put aboard a boat and set afloat and her knightly companions continue their quest. Despite all her goodness and munificence, she is denied the ultimate goal of seeing the Grail . More so, she is excluded from the Eucharistic ceremony at Corbenic. She does not receive communion from Christ as Perceval does, but instead dies as a result of her giving nature. In the beginning, Perceval’s sister bent to the will of the Grail and her duty to accompany the knights on their quest. However, she makes a choice to depart from the quest when she gives her blood for the leprous woman:

Perceval’s sister, the narrative’s holy virgin, is caught between two models of piety: the patriarchal one of the carefully supervised nun, dependent on her male advisors and kept from independent action, and the feminine model of the often-lay woman who questions official dictates and claims the right to act according to her own convictions. Perceval’s sister begins by conforming to the former model; when she chooses the latter she forfeits her place in the Grail story. This forfeiture allows the narrative to critique and nullify contemporary women’s attempt to patriarchal and antifeminist models. (Aronstein 215)

Without the sanction of the patriarchal power of the Grail, Perceval’s sister becomes less like the virginal nun and acts more in accordance with laity theological practices that

Bynum recounts in her books. She exists outside of the world of the Church and performs her charitable deeds without the presence of a priestly authority figure. Her strong characterization and pure nature is destroyed to preserve the necessary patriarchal hierarchy of the Grail quest. Perceval's sister remains at the outskirts of the narrative, merely helping the men achieve their goal, but never gaining anything herself. She is the sacrificial lamb in this story and her sacrifices make the ultimate success of the quest possible.

In the *Queste del Saint Graal*, Perceval is a key character in the story and eventually experiences a Eucharistic vision of Jesus. Aside from Perceval, there is an obvious trend in the treatment of gender in the Grail stories. In all of these narratives, the Grail is a decidedly male goal. In Grail narratives, the questers are male with all the male reservations – reliance on military strength, subjectivity to temptation, and inclination towards seduction, especially seduction that is a manipulation of their own weakness. This is the same treatment given to Perceval's sister in the *Queste del Saint Graal*. She is not named and yet she is one of the most compelling women in the Grail narratives. While most female characters in this story are considered inconsequential, this young woman, as Traxler points out, “not only interacts with the Grail triad but actually joins it. She dominates the material from the appearance of the Miraculous Boat to her death at the leper's castle, about one-sixth of the romance” (262). Her position in the narrative, however, jeopardizes the power of the male world of the Grail. She seems more pure and sacrificial than the men who surround her.

While other women are easily excluded from the Grail quest, Perceval's sister is a unique case because of her devotion to God. She is worthy of the task of helping the men

reach their goal; but, because she is still female, she cannot attain the final experience of God. The narrative cleverly uses Perceval's sister to aid the journey of the male-dominated quest and discards her when she has served her purpose: "After categorically excluding all women from the Grail Quest with its Eucharistic visions and miracles, the narrative allows one woman, Perceval's sister, to participate and then uses her to support its dictate against women" (Aronstein 214). Because she makes a selfless choice to help the ailing princess instead of holding to the quest, she is unable to reach the Grail group's goal, at least alive. Her body floats to Corbenic and, in a sense, is part of the Eucharistic finale.

The importance of Perceval's sister to the Grail narrative indicates a real sense of feminine power in the medieval Christian tradition. Although marginalized from the tale and lacking any overt power, Perceval's sister displays a different kind of religious authority – a feminine Eucharistic experience. Re-examining the simple-minded dichotomies about women described by Echols and Williams, one can see that not only were medieval women depicted as more than mothers or whores, but, according to Caroline Walker Bynum, they also rose to positions of religious power despite strong prejudices against them. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, there was a growth in the number of female monasteries where, as stated previously, women had positions of authority instead of the subservient positions of the nunnery (Bynum *Holy* 15). The patriarchal forces of the Premonstratensians and Cistercians sought to curtail the growing popularity of these female-dominated orders. As Bynum suggests, "misogyny – a male fear of the female sexuality that was a projection of male fear of male sexuality – was the articulated motive for such repression" (15). Monastic leaders of the twelfth-century were

fearful that women would ruin the celibate males and “were willing to limit women’s religious opportunities in order to protect fragile male virtue” (Bynum 15). It was obviously spiritually dangerous for a man to simply “see” a woman and having a woman instruct a man’s religious education was a bit too much feminine exposure for a man’s moral character.

Yet, for all this heavy opposition, the feminine experience of spirituality progressed. As a saintly character, Perceval’s sister clearly bypasses male control over her religious experience. Her piety is in great competition with that of her male counterparts making her a threat to their quest. With a great sense of compassion, Perceval’s sister’s characterization is a reflection of the holiness and religious power of Jesus Christ. Her blood sacrifice for the sake of the leprous woman mirrors the crucifixion of Jesus for humanity. Although the leprous woman does not survive to enjoy her new health, Perceval’s sister’s sacrifice avoids a more devastating encounter in this episode. More so than Galahad, she is much more aligned with medieval representations of Jesus.

Perceval’s sister’s connection with the Jesus is a result not only of her sacrifice in the narrative, but of the religious traditions of the medieval period. As Bynum recounts in her work, increasing emphasis was placed on Christ’s human body in religious traditions of the twelfth-century:

The new devotion to Christ’s humanity was also at least implicitly a shift in theological emphasis from atonement-resurrection and last judgment to creation and incarnation. In twelfth-century religious writing, great stress is placed on God’s creating of us ‘in his image and likeness’ and on Christ’s taking our humanity into himself. (Bynum *Jesus* 17)

Reflecting on his humanity, physical suffering during the Passion, and blood sacrifice, Christ's humanity was seen as more feminine than masculine. Christ was often compared to a mother in many medieval representations, as his body was a symbol of resurrection and rebirth (Bynum *Jesus* 128). Aside from this metaphoric relationship, Jesus' actions on Earth were characteristic of motherly devotion instead of fatherly. Bynum notes that,

In spiritual writers from Anselm to Julian, we find three basic stereotypes of the female or the mother: the female is generative (the foetus is made of her very matter) and sacrificial in her generation (birth pangs), the female is loving and tender (a mother cannot help loving her own child); the female is nurturing (she feeds the child with her own bodily fluid). This threefold concept of the female parent seems to have been particularly appropriate to convey the new theological concerns, more appropriate in fact than the image of the male parent if we understand certain details of medieval theories of physiology. (Bynum *Jesus* 131-132).

Jesus, as well as Perceval's sister, fit into this mother archetype clearly. In many images, Jesus feeds His followers His blood from the wound in His side, much like a mother would feed her child from her breast. Jesus' body, like women's, was connected to nourishment and fulfillment. He also dies to create redemption as a mother produces life (Bynum, Harrell, and Richman 262-263). Perceval's sister by her own femininity is generative as well as loving and tender. Her sacrifice of both her hair and her blood display her love and devotion to humanity and her companions. She gives these bodily elements much like Christ gives his blood, for the good of others. The use of her blood as healing salve for the leprous woman indicates her ability to nourish the health of this woman. Indeed, Perceval's sister is the motherly Christ figure for this Grail story. Her involvement in this capacity is not unusual to Grail tradition

Examining the sacrifice of her blood more closely displays her integral role in the Grail narrative. Without her acquiescence to the demand for her virginal blood, the lives of her male companions would be lost:

Perceval's sister dies while giving her blood to save a leprous lady, and the virgin's sacrifice would seem to be a salvific sacrifice: not only is the lady cured, but the virgin's voluntary gift of her blood prevents a battle in which Galahad, Perceval, and Bors would have had to fight against overwhelming odds to save her from that fate. (McCracken 8-9)

Saving the leprous woman seems to be a fruitless endeavor as she is cast down by God for her actions following her healing. However, it is important to notice that without the blood sacrifice, the men of Grail quest could have lost their lives. As men on a holy quest, they can expect many sacrifices to achieve their goal, but Perceval's sister saves them this time from death. With this event, she is able to attain equal footing with the men of the narrative: "Through her self-sacrifice Perceval's sister joins the ranks of the holy men and women who populate this romance..." (McCracken 9). Her choice to give her blood and life gives her the spiritual authority to be considered a truly holy woman.

