

**The Holy Grail: History, Legend, and Symbol**

**A Paper Delivered to the Quest Club, Fort Wayne, Indiana**

**December 5, 2008**

**by**

**Thomas P. Hansen**

Their conversation was interrupted when a boy entered the hall where Perceval, the castle lord, and everyone were gathered. The boy carried a white lance with a white head. “A drop of blood issued from the tip of the lance’s head, and right down to the boy’s hand this red drop ran.”<sup>1</sup>

Two other boys followed him holding candlesticks of gold inlaid with black enamel that held at least ten candles each. A fair and beautifully adorned girl entered the hall in procession behind the boys holding the grail between her hands.

When she entered holding the grail, so brilliant a light appeared that the candles lost their brightness like the stars or the moon when the sun rises. After her came another girl holding a silver trencher. The grail, which went ahead, was made of fine, pure gold; and in it were set precious stones of many kinds, the richest and most precious in the earth or the sea: those in the grail surpassed all other jewels, without a doubt. They passed before the bed ... and disappeared into another chamber.<sup>2</sup>

They were then served an extravagant feast and at each course the grail passed in procession before them.

This account of a grail procession appears in Chrétien de Troyes’ *Perceval*, written in 1190, and is the original of all subsequent descriptions of the Grail.<sup>3</sup> With it Chrétien opened the floodgates for grail literature to come. Unfortunately, he died before he finished *Perceval*. Four continuations were written with the intent to complete Chrétien’s work and within fifty years several other versions broke upon the scene crossing the cusp of history’s turn from the 12th to the 13th century.

The Grail has taken on many different shades of intrigue over the centuries since that first account. By the beginning of the fourteenth century “there were no less than 20 ‘Holy Grails’ claimed around the Christian world of which several survive today.”<sup>4</sup> The Grail has been identified as a cup that Joseph of Arimathea used to collect blood from the crucified Jesus. One

early 13th century version depicted it as a disembodied head immersed in a bowl of blood, another as a stone or crystal that fell to earth from Satan's crown.<sup>5</sup> In more recent times it has been claimed to be the Ark of the Covenant, and a bloodline that connects Jesus and Mary Magdalene to Merovingian kings. Paramount Pictures released in 2008 the latest installment on Indiana Jones, *Indiana Jones and the Crystal Skull*. Once again the reluctant hero, archaeologist, and university scholar, Indiana Jones, embarks on a quest that leads him to a lost crystal skull, a skull that, when returned to its rightful place, completes the circle of crystal aliens and unifies all knowledge. The final scene is reminiscent of Arthur's roundtable.<sup>6</sup> Shades of Grail images, adventures, and quests, also appear in the J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series. And of course, with its delicate portrayal of the tension that has long existed between the French and English, one epic masterpiece cannot go without mention, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

The last decade has tantalized our imaginations with the mystery of the Grail. Dan Brown gave us a novel, *The DaVinci Code*, that rocketed to the top of the best-seller list and onto the silver screen in 2006. Brown's thriller was fueled by the speculative research of Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln in their 1982 book titled *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*. They explore the idea of an historical Jesus who fathered children and whose bloodline continues to this day.<sup>7</sup> Grail quest narratives since their inception have typically starred an unsuspecting, naive hero with little to no "street smarts" on a dangerous quest that promises a reward in one form or another.

When Grail literature made its entry, Europe was undergoing radical transformation. The climate of northern Europe had warmed between 1100 and 1300. Swampland dried and was

transformed into fertile ground and farming prospered. Vineyards on the continent flourished and wine was produced in quantities that have yet to be exceeded. Trade in Europe before the first Crusade was virtually nonexistent.<sup>8</sup> People were tied to the land with less than 10 percent of the population living in cities. Then came an expansion of trade throughout the continent. Europe's population increased from forty to 60,000,000 people.<sup>9</sup> People moved to the cities, communities sprang up, and guilds of artists, craftsmen, and builders were born; there were also the emerging casts of scribes and knights. The growing numbers of skilled craftsmen, artists, and soldiers gave rise to the bourgeoisies and people gradually gained independence from their feudal lords. Courts of nobility enjoyed great prosperity. They shared their wealth as patrons of the arts, the church, and the crusades. The gradual collapse of the feudal system and the transition from subsistence to abundance resulted in a softened lifestyle. The people of Europe enjoyed more leisure, including the public reading and theatrical performances of prose and poetry.