Female characters can also make their presence felt through symbolic links with the Grail itself. As a vessel, the Grail, in the most basic way, can represent the female body. Sometimes depicted as chalice, the Grail as the cup can be perceived as a symbol for female genitalia. A much deeper evaluation of the Grail shows it parallels not only the feminine, but, more specifically, the mother. In Grail narratives, the mother is a pervasive figure that remains frequently at the margins of the story like most female characters. Perceval's mother in Chrétien's romance dies from her grief over losing her son, thus inflicting guilt on the previously insensitive youth. The Grail, in a sense,

supplants the maternal role, but still asserts the importance of the mother. This is especially noticeable in the *Queste del Saint Graal*: “In the *Queste*, the Grail’s functions and characteristics are notably maternal and feminine” (Rossignol 54). As a symbol of maternity, “The Grail, object of the knight’s desire provides them with nourishment, protection, and perfect union, all primal experiences arising from the original relationship with the mother” (Rossignol 53). When the Grail first appears to the knights at court, it fills their plates with whatever food they most desire. As the Grail knights reach their final spiritual destination, the Grail provides them with unity and closeness to God. The Grail also performs the one function most closely related to mothers – it gives life.

Perceval’s sister as the motherly Jesus figure in this myth is not an unusual concept. While the Grail has taken the place of the mother in some of the quest narratives, in *Sir Perceval of Galles* the mother becomes the Grail. In this English romance, Perceval is not on a quest for the Grail. Decidedly absent from the story are the Fisher King and the Grail castle. Amplifying the boorish behavior of the untutored youth, this narrative seeks to show how Perceval triumphs in chivalry without departing from his childhood mannerisms. From the beginning, this story displays a different relationship between Perceval and his mother. Instead of the callous scene where Perceval walks away from his fainting mother, Perceval’s “swete modir” gives him a ring as a token and patiently waits for her son’s return. Perceval makes his way toward his aspirations for chivalric glory, but his childish manner and foolish behavior makes him more of a comic figure than a hero. He assumes the appearance of a courtly knight, but keeps the same endearing quality of an inexperienced youth. Once he returns home, he replaces his

knightly garments with the goatskins of his youth. He comes back to the one person most important to him:

Scho bigan to call and cry:
 Sayd, "Siche a sone hade I!"
 His hert lightened in hy,
 Blythe for to bee.
 Be that he come hir nere
 That scho myghy hym here,
 He said, "My modir full dere,
 Wele byde ye me!" (*Sir Perceval of Galles*, lines 2217-2224)

The happy homecoming is completed as Perceval relays all of his adventures to his mother. Throughout the story, it seems, Perceval has been working towards this reunion with his mother. His departure from her at the beginning of the story is paralleled by his return to her at the end of the narrative. In the end, Perceval finds himself at home with his mother at the end of his quest. While the Grail is absent from this story, his mother can be seen as final destination and, in a sense, the Grail object. She is also the end of his path of enlightenment. He has seen the world, but returns home to his mother. This story has very interesting religious parallel. With the mother as the grail, she can also be seen as Christ like in her devotion and nurturing of her son. She allows him to depart, but welcomes him back to her as Christ does for his followers.

However, unlike the mother, the Grail is not connected with death. As the mother gives life to her child, she is also condemning it to an eventual death. The story of Cain and Abel in the *Queste del Saint Graal* shows the "link between conception and death, which constitutes a contamination of the former and of the mother who conceives (who in

giving life also gives death)” (Rossignol 54). Motherly figures are dangerous in this regard because they indicate the mortality of mankind. In using the Grail to supersede the mother, the men can overcome death. When Galahad finally reaches his goal of finding the Grail, he ascends into heaven and eternal life. This narrative displays the supremacy of the Grail over the mother:

Thus, the Grail metaphorically facilitates a vision of rebirth which resolves ambivalence toward the mother by eliminating her and replacing her with a masculine, paternal God who takes over her original primal functions providing nourishment and giving life, but remains uncontaminated by the mother’s sexuality and mortality (Rossignol 58).

Fulfilling all the functions of the mother and also exceeding her ability to give life, the Grail becomes a better model of maternity. This paternal figure of God seems to overcome the obstacles of the female mother, but it does not possess the savior quality of the quest’s female Christ figure. It is not just the Grail that occupies this motherly role. Perceval’s sister, in the *Queste*, occupies this maternal Jesus role, by nurturing her companions spiritually and sacrificing her own life. Her death, in a sense, saves the lives of the knights who may continue on their quest. By taking the necessary death onto herself, she supplants the Grail as both mother and savior. She occupies both a maternal and paternal as the motherly Jesus – a feminine and masculine identity.

Feminine experience of the divine was not uncommon during the Medieval period. These visions “came most frequently in a Eucharistic context” (Bynum 230). What is most interesting about the exclusion of women from the Grail quest is that the Eucharistic visions of the knights is one that “occurred almost exclusively to women and, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, served as the focal point of a uniquely feminine

religious discourse (Aronstein 211). Yet, from the Grail's first appearance in court, the women are excluded. They have recently departed, leaving the all male audience to view this holy vision. When Galahad, Bohort, and Perceval reach Corbenic, they are fed from the Grail and receive the communion of Jesus. Noticeably absent from the scene is Perceval's sister. In contrast to what Bynum's research shows, this typically female experience of the Eucharistic is withheld from the only female character to display piety. However, her body's presence at Corbenic demonstrates her ability to be allowed, in some form, to experience the achievement of the Grail. As the only main female character, Perceval's sister displays an immense amount of spiritual strength as a compassionate and gracious person.

Wolfram von Eschenbach, Parzival

Perceval or The Story of the Grail was completely retold and expanded by Wolfram von Eschenbach between 1200 and 1210 in his *Parzival*. He completes the story by having Parzival return to the Grail castle (Munsalvaesche), ask the right questions, heal the king, and ascend to the throne as the new Grail king. While he remains “generally faithful to Chrétien’s plot, Wolfram changes so many large and small details that his *Parzival* becomes an independent work...It is neither a paraphrase nor a translation” (Müller 158). Similar to the Grail story in Vulgate cycle, *Parzival* is a predominantly male-oriented story with Parzival as the hero instead of Galahad. Like the Vulgate’s *Queste del Saint Graal*, a distinct feminine presence is felt surrounding the Grail and Parzival’s journey to attain it. Characters like Respanse de Schoye, Anfortas’ sister and Condwiramurs, Parzival’s wife, are numerous within the narrative, but have brief episodes in the story. As marginal characters, the women of this Grail myth are relegated to the outskirts of the storyline, but there are two female characters – Sigune and Cundrie – that hold as much authority in the tale as Perceval’s sister from the Vulgate’s version of the Grail story.

As in Chrétien’s *Perceval*, there is a marvelous presentation of the Grail during dinner at Munsalvaesche, “Upon a green achmardi she bore the consummation of heart’s desire, its root and its blossoming – a thing called ‘The Grail,’ paradisaal, transcending all earthly perfection!” (Wolfram 125). The pure and virtuous sister of Anfortas, Respanse de Schoye, carries the Grail. In making this story his own, Wolfram recreates the Grail itself. His “description and interpretation of the Grail are original,” much like his romance (Müller 158). In this tale, the Grail is a holy stone, cast to earth during the war

of angels in the heavens. The holiness of the object remains the same as in the Vulgate's version of the Grail, but the characters, especially the female characters, are altered.

Parzival is already a figure greatly influenced by women and this characteristic will be helpful to his final achievement of the grail. Wolfram includes a prequel that explains Parzival's seclusion in the forest with his mother, Herzeloide, and his lack of worldly knowledge and manners:

She fled the world's delights. In her eyes day and night were all one. Her heart was obsessed in grief. Set on grief, the Lady withdrew from her possessions to a forest in the wilds of Soltane – not to the meadows among flowers. She had no mind for garlands, were they red or colours less gay, so entire was the sorrow in her heart. To this retreat she took the son of noble Gahmuret for refuge. (Wolfram 70)

Grieving over the loss of her beloved Gahmuret, Herzeloide isolates herself from humanity to keep her only son safe. Her isolation in the forest is a foreshadowing of Sigune's eventual life of penitence. Both Respanse and Herzeloide typify deep religious devotion and spiritual purity. Respanse is the only human being with the spiritual cleanliness to actually hold the holy relic and Herzeloide lives her life in a hermitic manner. Respanse de Schoye and Herzeloide are models of purity and beauty. Yet, both women only "exist within the sphere of the family...these two women rarely act outside of the roles defined for them by their family relationships" (Sterling 58).

Although Respanse plays an integral role in the carriage of the Grail, she is still lacking in independent motivation and complexity. Like Herzeloide, her family ties govern her behavior and role within the story. Female characters such as these exemplify what Alexandra Sterling-Hellenbrand calls the "concept of female marginality" as they are not major characters in Wolfram's work and do not occupy much of the story's space

(56). Respanse de Schoye only appears twice in the story to present the Grail and to be married at the end of the narrative to Feirefiz, Parzival's half-brother. Another female character, also relegated to the field of familial ties, is Parzival's eventual wife, Condwiramurs. The young man rescues Condwiramurs from Clamide and the two join in mutual love,

The sweet young noble woman had all that heart can desire here on earth. Her love was so strong, there was no lodgment in it for infidelity. She knew her man as true. Each found it in the other. He was as dear to her as she to him.
(Wolfram 119)

As his wife and the mother of his children, Condwiramurs is important to this ideal of completion and fulfillment only through family. Women's roles are excluded from the actual quest, and they have limited appearances in the story. As Sterling points out, mostly, they are pushed to the background and remain "passive and silent" (58).

However, much attention should be given to the two female characters that directly help Parzival on his quest for the Grail – Cundrie and Sigune.

In crafting his version of the Grail myth, Wolfram adds depth to characters previously unnamed in Chrétien's *Perceval*. The cousin that informs Parzival of his mistake at Munsalvaesche is called Sigune and the Ugly Maiden becomes the sorceress Cundrie. Along with Herzeloyde, and Respanse de Schoye, Cundrie and Sigune are closely related with Parzival's quest. Cundrie and Sigune are both isolated physically and metaphorically in *Parzival*. Cundrie acts mostly as a Grail messenger, carrying news between the Grail castle and King Arthur's court, while Sigune remains in the forest alone. Unlike Respanse de Schoye and Herzeloyde, Cundrie and Sigune are not ruled by direct familial connections. What keeps Parzival's mother and Anforta's sister from "the

margins of isolation...has to do with the one thing Cundrie and Sigune lack: the presence of the family” (Sterling 58). In contrast, Sigune and Cundrie play much more direct roles in Parzival’s quest for the Grail. They do not have the familial connections that are typified by Condwiramurs and Respanse de Schoye and, therefore, “are essentially alone, isolated from courtly life by the fact that they exist literally on the edge of society” (Sterling 60). It is their isolation and marginal status that affords the ability to act outside the conformities of their gender. They each possess strong characteristics of Grail heroines as Perceval’s sister does in *Le Queste del Saint Graal*.

Sigune’s narrative follows an orthodox path of feminine behavior before she commits herself to a life of penitence in the woods. Her courtly behavior has, she believes, caused the death of her beloved and this prompts her change to less traditional behavior for women. As she contains certain qualities of independent thought and willfulness, her role displays the positive effect of her choice for a religious and penitential life. Parzival first comes across his cousin after leaving home to become a knight:

Now our simple lad was riding down a slope when he heard a woman’s voice. Below a spur of rock a lady was lamenting from heartfelt grief. Her whole happiness had snapped in two. The boy rode swiftly towards her. Now listen to what the lady was at. Mistress Sigune was sitting there tearing out her long brown tresses by the roots in despair! The boy’s eyes began to range: they lit on Prince Schionatulander, dead, in the maiden’s lap. (Wolfram 80)

Not only is Sigune alone in the woods, she is alone in her grief. Her dead prince was her family and her link to the civilized world and she spends much of the narrative burying her dead lover. Living marginally in the story and in the text, Sigune primarily criticizes Parzival’s behavior, but in a more private fashion than Cundrie. She is representative of

what a good woman can be, but is still confined to being an outsider in the story. She mourns her dead husband and remains faithfully by his side until he is buried.

Afterwards, she dedicates her life to a spiritual journey to gain deeper knowledge of God.

Having lost her beloved, Sigune is no longer tied to the courtly world of King Arthur. Relinquishing her place among acceptable notions of courtly behavior, Sigune has devoted her life to her deceased paramour and to God. As Sterling notes, “While the forest in which Parzival encounters Sigune may be geographically indeterminate and while this area may be located on the edges of courtly society, it remains firmly within the jurisdiction of God” (*Topographies* 127). Being marginal in terms of the courtly world does not indicate less power for Sigune. She consigns herself to fulfillment in a spiritual sense and not a social one. Believing that she will rejoin her beloved in the afterlife, Sigune lives the life of an anchoress following her burial of Schionatulander. Although her episodes within the narrative are brief, she engages Parzival’s interest in her penitential life. Their familial connection brings them together at first, but it is her superior spiritual knowledge that eventually assists Parzival’s attainment of the Grail kingship.

Parzival first meets Sigune after leaving his mother and she gives him a brief history of his past and his name. The second time he encounters Sigune, Parzival is chastised for his mistake at Munsalvaesche and for his insensitive desertion of his mother. Her reprimand of his foolish behavior towards both his mother and the suffering Grail king display her personal involvement in Parzival’s quest:

That her extreme reaction stems from her belief in him and from her yearning for the release of her family from suffering is understandable, coupled as it is with her own bereavement, and in the fullness of time her

apparent rejection of him can be seen in a positive light, a contributory factor in the suffering which is essential to his ultimate success.
(Gibbs 16)

Their kinship involves her personally in his failure. Without her rebuke as well as Cundrie's, Parzival would not gain the humility and compassion necessary to fulfill his quest.

Outside of the Grail story, Sigune devises her own means of self-discovery by becoming an anchoress and devoting her life to God. Her beauty fades as she lives a difficult life of seclusion. But this loss of physical beauty merely reflects the attainment of spiritual enlightenment as is evident in this second encounter: "Gradually, Sigune divests herself of all the trappings of courtly appearance; Parzival notes at their second meeting that the conventional signs of courtly beauty have faded from her face..." (Sterling *Topographies* 127). Confused by her choice to further exclude herself from the world, Parzival asks, "It is inconceivable to me, madam, how you can lodge here in this wilderness so far from any road, and how you nourish yourself, since there is no cultivation anywhere around you" (Wolfram 225). Sigune informs him that she eats only the food brought to her from the Grail and that her devotion to God and her love for her dead prince keep her "virgin and unwed" in her hermitage (Wolfram 225). It is not necessary for her to rejoin the courtly world in search of marriage because she has, in a sense, married herself to God and her deceased love.