The church claimed more than a preponderance of influence. It had absolute authority in all matters of church and civil life and took the position that Europe must be Christian or nothing at all. The Pope, as sole master, could threaten excommunication and interdiction, both effective means of bending Kings and rulers to his will. A kingdom or a region under a sentence of interdict would be stripped of all religious ceremony. "The lord responsible for this status could not long hold out when confronted by a population that banded together against him in order to obtain a normal religious life."<sup>10</sup>

A new architecture that introduced the flying buttress and vaulted arch produced great gothic

cathedrals that reached for the heavens, rising to heights never seen before. Cathedral walls were transformed from stone to colored glass. The colored light that streamed through their walls told of the mysteries of the divine as it danced about their interiors. Relics of every kind poured into Europe from the Holy Land. They, like the Grail, were attributed with powers of healing, sustenance, protection, and fertility. By the late 12th century “Transubstantiation”, a theological concept suggesting the real presence of the body and blood of Jesus in sacramental bread and wine, came into wide use “and at the Lateran Council of 1215 belief in Transubstantiation was defined as ‘*de fide*’”, or a matter of the doctrine of faith.<sup>11</sup>

Respect for women of the 12th century, in church and culture, was on the rise. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) helped pave the way. Kings, bishops, and popes sought her advice. Her story is an “account of an irresistible spirit and vibrant intellect overcoming social, physical, cultural, gender barriers... .”<sup>12</sup> Eleanor of Aquitaine had become the most powerful woman the European continent had ever known.<sup>13</sup> By the late 13th century it was understood that women could be doctors of theology “*ex beneficio*”, from the gift of grace, and that women could rule nations. The twelfth century gave birth to an age when feminine influence began to rival that of warrior kings and oppressive papal rule.

In his *History of the Kings of Britain*, Geoffrey of Monmouth completed in 1137 a chronological narrative of the kings of Britain that quickly soared to the top of the 12th century best-seller list. Translations were soon to follow. In 1155 Norman poet Robert Wace completed, in Anglo-Norman, a free and spirited paraphrase of Geoffrey’s work in couplets, titled *Roman de Brut*, (Romance of Brutus) and, like many writers and poets, dedicated it to Eleanor of Aquitaine, the

new Queen of England.<sup>14</sup> A unique contribution to Geoffrey of Monmouth's history was Wace's addition of King Arthur's roundtable. Geoffrey's *History* became the standard reference on British history for over 600 years.<sup>15</sup> Beginning with Homer's *Illiad* and the founding of the British nation it traces their history to the 7th century when the Anglo-Saxons took control. Though it is wildly inaccurate, it introduced non-Welsh speakers to the legend of King Arthur.<sup>16</sup> Prior to Geoffrey's history Arthur is only mentioned as a warrior knight and leader of other warriors.

Theology and the arts, in addition to Geoffrey's history, had become accessible to a broad base of the population.<sup>17</sup> The accessibility of these new sources, coupled with improved economic conditions, a growing mysticism, and the emerging influence of women, set the stage for the birth of a new genre of romance literature that embraced Arthurian Legend and the Holy Grail.

“Literary endeavor in the Middle Ages was essentially an art of imitation. Since little emphasis was placed upon originality, since praise went rather to the combination and interpretation of familiar materials – or stylistic qualities – the author felt free to appropriate whatever themes or episodes that best suited his fundamental conception.”<sup>18</sup> Robert de Boron mastered this art of free appropriation and created a work of genius. Robert likely used Wace's *Brut*, Chrétien's *Perceval*, and possibly the work of a contemporary Welsh Priest, Gerald of Wales, who claimed to have discovered the remains of King Arthur and Guinevere. Robert crafted an Arthurian romance that would become the premier Grail romance around 1194. In it Robert establishes a pre-history of the Grail by linking it to Jesus' last meal, his crucifixion, and to Joseph of Arimathea.<sup>19</sup> Robert's work combined and expanded the apocryphal stories of Joseph, Merlin,

and Perceval in a unified work that enriched the legend of the Grail and ensconced it in the legend of King Arthur and the Round Table. Each piece is remarkably fast moving and together they form a unity of “legend” filled with drama and passion, nearly erotic and comical, written for both the eye and the ear. Robert de Boron’s account of the Grail simply “cries out to be read aloud.”<sup>20</sup>

Chrétien’s text depicts the Grail as some sort of vessel not unlike the one named ‘gradalis’ in Medieval Latin. He refers to this vessel in Old French giving rise to the term ‘gra(d)al’. Robert de Boron’s *Joseph of Arimathea* was the first to specify the Grail as the Chalice of the Last Supper that Joseph filled with blood from the Cross. And he was the first to call the Grail *Holy*.

The most enduring legend of the Grail locates itself in Glastonbury, England. The Glastonbury legend claims that Joseph of Arimathea brought to Glastonbury the cup Jesus used at his last meal and there founded the first church in England. The legend also claims that Mary Magdalene, the Bethany crew, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, and other followers traveled to Glastonbury with Joseph. It purports that upon their arrival Joseph thrust his walking stick into the ground where it was miraculously transformed into a hawthorn tree that would come into full bloom every Christmastide thereafter. To this day a blossomed sprig from the Glastonbury hawthorn is used to decorate the Queen’s breakfast table on Christmas morning. “The (very) first testimony to a link between the Holy Thorn and Joseph comes from 1677, when (a) Dr Plot wrote: ‘Some take it for a miraculous remembrance of the birth of Christ, first planted by Joseph of Arimathea.’”<sup>21</sup>

As noted, Glastonbury had been claimed to be the burial site of King Arthur and his Queen, Guinevere. The first historic record of the “Royal Grave” occurs at about the time Chrétien introduced the grail to his readership. Geoffrey of Monmouth’s history introduced Arthur to the succession of British kings but did not record Arthur’s death, a missing detail that paved the way for a Celtic Arthurian mythology to grow. And grow it did, becoming the hope of a rebellious Celtic fringe that gave Henry and Eleanor great trouble as they sought to unify their domains. Geoffrey records that Arthur went to the mythological Isle of Avalon to recover from his wounds. It was from this account that the hope of Arthur’s return to liberate his people would grow.

There is no verifiable evidence of record that Joseph ever set foot outside the Holy Land.<sup>22</sup> The Abby at Glastonbury possessed a remarkable list of relics, particularly relics associated with Jesus’ passion. Relics purported to be in their possession included pieces of the following objects: part of the table at which Jesus supped with His disciples before his betrayal, the pillar to which Jesus was bound at his scourging, the garment with which Herod clothed Jesus, the sponge from which Jesus drank the wine mingled with myrrh, the other sponge from which He was offered vinegar mixed with gall. There were pieces of the cross, eight portions of Mount Calvary, earth and a stone from where the cross was anchored, a spike from the thorny crown, and six fragments of the Holy Sepulcher!<sup>23</sup> The Glastonbury list makes no mention of a chalice, a dish, cruets of blood, or of the remains of Joseph of Arimathea. Additionally, the medieval Glastonbury monks never officially claimed a connection with the Grail until the 15th century.

The creation of the Glastonbury legend can be attributed to a weaving together of the

fabrications of poets and historians who wrote with the intent to entertain the imaginations of their benefactors and to promote their ambitions. There is also a verifiable history beneath the legend, driven to a considerable degree by the personal ambition of the respected historian Gerald of Wales.

Gerald wrote several volumes including one commissioned by Henry and Eleanor, *Journey through Wales*. He tutored Henry and Eleanor's children, including future kings Richard I and John. Gerald would twice come very near to achieving his life ambition to be Bishop of St. David's in Wales, a position held by his uncle David FitzGerald. He was twice elected to the position. Both elections were denied confirmation, the first refused by Henry II, and the second by the Pope.

Gerald's dream was to become Bishop of St. David's and to bypass Canterbury to be consecrated by the Pope. He "fought for this with great courage and tenacity over the years and refused four Bishoprics during his career in both Ireland and Wales. He chose to remain Archdeacon of Brecon if he could not realize his grand design."<sup>24</sup> In the service of his ambition Gerald unintentionally put Glastonbury Abby on course to become one of the most acclaimed sites of Grail legend.

At King Henry's request and to enter the King's good graces, Gerald established Glastonbury as the burial site of King Arthur and his wife Guinevere by supposedly uncovering their remains in a common grave. This translated Geoffrey of Monmouth's non-geographic mythical Isle of Avalon to Glastonbury, a political coup to say the least. Gerald wrote,

Many tales are told and many legends have been invented about King Arthur and his mysterious ending. In their stupidity the British people maintain he is still alive. Now that the truth is known... . The fairy-tales have been snuffed out, and the true and indubitable facts are made known, so that what really happened must be made crystal clear to all and separated from the myths which have accumulated on the subject.<sup>25</sup>

Gerald successfully smothered the smoldering legend that Arthur lived on, a legend on which the Celtic fringe hung their hopes. Arthur was not going to return one day to lead them to victory over their enemies. Demoralized, the Celts would more easily be brought under the rule of the English crown. The Normans were also pleased by Gerald's find. He had closed the book on Arthur, whose legend had contributed significantly to their national identity and royal pedigree, yet, whose death lay to rest any claim to succession the Celts may have had.

Gerald believed that St. David's Church in Wales was once the seat of an Archbishop. There was also a vague history that would locate Joseph of Arimathea in Glastonbury as the founder of the Church not only in Glastonbury, but the whole of Britain even though Bede, a 7th century monk of Jarrow in Northumberland, was the first to officially record the history of Christianity's arrival in Britain, a history that does not include Joseph. William of Malmesbury, while a guest of the Abby between 1129 and 1135, established from Abby records and recorded in his book *Concerning the Antiquity of Glastonbury*, that two missionaries, Phagan and Deruvian, were sent to the island of Britain at the King's request in the year 167 by Pope Eleutherius to preach the Gospel and that while there, constructed a church in Glastonbury.<sup>26</sup> However, William also alludes to information that pointed to Philip the Apostle who, while on a preaching mission in Gaul in the year 67, sent Joseph to evangelize England. William claimed his sources were vague and difficult to verify, but the mere mention of Joseph made it possible for others to later embellish the legend. William's account would be expanded more fully 100 years later when

Grail romance literature had reached its height in 1230.