Unlike Perceval's sister in the Vulgate cycle, she takes part in a Eucharistic form of spiritual expression. Sigune's religious experiences are tied to her nourishment from the Grail, a holy relic. Her mass and Eucharist are delivered directly to her by Cundrie, displaying her superior religious status. Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* examines the

ways in which women bypassed clerical control and continue their service to God. Sigune has dedicated her life to chastity and seclusion in worship of God. She closes herself off from the world and earthly temptations similar to the examples of female spiritual expression given by Bynum. Aside from celibacy, women also used food as means of subverting the male-oriented church. Food was a crucial part of the medieval female's spiritual life, but not only in connection to Eucharistic experiences:

Like body, food must be broken and spilled forth in order to give life. Macerated by teeth before it can be assimilate to sustain life, food mirrors and recapitulates both suffering and fertility....And, in Christian doctrine, the suffering, broken, crucified body on the cross, form which springs forth humankind's salvation, is food. (Bynum *Holy* 30)

The crushing of the food during eating as a metaphor for Christ's crucifixion is an intriguing example of the affective piety displayed by medieval Christian women. By focusing on the emotional and physical suffering of Christ, women attained spiritual connection to Jesus. Sigune has already displayed this type of affective piety through her isolation and continuous prayer in addition to her unique relationship with the Grail.

Her devout Christianity and grief has led Sigune to lead pious life of an anchoress. She will not eat unless she is being fed by the holy vessel and excludes herself from all society. Fasting, chastity, and constant prayer fill her days in her hermitage. The only food she allows herself to eat is the manna delivered from the Grail by Cundrie. Her fasting is not an unusual expression of piety for a medieval woman: "Christians male and female paid tribute to God's power and acknowledged their own sinfulness by renouncing food. And Christians male and female received their God most intimately in that holy meal in which he became bread and wine" (Bynum *Holy* 31). Ascetic living was

common for those in search of spiritual enlightenment. Bynum's work focuses on this particular form of asceticism – fasting – in women specifically. From Catherine of Sienna to Margaret of Oingt, Bynum displays vast quantitative evidence that indicates a special relationship between religious women and food (81-82). During the twelfth and thirteenth century:

[F]ood was not merely a powerful symbol. It was also a particularly obvious and accessible symbol to women, who were more intimately involved than men in the preparation and distribution of food. Women's bodies, in the acts of lactation and of giving birth, were analogous to ordinary food and to the body of Christ, as it died on the cross and gave birth to salvation. (Bynum *Holy* 30)

As Bynum suggests, women were easily connected to food as their bodies were the source of nourishment for their children. Their life-giving bodies also formed an association with the motherly body of Jesus, as seen in the previous chapter. Thus, food becomes the primary expression of control over their spiritual well-being. In understanding this concept, Sigune rejects all earthly nourishment in favor of holy sustenance. Her actions and narrative are not abnormal in the medieval literary tradition. Bynum notes that numerous writers recounted the lives of female saints and their holy relationship to food, God, and the Eucharist. The three Marys to whom Christ first appears to after the Resurrection. But perhaps most importantly, there is the figure of Mary Magdalene in the Digby plays.

Mary Magdalene's spiritual journey is an excellent example of a female Grail quest. Previously lecherous, Mary Magdalene renounces her past sinfulness when she gains the forgiveness of Jesus. When Jesus enters the home of Simon the leper, it is Mary who washes his feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. To her, He says, "I

forgive you your wretchedness; and thereby, your soul is made whole” (*Mary Magdalene* 61). After Jesus’ messenger Raphael visits Mary Magdalene, she acts in the role of the priest and right hand of God in performing miracles. The angel tells her, “You must fulfill our Lord’s command....You shall convert the king and queen and be admitted as a holy apostle” (*Mary Magdalene* 79). She makes divine appearance to the king of Marseille and through her miracles, converts him to Christianity. In his praise of her, the King proclaims, “You are the healer of our souls and food for contemplation” (*Mary Magdalene* 92). Having fulfilled her task, Mary Magdalene, like Sigune, retreats to the wilderness. She declares, “In the desert we shall remain. To save my soul from sin. I shall ever atone for my sin with humility. I shall patiently love my Lord. I shall do my works with charity, and all the days of my life, I shall live in abstinence” (*Mary Magdalene* 93). She becomes a hermit in devotion to God and spirituality.

While in her hermitage, Mary Magdalene is lifted into heaven to dine three times a day. Jesus tells his angels that she must be brought into the clouds where they “feed her with the manna to sustain her” (*Mary Magdalene* 93). Unlike Sigune, she joins the ranks of the divine to be fed. This continues for thirty years until she dies. Jesus says that, “Mary shall have possession by the right of inheritance to wear a crown. She shall be brought to everlasting salvation to dwell in joy without fear” (*Mary Magdalene* 96). Her body is left behind to rejoin the earth while her soul ascends into heaven. As in Grail narratives, the emphasis is on her being fed by God and her earthly body is left behind as her spirit progresses to heaven. Sigune is also fed this holy manna from the Grail and she reaches her spiritual culmination through death as well. Ultimately, both Wolfram’s story

and this medieval play draw from the same medieval tradition of feminine Eucharistic experience.

When Parzival visits Sigune in her penitential cell, he defers to her greater knowledge of spirituality by asking for her advice. It is Parzival's observation of Sigune's piety and his acceptance of his own sinfulness that leads him back to the Grail. As Ranke points out, "Parzival has fought the hardness of his soul and softened his self-will" (375). Sigune lets him know that Cundrie recently departed after delivering food and shows him the path to follow. With this last action, she has directed Parzival to his final journey to the Grail and his ultimate goal. While Sigune may not take part in his fulfillment of this quest, as Perceval's sister also did not, she is granted her wish to join God and her departed love: "She has reached the end of her physical and spiritual 'becoming,' parallel to Parzival's becoming worthy of the Grail, which is also now all but complete" (Sterling *Topographies* 129). While her possession of the humility, strength, and compassion lacking in Parzival at the beginning of the story assist her ultimate enlightenment, Sigune, like Perceval's sister, suffers greatly to reach this point:

If Wolfram bestows upon his women characters so much of the abstract virtue which is seen to be crucial to Parzival's nature and to his attainment of the Grail, this does not by any means imply that they are saintly paragons. Sigune's passage to the next world, where she will be united with her earthly lover and with God, is fraught with conflict and passion. (Gibbs 15)

Sigune carries much guilt for the death of her Prince Schionatulander. In having played the game of courtly love, her denial of his love leads to his demise. To atone, she dedicates herself to chastity, piety, and seclusion. Her sacrifice is a painful one, but she is more pained by the loss of Schionatulander. In seeing his cousin in this position of

penitence, Parzival is moved to change his own ways: “What Sigune, however, also wants Parzival and, concurrently, the reader to be aware of is that she was guilty of her lover’s death” (Jacobson 6-7). Sigune must own her guilt for her part in his death and make Parzival aware of her own spiritual failings.

Her relation to Parzival allows her more sway over Parzival in one sense because he can witness her transformation from sinful to pious: “Sigune therefore, related to Parzival not only as a blood-relative, but also by the fact of her sinfulness, elicits a different response from Cundrie – assistance rather than accusation – because of her awareness, her repentance, and her demut. Working together, they provide the impetus for Parzival’s journey toward the same goal” (Jacobson 6). Although she does chastise Parzival for his errors, her pursuit is one of instruction, not punishment. She can show him how humility is gained so that he may be worthy of returning to the Grail. Choosing penance for her perceived sin, Sigune is passionate in achieving forgiveness. Her grief and piety sustain her as does the food from the Grail, and she is able to reach a fulfilling place in the afterlife. Sigune has found spiritual fulfillment as Parzival reaches the achievement of his desire. Her contribution to his eventual attainment of the traits necessary to redeem his mistake is integral to his quest, but she is not the only female character to assist him.

From her description and origins, Cundrie already exists outside the world of King Arthur’s court before her role as a messenger begins. Her sorcery and pagan ways make her an outsider to the usually Christian civilization of Arthur’s world. From her first appearance in Book VI, Cundrie is a shocking female character and seems to have much power as she incites Parzival’s quest for the Grail. Although otherworldly

characters frequently appear in Arthur's court to incite the action of the narrative, Cundrie is intriguing with her independent femininity. In this narrative, her appearance and behavior are tolerated by both the Arthurian world and the Grail kingdom because of her status: "Cundrie's history, her appearance, and her knowledge maintain her separation from the Arthurian and the Grail worlds, although she is accepted in her capacity as messenger by each" (Sterling *Topographies* 131). She is appallingly hideous and does not heed the normal codes for conduct in court; rather, she reproaches Parzival for his failure to ask the right question in the Grail castle. Sigune also berates Parzival for this mistake, telling him, "You dishonourable person, man accurst... You should have had compassion on your host, in whom God had worked a terrible sign, and inquired about his suffering" (Wolfram 135). However, there is great difference between the admonishments of Cundrie and Sigune – one takes place in a private setting and the other in a public one.