This alternate seed of legend, that Joseph brought Christianity to Glastonbury where he and his entourage constructed a church, added fuel to Gerald's ambition. Joseph's arrival would establish Christianity in England one hundred years earlier. If true, then Phagan and Deruvian would have only restored the old waddled church first constructed by Joseph. William of Malmesbury's history does not mention any cups or dinnerware but it fit Gerald's design by offering the possibility that the church in Wales was the first in England. With Joseph's connection to Glastonbury, the Bishop of Wales could be elevated to Archbishop and the see would gain historic precedence over Canterbury and would cease to fall under Canterbury's authority. Further, if the Episcopacy in Wales held origins that predated the founding of the church in Rome it could possibly qualify for competing status with Rome. It is not hard to understand why Henry II and the Pope did not confirm Gerald's elections to the post. Henry's guilt over Thomas Becket's death in 1170 still haunted him. It would have been political suicide for Henry to allow Gerald to achieve his dream since Thomas, Archbishop of Canterbury at the time of his death, was canonized in 1172 making Canterbury a premier international pilgrimage site. Gerald eventually completed his history under Eleanor's regency in 1191, two years after Henry died.<sup>27</sup> Though he never realized his dream, Gerald laid the foundation that writers would build upon to create a legend that linked King Arthur and the Holy Grail.

Medieval Grail literature played on the new theology of transubstantiation. In one account Josephus, claimed by legend to be the first bishop, appears in the context of a Eucharistic celebration where he raises a crying infant from the cup. The infant is miraculously transformed

into the crucified Jesus and then into the Eucharistic host, or bread. However, the literature portrays Grail appearances in royal courts more often than in Eucharistic celebrations. Overall, the Grail serves as a delivery system of the presence of God, a vessel that bridges heaven and earth; a vessel that fulfills dreams and desires, restores wholeness to the land, and sustains a wounded king. Grail literature places the business of spiritual matters and the conveyance of its blessings in the hands of women, the traditional role of a male dominated priesthood. Consistent with troubadour tradition, the knights of the quest, were often more interested in the blessings received from women who responded favorably to their poetry, their songs, and their acts of bravery and chivalry. Though Grail appearances play on the theology of transubstantiation the literature carries the reader beyond accepted Eucharistic symbolism of the time.

Existing speculation on the existence of an actual Grail is nothing but that, speculation, though many people maintain that the true Grail is the remaining remnant of a chewed up wooden bowl brought to Glastonbury by Joseph of Arimathea. This may or may not be true. A legend of Joseph written in 1400 by John of Glastonbury contains no mention of a grail. In the final analysis it can be said that the Glastonbury legend was seeded by William of Malmesbury, embellished by Robert de Boron, and given roots by Gerald of Wales.<sup>28</sup> But who gave life to the legend of the Grail?

Could there be more to the legend of the Grail than meets the eye? Initially I anticipated an exploration of Templar history since they figure so much into what has been written about the grail in our own time. My explorations led to little that was compelling enough to elaborate though this is not to say there is not a lot of intriguing material on the Templars. However, there

are a few personalities that lurk in the background, people who consistently peer from behind the veil of time; the most compelling, Eleanor of Aquitaine.

Eleanor was one of the most influential personalities of the 12th century. Her grandfather, William IX, was the first Troubadour. He was a stormy character, twice excommunicated. One account of William has him charging the Bishop who excommunicated him with a drawn sword threatening to kill the Bishop if he did not absolve him. The Bishop would not budge. William backed off. “I do not love you enough to send you to paradise’, he sneered.’<sup>29</sup> Another account has Eleanor’s father, William X, also excommunicated, overturning an altar almost killing Bernard of Clairvaux, demanding restoration. Eleanor grew up under the influence of these fiery and flamboyant men whose courts always bustled with troubadours who read their poetry and sang their songs of love. Her father also surrounded her with scholars who taught her Latin, history and more.

Having no male heir at the time of his impending death, William entrusted his daughter to King Louis VI of France in 1137, and in the same year Eleanor, then age fifteen, would be wedded to the King’s son who within weeks would be crowned Louis VII of France along with Eleanor as his Queen. At their wedding celebration when Eleanor lavished many valuable gifts upon her guests, she presented her husband with a cut rock crystal and gold vase inlaid with precious jewels. This is Eleanor’s only personal possession that survives. It is currently on display in Paris’s Louvre Museum. The vase was a family heirloom given to her by her father, William X. It had been passed down through Eleanor’s family for generations. Louis would give this precious heirloom to Abbot Sugar. In 1137 Sugar began his renovation of St. Dennis, the old

abbey church in Paris. The renovation was likely funded in part by the resources Eleanor brought into the marriage that same year. The Abby Church was completed in 1144. St. Dennis's renovation was a defining religious and architectural event that gave birth to the new Gothic architecture that would spread like wildfire across Europe.<sup>30</sup> It must have been a sight to behold Eleanor's intricately cut rock crystal and gold vase as it caught the colored light that streamed through the Abbey church's new windows.

Eleanor brought into her marriage vast territories that extended from the Loire to the Pyrenees. Aquitaine was the largest fief in all of Europe, practically a nation in itself. In comparison France was not much more than a culturally desolate island with the exception of its growing university. Eleanor also brought to the French Court a refined appreciation of the arts and a colorful and provocative sense of fashion: extravagant and revealing. Two daughters were born to Louis and Eleanor before their fifteen-year marriage was annulled in 1152 under the rule of consanguinity.<sup>31</sup> Within months Eleanor would marry Henry of Anjou bringing to that marriage the extensive territories reclaimed from Louis in her divorce, along with Aquitaine's troubadour traditions. Two years later Henry would be crowned King of England, Henry II. Their marriage produced five sons and three daughters, their last child born when Eleanor was forty-four.<sup>32</sup>

Henry would engage in an affair with the beautiful young Rosamund Clifford whom many called *The Fair Rosamund*. Eleanor became aware of the affair while she was pregnant with her last child, John. She was devastated so in return Eleanor fostered a revolt against Henry by playing upon her sons' ambitions for power. She also spent more time in Aquitaine overseeing her personal domain. Henry, furious with Eleanor, placed her under house arrest in 1174 where she

remained for fifteen years. He only publicly acknowledged his affair with Rosamund following Eleanor's arrest. Richard I ordered his mother's release immediately upon Henry's death in 1189.

Eleanor would rule the most powerful kingdom in the 12th century following Henry's death. And her influence in the world of literature would continue well beyond the 13th century following her death in 1204. As an enthusiastic patron of the arts she can be credited with shaping the future of the arts and humanities.

Chrétien de Troyes was known in Eleanor's courts and in those of her daughter Marie, Duchess of Champagne, long before he wrote *Perceval*. Philip of Flanders, Chrétien's benefactor, dedicated *Perceval* to Marie, whose court was located in Troyes. Chrétien had served in Marie's court between 1160 and 1172. It is also believed that he performed at Eleanor's courts in Poitiers. Scholars agree that prior to Eleanor's house arrest Eleanor and her daughter Marie dictated their controversial *Treatise on Love and the Remedies of Love* to the cleric and scribe Andrea Capellanus, a contemporary of Chrétien. Capellanus had also been a frequent guest at Eleanor's courts held in Poitiers. "He knew her quite well...(In fact) it is he who mentions the courts of love, those female tribunals of which Eleanor was, both literally and figuratively, the uncontested sovereign."<sup>33</sup> The treatise included 31 codes of conduct for educating her male subjects in the romantic requirements of the newly emancipated woman.<sup>34</sup> Chrétien would have been in close contact if not together with Marie and Eleanor, when working on *Perceval*. Philip of Flanders was off on crusade where he would be killed. So, the infamous question is posed, "What is the meaning of all this?" Could Eleanor's wedding gift to Louis be the vessel described

in Chrétien's *Perceval*, a variant description of the family heirloom that Eleanor had long regretted giving to Louis; a description constructed from the memory of the heirloom housed at St. Dennis', Paris; a vessel that gave off a refracted colored light whose brilliance was such that candles would have lost their brightness like the stars or the moon when the sun rises? Could Chrétien have used this vessel at Eleanor and Marie's request as a model for his depiction of the grail?

Could it be Eleanor, a woman of power and influence, whose daughter held court in Chrétien's Troyes; whose husband commissioned both Robert Wace and Gerald of Wales, men who rewrote the history of Arthur and Guinevere; could it be Eleanor who had close connections with the poets who wrote the Grail romances that made women high priests of the grail; could she be the one who peers from behind the veil of time, who is ultimately responsible for giving life to legend of the Grail? As benefactor, friend, and regent of those who wrote the histories and romances and who with her daughter authored the code of chivalry, it can be concluded with confidence that Eleanor had a hand in the development of Arthurian Grail romance at its foundation.