Cundrie's reprimand shames Parzival publicly in the presence of the many highly regarded knights as well as King Arthur: "The mighty reputation of the Table Round has been maimed by the presence at it of Lord Parzival, who moreover wears the insignia of knighthood" (Wolfram 164). Her outburst is followed by an emotional cry and she leaves Parzival in stunned silence with her verbal challenge and ultimately redirects Parzival in his quest for "knowledge of himself, of the Grail, of God" (Sterling 61). Cundrie lives in service of the Grail as well as others "according to the principle of demut or humility" (Sterling 60). Her manner of living is far superior to Parzival's compassionless abandonment of his mother, which is subsequently repeated in his failure to respond to Anfortas' pain. Confronting Parzival with his own shortcomings seems to a particularly

female trait as Sigune has done so as well. The shame both women instill in Parzival triggers his growth and development and eventual triumph. As Sterling notes, “Cundrie’s ‘otherness’ highlights for Parzival in a way his position as her ‘other’ – he must become as she is (and acquire the quality humility or demut) (*Topographies* 130). Cundrie is a reflection of the characteristics that Parzival lacks, much like Sigune.

Cundrie acts mostly as an intermediary between the world of the Grail and the court of King Arthur. She appears in court to admonish Parzival for not saving Anfortas and uses the Grail to nourish Sigune when she devotes her life to God. Through her public reproach of Parzival, “Cundrie represents not the ideal, but an exaggeration in reverse of Parzival’s strengths and weaknesses. She is ugly where he is beautiful and beautiful where he is ugly” (Blumstein 165). Although Parzival possesses all the outward appearance of the perfect knight, internally he lacks the qualities to save Anfortas and achieve the Grail kingship. As Sigune provides a model of pious and loyal behavior, Cundrie represents compassion and humility as well. She feeds the fasting Sigune with the Grail and is angered to the point of tears by Parzival’s disregard for the condition of Anfortas. Her emotional investment in characters like Anfortas is clearly displayed when she weeps following her enraged rebuke of Parzival. Both her appearance and her harsh rebuke of Parzival help the knight realize his faults: “Cundrie, then, is explicitly presented as the physical representation of original sin...and her accusation of Parzival, coming as it does after Sigune has already told him of his errancy, is another step leading him to an awareness of original sin, of the fallen state of all mankind” (Jacobson 5). He must gain this understanding of his and humanity’s failure in order to take steps to resolve it.

When Parzival locates Cundrie following his meeting with Sigune, she can see that he has gained the state of “demut”, or humility, necessary for his task. She directs him to the Grail castle and Parzival heals the ailing Anfortas and takes over as the Grail King. Similar to Sigune, “Cundrie is instrumental in teaching Parzival true humility and loyalty – prerequisites for the intermediate phase of self-definition as well as for the Grail Kingship” (Blumstein 161). She allows him to recognize his own deficiencies as a man and as knight. Also, she, along with Sigune, displays how forgiveness can be attained. Parzival learns the true power of forgiveness when he sees that Sigune, despite her sinfulness, may eat from the Grail. Her involvement with Cundrie is a lesson in the power of repentance. Cundrie, as a spiritual and knowledgeable heathen, is the messenger for the Holy Grail and her ties to this relic give her quite a bit of authority. Her ability to feed the previously flawed Sigune from the holy stone reveals to Parzival his capacity to gain the humility he lacks: “She, the healer, is therefore apologizing for precipitating the pain he had to endure so that he might empathize with the condition of the family – empathy, and awareness of the basis of his own one-ness with the family, more than mercy, being the mark of the question he must ask of Anfortas” (Jacobson 6). By permitting his family member the great honor of feeding from the Grail, and, thus, forgiving her sins, Cundrie heals both Sigune and Parzival from their moral flaws. Jacobson notes, “The bonding of the legendary figure of the Grail messenger, Cundrie, with the figure of Christian repentance, Sigune, provides one more instance of the intensity of Wolfram’s religious experience into an integral part of the narrative” (10). Sigune’s religious experience directly impacts Parzival’s journey to the Grail. With the knowledge gained by his

encounters with these women, he is able to take the first steps towards realizing and correcting his errancy.

It is important to recognize that Wolfram is being very deliberate in his repeated (although brief) use of the characters of Sigune and Cundrie. Parzival's encounters with the women are integral to the narrative and its completion. In connecting both Sigune and Cundrie by having both women indicate his moral failings, Wolfram demonstrates the equal power both women have in their demonstrations of "the necessary qualities of selflessness and service" (Sterling 64). Like Perceval's sister, Sigune's religious sacrifices and Cundrie's superior traits were models of piety to the fledgling knight: "Both are strange and alienating to the culture of the Arthurian court, and they facilitate Parzival's eventual integration into the 'true' court of the Grail king...by means of the stark contrast between their inner qualities of goodness and humility and their outer appearance" (Sterling *Topographies* 130). Cundrie is almost animal like in her appearance and Sigune's life as an anchoress causes her to lose all traces of her former beauty. Regardless, their exterior condition does not reflect their inner forms, as Parzival's does not in the beginning of his quest. In causing Parzival to internalize his quest and improve his inner spirit, they bring focus away from outward appearance and into the more pertinent condition of spiritual attributes. Sigune reaches her desired afterlife after she strips away her life in the Arthurian court and Parzival reaches Munsalvaesche once he reaches an internal realization – he must have awareness for the suffering of others and obtain a sense of humility instead of pride.

More so, Sigune and Cundrie not only influence Parzival's personal growth, but they also lead him to the correct paths and drive his desire to find the Grail. It is because they exist only in the background of the story that they are able to have so powerful an influence on Parzival:

The 'marginal' positions they occupy free them from the restrictions of any particular code or set of rules so that they may act in this manner....they can guide Parzival toward his goal and keep him from straying beyond the margins, as it were, in ways that other characters, male or female, cannot. (Sterling 64).

As women on the margins of society, they are able to reprimand and guide the young man to his goal. If familial relationships tie other female characters to the narrative, as Sterling suggests, Sigune and Cundrie's life outside the court in the forest or traveling between two different worlds prevents them from being included in the civilized life of the court. However, they play an integral part in Parzival's quest, and "although they are positionally marginal, [they] are thematically central to Wolfram's work, and they have a profound impact on Parzival's development" (Sterling 60). Together these women bring Parzival to knowledge of the "fallen state of humankind" through their selfless dedication to serving others (Sterling 57). Parzival sees his mistake at the Grail castle as a personal flaw that must be corrected and this flaw is something present within all mankind according to Sterling. In this narrative, the character's ability to gain humility and compassion, with the help of two strong female characters, reflects a desire for all humanity to achieve this same personal fulfillment.

Indeed, Parzival's ultimate possession of humility is necessary for the completion of this story, but it is through recognizing guilt and penitence in Sigune that he can overcome this moral failure. In witnessing the model of Sigune's piety and asceticism, he

is somewhat joined into his kinswoman's journey of repentance. Sigune's subscription to the fasting tradition of this religious period displays her religious strength and her autonomy from the world. Cundrie, already free from the constraints of femininity by her appearance, shows Parzival the necessary quality of forgiveness as she allows Sigune to feed from the Grail. These two women display spiritual freedom in a similar fashion to the actual medieval women described by Bynum. In essence, these two women model the correct behavior for this male character.

Malory's "Tale of the Sankgreal"

William Caxton's publication of Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* in 1485 added an additional representation of the Grail myth. In Malory's "Tale of Sankgreal", the Arthurian knights pursue the Grail following its appearance in court. As his postscript notes, Malory reworked the French tale of the Vulgate's *Queste del Saint Graal* into English while leaving out most of the origins of the Holy Grail. Despite his shortening of the tale, Malory's tale closely adheres to his French source and the quest for the Grail is a male endeavor. Galahad is introduced as the most virtuous and powerful knight, as well as the son of Launcelot, shortly before the thunderous arrival of the Grail. Again, women are forbidden from accompanying the knights on their quest by an "olde knyght...in relygious clothyng" who says, "Fayre lordis whych have sworne in the queste of the Sankgreall, thus sendith you Nacien the eremyte worde that none in thys queste lede lady nother jantillwoman with hym, for hit ys nat to do in so hyghe a servyse as they laboure in" (Malory 8-13). Overt references to feminine proclivity towards spiritual impurity are not included in this text. However, it is expressly clear that women do not belong in such a "hyghe servyse" as the search for this holy relic.

Into this male domain enters Perceval's sister, once again. Her path and sacrifice are similar to that recounted in the *Queste* tale, but she is a particularly intriguing Arthurian heroine. Like most female characters in these Grail myths, she occupies a small portion of the story, but has a vital impact on the ultimate achievement of the Grail. Unlike Guenevere, Isolde, or Elaine, her importance to the story rides on her virginal status. Arriving in the story, she is a necessary component for the success of Galahad. The scabbard for Galahad's sword is inscribed with precise directions for its use:

For the body of hym which I ought to hange by, he shall nat be shamed in no place whyle he ys gurde with the gurdyll. Nother never none be so hardy to do away thys gurdyll, for hit ought nat to be done away but by the hondis of a mayde, and that she be a kyngis doughter and a quenys. And she must be a mayde all the dayes of hir lyff, both in will and in worke; and if she breke hir virginite she shall dy the moste vylaynes deth that ever dud ony woman. (Malory 582)

Interestingly, the engraving specifies, in detail, the person who may touch this scabbard.

As Traxler points out “These events illustrate why someone must do what Perceval’s sister does, but they do not reveal why a female should play this role” (265). If Galahad is able to retrieve the sword, it is strange that he may not touch the scabbard. Female characters have been excluded from this quest, but this moment clearly expresses the necessity of women. Perceval’s sister is a convenient arrival at this point. Her virginity is integral to not only Galahad’s survival, but to her own as well. Conveniently placed in the narrative, Perceval’s sister becomes a commodified being who serves the purposes of her male counterparts. However, her chastity and virtue place her in high standing in this normally male dominated world.

The role of Perceval’s sister is a stronger figure in Malory’s version of events. She achieves equal standing with the narrative’s other virgin hero, Galahad. Her role is much more comprehensive and she is allowed to achieve the Grail, in a metaphoric sense (Shichtman 12). While most women’s virginity is used for monetary gain or an increase in status for their families, Perceval’s sister’s virginity holds a similar, and yet, different significance. It is necessary for her to remain chaste throughout her life in order to assist Galahad, but this does not impede her ability to gain influence for herself and her kinsmen. As Shichtman notes, “Like Galahad, Percival’s sister flaunts an unassailable chastity. Chastity is necessary to her identity, however, because it enables her to remain

in play as a commodity. Percival's sister is, like many women in Arthurian romance, trafficked for the profit of her kinsmen" (Shichtman 14). The episode of the Marvelous Boat seems to indicate that woman will be necessary to the successful completion of this quest. Not only must she be a maid, but she must be the daughter of a king. By arriving in the story at this point, she becomes an essential component for the men to achieve their goal: "Percival's sister is trafficked to several different parties to create bonds among kinship groups; her much prized virginity, which would seem to present an impediment to her commodification, actually enhances her value, and death provides the greatest opportunity to capitalize on her body" (Shichtman 12). Virginity, specifically hers, is crucial to the quest. However, Perceval's sister is by no means regarded merely as the requisite virgin sacrifice for this tale. Her virginity may make her commodity for her male counterparts, but it also is a crucial part of her spiritual autonomy. In her interaction with the male characters, she is as captivating a character as Galahad.

The ban on women from the Grail quest obviously indicates an inherent distrust of the female form, particularly, its sexual attractiveness. Sexual temptation is dangerous to the spiritual health of the Grail knights, especially Galahad. As the virgin knight and the one proclaimed to hold the sword and scabbard, he is above his companions in religious strength and chastity. Perceval's sister becomes a mirror image of Galahad with respect to her virginal status and that allows her to participate in the quest: "But she is allowed access to the homosocial world of Grail knights because, like Galahad, she possesses ostentatious, aggressive virginity. Even as she socially and physically embodies all that is requisite in a sexual partner, her virginity ensures that her sexual presence is not disruptive" (Shichtman 15). Her "aggressive" virginity is modeled by Galahad's intense

devotion to his quest and spiritual purity. If Galahad is like the Christ-figure in his ascension to heaven, Perceval's sister takes on the role of the most famous virgin in Christianity:

The episode of the Marvelous Boat underscores a theme that is present from the beginning of the romance: purity, both physical and moral, is at the heart of the story, and specific male/female pairs provide the structure in which this theme develops. Thus while no women may go on the Grail quest, the story proceeds artistically and theologically because the author uses Perceval's sister as his Arthurian Virgin Mary. (Traxler 267)

Galahad and Perceval's sister form a non-sexual partnership that is essential to the progression of the storyline. She sacrifices her hair to make the girdle for his scabbard, but, more importantly, she counsels and directs the young knight through an odd sort of flirtation.

Upon reading the engraving for the sword, Galahad is swept by a moment of insecurity. Afraid of the penalty for an incorrect assumption, Galahad hesitates to draw the sword, "I wolde draw thys swerde oute of the sheete but the offendynge ys so grete that I shall nat sette my hande thereto" (Malory 581). Quick to respond, Perceval's sister assures him of his worthiness, "Now, sirs,' seyde the jantillwoman, 'the drawynge of thys swerde ys warned to all sauff all only to you'" (Malory 581). Following this exchange, Malory makes another change from his source that gives a greater sense of authority to this female character. She gives the history of the sword and scabbard as well as a brief theological background to the Grail. In the original Vulgate version, an authorial narrative recounts this information. Into this woman's mouth Malory places the command of the storyteller as she informs the men of sacred knowledge they are not privy to before her arrival. Knowledge gives her power over these men for this moment.

It places her in a far more important role than her marginal status would suggest. In addition, her interaction with Galahad displays her ability to be on equal standing with the infamous knight.

After making his new girdle out of her hair, Galahad is immensely impressed by the virtuous and generous nature of Perceval's sister. He takes the object from her and expresses his gratitude:

“Now recke I nat thought I dye, for now I holde me one of the beste blyssed maydyns of the worlde, whych hath made the worthyest knyght of the worlde.”

“Damsell,” seyde sir Galahad, “ye have done so muche that I shall be your knyght all the dayes of my lyff.” (Malory 587)

This interlude, typical of traditional courtly love, displays her ability to attract the attention of the virginal Galahad in an erotic, yet chaste, manner. Her character, evident by her fulfillment of the inscription's directive, has not only proved her worth to the knight, but has, in fact, validated Galahad's position as the one valorous and virtuous knight that may hold the sword and scabbard. Her virginity makes her the one female character equal to Galahad and a perfect match as well: “Virginity becomes eroticized in the relationship between Galahad and Percival's sister. Matched well in their holiness, in their saintly certitude, the two participate in what might be read as a symbolic wedding ceremony with a symbolic consummation – their very chastity setting off sparks” (Schichtman 16). The vows exchanged between the two could very well indicate a metaphoric marriage between the spiritual purity of this pair. As Galahad's “wife”, Perceval's sister eventually must make the blood sacrifice necessary for the consummation of her marriage (Schichtman 18).