It was Eleanor, Duchess and Countess, twice Queen and the mother of two kings, who with her vast possessions and royal positions established a domain that reached from the southern border of Scotland to the Pyrenees. Personally, she had no fear looking men of power in the eye and confronting the likes of Bernard of Clairvaux, who was a principal representative of a patriarchal church crippled by its gynophobia; even Bernard of Clairvaux, author and founder of the Templar rule, who once wrote, "to live with a woman without danger is more difficult than

raising the dead to life.”<sup>35</sup> Through the work of poets and of troubadours who pined for her, Eleanor confronted the central problem faced by women of the time who sought freedom to do with their bodies as they chose, who viewed marriage as incompatible with love, an institution designed for the sole purpose of producing heirs and royal bloodlines. Eleanor broke the mold when she married Henry. She married him because she wanted to.

In Eleanor’s unique and colorful world of troubadour tradition, women were the source of inspiration to the knights who longed for a favorable look or gentle touch from their Queen or noblewoman. Rather than the customary harsh rule, this inspired their loyalty to the throne as well as their motivation to perform heroic acts. “Arthurian legend has left us the souvenir of a great lady who was not merely content to rule over her domain but wished to remain the sovereign of the arts and literature of her time.”<sup>36</sup>

“Historical narratives and simple legends about Eleanor stand at the heart of an attempt to restore to the human race something it had lost long before: its female components . . . .”<sup>37</sup> In his final work Chrétien pays tribute to Eleanor through the words of Gawain: who said,

God never made a race or land in which so fair a lady could be found. There has never been a lady of such renown since God formed the first woman from Adam’s rib. And she is justly renowned: for just as a wise teacher teaches little children, so my lady the queen instructs and teaches everyone; all goodness stems and passes down from her. No-one can leave my lady without good guidance. She knows so well each person’s worth, and what she needs to do to please him. No man does any good or honourable deed that he has not learned from my lady. And no man, however unhappy, leaves my lady with his mind still troubled.<sup>38</sup>

Eleanor’s story has grown to the level of myth, perhaps rightly so. When she married Louis she had already received an excellent education. Classes from the overcrowded prestigious

University of Paris would meet in the royal gardens where Eleanor was able to sit in and listen to lectures on debate, rhetoric, church law, Aristotelian logic and other subjects. She could stand face to face with nobility and princes of the church and hold her own in just about any situation at a very young age. She had a formidable intellect and possessed remarkable beauty that remained even after giving birth to ten children and on into her old age. Her intelligence, confidence, and beauty “disturbed” men in power like Bernard of Clairvaux. And Louis? He remained unreasonably in love with Eleanor even after their marriage was over. He was an insanely jealous husband who trusted the rumors and his own suspicions about her.

The silence of women in the past is thick even to the point that we might ask if they ever existed. This is as true in the church as it is in political and social arenas.

Of course, a few have survived in memory, but often these female figures are devalued. Often they are transformed in to *femmes fatales* or ... into symbols of sensuality that pose a danger to the male balance ... . When Cleopatra is mentioned, it is always in the context of her liaisons with Marc Antony and Caesar, and she herself is characterized as flirtatious and vain. When Catherine the Great of Russia is mentioned, it is obviously to condemn her nymphomania. ... (There is always a whiff of scandal that has often relegated women of power to the mythological paradigm of the great prostitute) ..., the divine woman who bestows her power on numerous lovers of her choosing who then execute her supreme desires.<sup>39</sup>

These characterizations have often sought to undermine the influence of women and to diminish their intelligence. The distorted myths about famous women in history often set them up, if not as sexually obsessed individuals, as instruments of perdition of humanity. This is precisely what was attempted by Bernard of Clairvaux who referred to Eleanor as a demon, an agent of Satan. We do not need to look too far to observe this phenomenon today. Regardless of the side of the political aisle we may choose, we only need to revisit Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin’s

campaigns to see how women on the quest for power can be similarly characterized by the media and by their political opposition.

Could it be that no religious system, social or political system, will ever be fully functional until such time the attitude that pervades these systems is overcome, until a time when anima and animas substantially coexist in a co-equal manner, when logic can coexist with intuition; when king and queen can rule side by side? The Grail viewed through the lens of Eleanor's legacy at its origin could very well be the vessel she gave to Louis, a symbol of her youth, her beauty, and her refined upbringing, a gift that she offered to a king when she herself became subjugated as a vessel of royal lineage.

And so it is with Chrétien's grail, a literary device that opened the gates for literature to come: a grail that sustains the wounded king. To conclude I choose to join the long list of those who have speculated over the centuries about this mysterious object by stating that the grail can stand on its own as a symbol of the quest of women who seek to reclaim their dignity and the power to choose their destiny, and as a symbol for those men who choose to join them on this quest.

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<sup>1</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval: The Story of the Grail*, p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 38. Some manuscripts do not identify the trencher as being "silver" as in Bryant's translation. A trencher has been variously described as a wooden plate, bowl, a stale piece of bread used as a place marker at medieval feasts and for dipping in sauces or some kind of knife or serving utensil.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Barber, *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief*, p. 19. "This is not the same as saying that there were no narratives or cults centered on esoteric vessels or other objects (before *Perceval*) for if one chooses to take the matter loosely one can go far beyond Byzantium in space, and if licentiously, as far back in time as the Pharaohs." (Eschenbach, p. 8.)