As their interplay suggests, there is some level of attraction between the two virgins of this myth. This interaction displays one of the key concepts of Heng's article regarding feminine subtextual discourse in Malory's works – enchantment. Heng notes, “The most suggestive trope for an analysis of feminine authority and presence in Malory, however, is that which is offered to us to describe two kinds of feminine play in the text – the tantalising, doubly-figurative trope of enchantment” (99). Indeed, many female characters are involved in courtly displays of love and enchantment. For Heng, the idea of enchantment can be either one of magic or love. Perceval's sister, with her pious and charitable behavior, seems to enchant Galahad with love. In this narrative, enchantment through love allows women a very intriguing influence on the story:

In a fictive discourse where love is valorized as a formidable motive power, and the female beloved identified with its source and regulation, even a territory of masculine endeavor is a ground of feminine possibility. Each kind of enchantment traces a path by which the feminine may be active in the world, and constructs patterns of intelligibility specific to female interests and presences. (Heng 99).

Galahad's acknowledges his devotion to Perceval's sister when he vows to be her knight for the rest of his life. Through her involvement with Galahad in this respect, she is able to traverse the male world of the grail quest and put more of her feminine presence into the text. Aside from her religious purpose in the quest, she is afforded a more traditional role as the possible love-match for Galahad.

The death of Perceval's sister is nearly unchanged by Malory. As a maid, she must give blood to heal the leprous lady and dies for her sacrifice. The gift of blood can be seen as the symbolic loss of her virginity. Already matched and “married” to Galahad, her technical virginity must remain intact to avoid a violent death, but there must be an end to her maidenhood. The sacrifice of her blood fulfills her role as the sacrificial lamb

of the story as well as legitimizing her marriage to Galahad: “The union created by this blood sacrifice provides, for Percival’s sister, an apparatus whereby she can claim, ‘and I dye for the helth of her I shall gete me grete worship and soule helthe’...Her kinship group profits, receives ‘worship’ perhaps because she dies during a symbolic marriage and deflowering” (Shichtman 18). Her death increases her spiritual worth and validates her position alongside Galahad. She proves her religious superiority by dying to save another. Following the great loss of blood, she makes her final wishes known to her kinsman:

“Fayre brothir sir Percivale, I dye for the helynge of this lady. And whan I am dede I requyre you that ye burye me nat in thys contrey but as sone as I am dede putte me in a boote at the nexte haven, and lat me go as adventures woll lede me. And as sone as ye three come to the cite of Sarras, there to encheveve the Holy Grayle, ye shall fynde me undir a towre aryved. And there bury me in the spiritual palyse. For I shall telle you for trouthe, there sir Galahad shall be buryed, and ye bothe, in the same place.”
(Malory 592)

She does not request this specific burial, but demands it of her brother. Ordering her body be allowed to join their final achievement of the Grail, she intuitively knows the ultimate end of the quest. Possessing an incredible amount of wisdom and spiritual strength, she is definitely Galahad’s female counterpart. In addition, “Without losing her virginity – in fact because her virginity is so much a part of her identity – Percival’s sister manages to tie herself to Galahad; she will even negotiate a burial spot next to his” (Shichtman 17). Indeed, her vision of future events does take place and her pristine body follows the men to Sarras. While not alive to be in the physical presence of the Grail, her body reaches its rightful resting place, by her symbolic husband, Galahad.

Returning to Traxler's point regarding the need for a female character on the *Marvelous Boat*, it is clear that Malory places a great deal of importance on Perceval's sister. While it is evident that she is an equal match to Galahad, she seems superior to the male characters of the story. She has the knowledge and authority to dictate the men's actions on the *Marvelous Boat* and the wisdom to accept her death. In fact, her precognitive knowledge of the end of the quest seems to suggest that she has, in essence, already experienced it. She witnesses the attainment of the Grail and the result of Galahad's ascension into heaven before her death. It is interesting to consider why Malory places such power in this feminine character.

Perhaps, Malory's male characters do not gain as much agency in the narrative because they lack the same religious power possessed by Perceval's sister. Gawain undertakes the quest to escape the boredom of court. He has many adventures, but is not, ultimately, spiritually altered by the quest. Launcelot may forsake his adulterous relationship with the queen for the journey, but he is tainted by his sin and returns to his corrupt ways upon arriving back to court. Donald Hoffman notes, "Malory's most crucially rejected 'masculinity,' Perceval's sister, calls into question the very possibility of the *imitatio Christi* within a masculine, chivalric context. Against this ground of absence, Malory's remaining masculinities present an array of possibilities, all of which are interrogated and, ultimately, found wanting" (73). Galahad, as the only knight to see the Grail, would seem the only male character to achieve the same level of piety and strength as Perceval's sister. However, he as well is lacking the sheer depth of character and sacrificial nature as this female character.

As the Grail knight, Galahad would seem the character most likely to be the Christ figure of the narrative. His chastity and pious nature glorify him to all the other knights as he appears to be “the beste knyght of the worlde” (Malory 517). However, his death does signify the same connection with Jesus’ crucifixion as Perceval’s sister’s death. Although all of the male knights accept his place as the virginal figure most likely pure enough for the task, he remains a very stagnant individual. As Kelly points out, “Yet in spite of these accomplishments, Malory’s Galahad remains a curiously static character. The battles he fights do not help Galahad grow into knighthood in any way...Alone among the knights of the Round Table, Galahad is not tested: he is simply affirmed in his monumental monologism.” (113). His journey allows him none of the character growth that is afforded to earlier male arrivals to court, like Gareth or Perceval. He appears at the start of the Grail quest and dies upon its fulfillment. As a character, Galahad does not fit into the usual knightly educational tales of the court. He sacrifices his own life for the miraculous view of the Grail, not for the sake of another, and is virtually unchanged by the experience. In this narrative, female virginity seems to overtake male virginity in supremacy.

Indeed, there are numerous differences between male and female virginity, especially when considering the saintly qualities of the individual. Semple describes the necessity for “a complete elimination of the aggressive impulses such as sexual desire or striving for power that can be seen to threaten social stability” for male saints (166). Desire for any earthly pleasure had to be removed from the male saint’s spirit. It is a bit more complex for female saints:

While a great deal of value is attached to male control of desire, female desire is not a threat to community. But chastity is still enjoined on women saints. They reinforce the male renunciation of desire by maintaining their own chastity. Men control their sexual desire and women help them do it, largely through models of comportment prepared for them by men, in accordance with the notion of Adam educating Eve. (Semple 166)

Perceval's sister maintains her virginal status as that is the one of reasons she is allowed on this quest. In addition, her chastity prevents any threat to the virginities of her male companions, especially Galahad. But, this description of female virgins does not indicate how virginity can empower women.

Perceval's sister virginal status not only ties her to Galahad in this narrative, it binds her character with a deep medieval tradition of female virgins that, perhaps, explains her commanding presence in the story despite her marginal occupation of the quest. As indicated previously, women during this period were unable to express religious power and clerical movements sought to suppress the number of female nuns, saints, and religious figures. Bynum's work shows the various ways women utilized to bypass clerical control and continue their service to God. One such manner was through celibacy. As a virginal nun, women were saved from the dangers of childbirth and unwanted marriages. More than that, the virgin was considered closer to God: "her flesh untouched by ordinary flesh, the virgin (like Christ's mother, the perpetual virgin) was also a bride, destined for a higher consummation" (Bynum *Holy* 20). Her feminine body becomes a symbol of power and a vessel for the Holy Spirit, similar to that of the Virgin Mary. Perceval's sister keeps her body in this "intact" state. Not only does virginity connect her to the holiest of female figures, it also allows her to escape the constraints of femininity.

As Bynum has stated, celibacy was an acceptable way for women to avoid marriage and children. More so, "...we must not ignore the extent to which virginity – as a source of spiritual power – was a compelling religious ideal in its own right, not merely a second-best substitute for marriage" (Bynum *Jesus* 15). Chastity was not just an inferior choice for women, it was a considerable factor in determining religious strength and authority. Maintaining their virginity becomes an empowering choice for women:

Virginity was presented as an ideal higher state of being for all and, practically considered, as an opportunity to obtain freedom from that condition which alone defined the inferior status of the female. At the very least, the virgin woman could expect release from the governance of a husband and the chains of children. She was free of the burden of worldly cares and responsibilities that weighed her sisters down. (McNamara 151)

In essence, the choice to remain a virgin increased women's status in the eyes of God while offering an alternative to the traditional lifestyles for women. Already considered inferior to men, women had few choices outside that of marriage. Choosing to devote one's sexuality to God in this manner was freeing. Female virgins possessed an intriguing position within society as well as within narratives of female saints. Regardless, being virginal was a much more pious choice than that of marriage.

In her book, *Versions of Virginity*, Sarah Salih examines numerous definitions, narratives, and historical descriptions of the importance of female virginity. As she recounts the trope of virgin martyr stories, Salih indicates the common components of these accounts:

The genre of the virgin martyr legend has strict narrative constraints. A young, beautiful and aristocratic Christian virgin defies the pagan authorities, often including her own family or her suitor, who attempt to persuade her to marry and/or renounce her faith....The combination of virginity and Christianity, both written as voluntarily chosen identities, leads only to death. (Salih 48)

Female virgin martyrs, in this literary tradition, would forsake gender expectations, like marriage, for their beliefs, which leads to their ultimate death. Perceval's sister fits into this pattern as she lives a chaste life instead of that of a wife and mother. Her choice and dedication to this Christian relic leads to her eventual demise. While it may seem that she, as well as other virgin martyrs, is merely a powerless victim of the pagan world, they clearly display a sense of authority in the narrative:

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the virgins in these legends are represented as active agents. Their desires, their actions, their words drive the narrative... Their power stems from their virginity; the choice to be a virgin is the originary choice which enables all others. Their agency may be fantasized, in that they have the advantage of occupying a narrative world designed to enable the production of virginity, but it is nevertheless foregrounded and emphasized." (Salih 48-49)

Indeed, characters like Perceval's sister carry much influence over the direction of the story. Without her virginal presence, Galahad would not have the sword and scabbard. She is informative and directs the men to their ultimate destination. Her death saves the men from having to make a similar sacrifice and propels the narrative forward. In the loss of her life, she attains a spiritual connection to God.

As Salih recounts, many female virgins considered their chastity to indicate their marriage to Jesus. In virgin groups, like the Katherine Group, maintaining one's virginity indicates that a woman "aspires to be an identity gendered differently from female. The virgin is both bride and virago; her desires are directed to Christ, and her body is glorified and miraculously impermeable. Her virginity is voluntarily chosen, established in defiance of worldly authority, and performed in the endurance of torture" (Salih 98). Obviously, a woman cannot escape her identity as female, but she can supplant the

expectations of her sex with a holy union with God. In choosing chastity and marriage to Jesus, women, as virgin martyrs, may endure pain, torture, and death, but they achieve something much greater than traditional gender roles allow:

The marriage to Christ is consummated in the moment which also fixes and perfects the virgin body, that of death... Thus imitatio Christi becomes a means to achieve sponsalia Christi; the virgins get to marry Christ at the moment when they are most like him in their triumphant endurance of suffering and death. (Salih 70)

Perceval's sister achieves this "sponsalia Christi" as she is the Christ-figure in the narrative. She is painfully drained of her blood for the sake of a leprous lady. Upon her death, she is bound to Jesus as well as Galahad for her sacrifice of both sexual experience and blood. Within this story, she is a strong female character that clearly overcomes the constraints of her femininity and escapes the margins of the tale. McNamara states, "Since woman's special condition was defined by her status as a wife, the virgin must be viewed as having transcended that condition and therefore the limitations placed on her sex" (152). Her special condition as a virgin allows Perceval's sister to be more than a liminal female character. She is more than wife, mistress, and even, queen. Perceval's sister becomes the leader of the Grail quest.

Returning to Heng, it is possible to see how Perceval's sister is able to occupy such an authoritative role in Malory's world. As with all female characters in the works of Malory (and other male writers of the time), it is only possible to view her feminine power through her marginal dealings with the male characters. Most significantly, her presentation of the sword and scabbard to Galahad and her blood sacrifice allow her to display her feminine power. Heng notes that, "Perhaps the most enigmatic and dangerous item of this material trove are swords, the instruments on which all masculine

accomplishments must turn, and therefore pivotal to conceptions of male identity and personal force. These are so strongly associated with feminine sources and ownership as sometimes to be only temporarily accessible to men” (98). The sword and scabbard given to Galahad by Perceval’s sister clearly echoes earlier presentations of swords to male characters in the work, such as the Lady of Lake giving Excalibur to Arthur. Heng’s focus upon the sword is most interesting because it is a very male (penetrating) symbol. Perceval’s sister retrieves the scabbard (sheath) for his sword to be placed into as well as making a girdle for it out of her own hair. She is literally weaving her physical self around the sword, a symbol of maleness, as she weaves her presence into the narrative. It is impossible to escape this female figure as she is even present at the final Eucharistic experience of the Grail. As predicted, her body floats to Corbenic symbolizing her tie to the Grail and the story. Her body is a reminder of her blood sacrifice and her involvement in the direction of the story. Although she is only on the outskirts of the city and the story, her femininity is deeply embedded in the plot.

Conclusion

Examining each version of this Grail myth, I am struck more by the similarities in characterization of female characters than the differences. Although each narrative grew out of distinctly different countries, the female characters seem bound by a religious devotion that transcends the misogyny of their age. Women in this era were increasingly growing in their religious status as more and more women saints appeared and others devoted their lives to the austerity of an anchoritic life. While antifeminist tracts abounded, female autonomy could be achieved in the religious world. As pious figures, women were connected to both Jesus and the Virgin Mary. Being compared to such religious models sets up feminine Christian experiences as compelling and powerful. It is intriguing to read over feminist religious experiences like that of Julian of Norwich and directly examine the devotional writings of women who occupied a marginal space from the patriarchal forces of the Christian Church. Even more interesting are the fictional texts of the period. I feel that fictional works always convey a deeper sense of the traditions, opinions, and beliefs of their time.

As evident in the stories, each female character's devotion to spirituality gives them a certain power that would be denied to them if they occupied traditional female roles. Perceval's sister, in both Malory and the Vulgate version, is allowed in the presence of men despite direct provisions against women. As a chaste woman and the daughter of a King, she is actually a necessary component to the story. She comes to the men, instructs them, guides them, and, ultimately, saves them. Cundrie and Sigune reject the courtly world for their peripheral positions in the forest. As autonomous figures, they gain great power in a religious sense and are able to teach a valuable moral lesson to the

story's hero. As Heng pointed out, these women are necessary to the ultimate completion of the grail stories. Without Perceval's sister, the sword and scabbard would remain untouched by Galahad. Parzival needs the episodic encounters with Cundrie and Sigune to gain spiritual knowledge so that he may heal the ailing Anfortas and assume his kingship.

The idea of the Grail itself as a holy vessel has obvious feminine overtones. As stated previously, the Grail of Malory and the Vulgate's *Queste* as a cup that was once filled with Jesus' blood has blatant connections to female genitalia. In this respect, the grail becomes a sexualized object that might be considered a desire for the one thing the Grail knights are denied – sexual expression. The Grail cup as vaginal is only one aspect of its feminine appeal. As in Wolfram's *Parzival*, the Grail is a nourishing agent. It provides a Eucharistic experience to those that find it or to those that deserve its sustenance (Sigune). As a nourishing vessel, it can also be considered a nurturing relic. It feeds others as a mother feeds her children and as Jesus feeds his followers with his blood in medieval images.

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