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Hodapp and Alice Von Kannon, *The Templar Code for Dummies*, p. 231.

<sup>5</sup> Wolfram von Eschenbach wrote a different version of Arthurian/Grail romance. He introduced in *Parzival* a new cast of characters with the exception of *Perceval* and Arthur. More importantly he introduced a different version of the Grail's origin. His grail was a clear stone or crystal that

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fell from Satan's crown, knocked loose in a "heavenly battle." Wolfram's romance points us to the region of southern France, then Aquitaine, where the others point us to England, where Aquitaine's duchess Eleanor ruled as Queen with Henry II. Wolfram's *Parzival* inspired Wagner's 19th century, *Parsifal*. Wagner portrayed the grail as a cup rather than Wolfram's stone or crystal. It was Wagner who inspired Adolf Hitler and the head of Hitler's SS, Heinrich Himmler. Both were both strangely obsessed with the idea of a "pure" Arian Blood and its supernatural power. Wolfram eventually names Chrétien in his text as his inspiration and joins with other authors of the Grail romance.

<sup>6</sup> George Lucas, Jeff Nathanson, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (Paramount Pictures, 2008). Other Indiana Jones adventures include, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), the *Last Crusade* (1989).

<sup>7</sup> The idea of a married messiah is not new and was a well-known legend in France for a number of centuries. The new twist to this legend was the addition of the Priory of Zion accompanied by a claim to "new evidence." In the 1960's Gerard de Sede authored *Le Tresur de Rennes le Chateau*, which included a tale told by Pierre Plantard who claimed he was a descendant of Merovingian kings based upon documents produced in the 1950's. A simple synopsis of this theory may be found in Christopher Hodapp and Alice Von Kannon's *Templar Code for Dummies*, p 243ff. The concept of a married Jesus was reintroduced in 1951 by Niko Kazantzakis', *The Last Temptation of Christ*. *The Last Temptation* is a fascinating fictional depiction of Jesus' dying dream on the cross of being married and having a family. It was adapted for film in 1988 by Martin Scorsese.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Gale Moore, *Climate of Fear: Why We Shouldn't Worry About Global Warming*, p. 49.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 49.

<sup>10</sup> Jean Markale, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Queen of the Troubadours*, p. 94.

<sup>11</sup> F.L. Cross, F.A. Livingstone, eds., *Dictionary of the Christian Church*., "Transubstantiation". p 1390.

<sup>12</sup> Halsall, Paul, ed. *Internet History Sourcebooks Project*, "The Life and Works of Hildegard", (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/med/hildegarde.html>, 1995).

<sup>13</sup> Women who rose to greater power on the mainland following Eleanor include the 18th century reigns of Holy Roman Empress and Queen, Maria Theresa (Germany, Hungary, Croatia and Bohemia. Ruled: 1740-1780) and Catherine the Great of Russia (Ruled: 1762- 1796).

<sup>14</sup> Roger Sherman Loomis, *The Development of Arthurian Legend*, p. 40. Romance does not refer to romantic love but to narrative told in the vernacular, in this case, Norman-French.

<sup>15</sup> By the 13th century Geoffrey's history was also translated into Middle-English verse.

*Britannia History*, "Glastonbury Abby and the Legends of King Arthur and Joseph of Arimathea", <http://www.britannia.com/history/arthur/abbey4.html>.

<sup>16</sup> *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, "Historia Regum Britanniae", [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historia\\_Regum\\_Britanniae](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historia_Regum_Britanniae).

<sup>17</sup> "The use of poetry to express mystical consciousness grew in significance in vernacular theology. ... Latin was at best half-alive in the Middle Ages – never the language of the first acquisition, always bound to a male-dominated cultural elite, and regulated by inherited models of linguistic propriety that made innovation difficult... The vernacular languages that were beginning to become literate in the full sense around 1200, offered, on the contrary, remarkable potential for creative innovation." Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western*

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*Christian Mysticism Vol. III*, “The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism – 1200-1350”, p. 21.

<sup>18</sup> Author Unknown, *The High Book of the Grail*, trans. Nigel Bryant, p. viii.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. viii.

<sup>20</sup> Robert de Boron, *Merlin and the Grail: Joseph of Arimathea, Merlin, Perceval: The Trilogy of Arthurian Romances attributed to Robert de Boron*, trans. Nigel Bryant, p.10.

<sup>21</sup> It is difficult to date literary works from this period unless they can be tied to known and verified historic events. Chretien’s work is variously dated between 1181 and 1190 and Robert de Boron’s work between 1194 and 1204. Loomis’s dating does not contradict our argument: “Robert de Boron writes his *Perceval* around 1202. Wolfram begins *Parzival* in 1204 (the year Eleanor died). The Vulgate cycle is finished by 1230. There is reason to believe that Eleanor of Aquitaine was the patroness of the Vulgate cycle (a large collection of grail romance poems and literature) . . .that was written (in part) or (at least) conceived by Walter Map (another) one of Eleanor's supporters. Wolfram claims his story comes from Provence ("Kyot of Provence") and his grail castle, Munsalvaesche is set in the Pyrenees (within Eleanor’s domain of Aquitaine). . . . Southern France is central to the development of the Grail stories (both geographically and through troubadour tradition).” Roger Sherman Loomis, “*The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol*”, p. 266.

<sup>22</sup> cf. Mark 15:43-47; John 19:33-42.

<sup>23</sup> Roger Sherman Loomis, *The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol*, p. 250.

<sup>24</sup> Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales and The Description of Wales*, trans. Lewis Thorpe, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*. p. 285.

<sup>26</sup> *Britannia History*, “Glastonbury Abby: The Legends of King Arthur and Joseph of Arimathea”, (<http://www.britannia.com/history/arthur/abbey.html>). William wrote much on the lives of saints and, as a librarian, established a reputation as a well-disciplined scholar.

<sup>27</sup> Gerald actually had sealed his dream’s fate 17 years earlier, at the time of Eleanor’s imprisonment, by accusing her of having had a sexual encounter with Henry’s father when she had met him along with Henry in Paris at the time of her and Louis’ annulment hearings.

<sup>28</sup> Scribes, as was often done, would later embellish William of Malmesbury’s brief mention of Joseph. This lent more credence to the legend’s development in the centuries to follow.

<sup>29</sup> Alison Weir, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: By the Wrath of God*, p.13.

<sup>30</sup> Could Eleanor’s vase have been used as such a communion vessel or vial to hold the consecrated communion elements such as those described in Suger’s report on the renovations? Concerning vases Suger wrote, *To me, I confess, it always has seemed right that the most expensive things should be used above all for the administration of the holy eucharist. If golden vessels, vials and mortars were used to collect "the blood of goats or calves or the red heifer, how much more" should gold vases, precious stones and whatever is most valuable among created things be set out with continual reverence and full devotion "to receive the blood of Jesus Christ" (Heb. 9:1 3f). Certainly neither we nor our possessions are fit to perform this function. Even if by a new creation our substance should be changed into that of the holy cherubim and seraphim it would still offer an insufficient and unworthy service for so great and ineffable a victim. Nevertheless, we have such a great propitiation for our sins.*

*Medieval Sourcebook*, “Abbot Suger: On What Was Done in His Administration (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/sugar.html>).

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<sup>31</sup> Marriage had been identified as a sacrament by the church in the middle of the 12th Century. This gave the Magisterium sole authority over the unions between kings and queens and people of noble descent and thus control over the makeup of domains and kingdoms. “The Church, omnipotent in civil matters, strictly prohibited marriage between individuals united by blood ties ... set as the seventh degree of separation.” Jean Markale, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Queen of the Troubadours*, trans. Jon E. Graham, pp. 82-83.

Most nobility in Europe was related within this degree. The church, by identifying marriage as a sacrament, held authority over all marital unions and wielded a heavy hand over political alliances within the continent. Henry and Eleanor married without the Pope’s or Louis’ permission, a king’s permission required within his domain. Moreover, Henry and Eleanor were more closely related than were Louis and Eleanor. Eleanor’s annulment and immediate marriage to Henry scandalized the Europe of 1152. The more probable reasons the church granted the divorce were first, that Eleanor produced no male heirs and second, rumors of adultery on her part convinced authorities that the integrity of the “purity” of descendants to the French throne was threatened.

<sup>32</sup> The notable thing about this marriage was that Henry was 10 years younger than Eleanor then age 30. Over fourteen years she bore five sons and three daughters to that marriage. It was remarkable in that era for a woman to give birth to two healthy children! Eleanor lived well beyond her childbearing years into her eighties.

<sup>33</sup> Jean Markale, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Queen of the Troubadours*, trans. Jon E. Graham, pp. 146-7.

<sup>34</sup> Oddvar Olsen, *The Templar Papers*, p. 79.

<sup>35</sup> Alison Weir, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: By the Wrath of God*, p.30

<sup>36</sup> Jean Markale, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Queen of the Troubadours*, trans. Jon E. Graham, p. 206.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p. 217.

<sup>38</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval: The Story of the Grail*, trans. Nigel Bryant, p. 94.

<sup>39</sup> Jean Markale, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Queen of the Troubadours*, trans. Jon E. Graham, p. 9.

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