

BRIGITTE CAZELLES, *The Unholy Grail: A Social Reading of Chrétien de Troyes's 'Conte du Graal.'* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996. *Figurae: Reading Medieval Culture.* Pp. 325. ISBN:0-8047-2781-4.

The author of a scholarly book on Chrétien's *Conte du Graal* (or *Perceval*) announces in her title that the grail first presented to the world in this Old French poem of c. 1185 is not the holy object that subsequent generations of Arthurian enthusiasts have made it out to be. The title is therefore eye-catching, but in her carefully constructed argument, Brigitte Cazelles also contends in scrupulous detail that Chrétien's text offers us, not an idealized alternative to secular society, but rather a paralyzing picture of the twilight of chivalry, in which two earthly factions, led respectively by King Arthur and the Grail king(s), maneuver for possession of Perceval's allegiance. It is hard to imagine an interpretation of the *Conte du Graal* more radical than this, but Cazelles reassures lovers of Chrétien in these words:

This book represents a modest attempt to offer one possible reading of Chrétien's much read and much interpreted work. Although differing from existing interpretations in its focus on the 'social' implications of Chrétien's narrative, it does not seek so much to replace those earlier views as to supplement them. (p. 18)

Having tried to reread Chrétien's *Perceval* using *The Unholy Grail* as a guide, I must report that the results are disappointing. On the positive side, Cazelles's 'social' emphasis leads to a focus on parts of the poem that I had not read as carefully as I should have, notably the Gauvain sections, which she analyzes with considerable skill. For this she is to be commended. On the other hand, the author's concern with the world of Gauvain absorbs her to the point that she exaggerates its importance, and her interpretation of the poem as a whole suffers accordingly.

A major purpose of Chapter I is to establish the thesis that Perceval's family was among the enemies of Arthur, who was therefore ultimately responsible for the wounding and eventual death of Perceval's father and two brothers. This information might then be used effectively by the Grail faction to persuade Perceval to turn against King Arthur and join the forces of the Grail king(s). But in order to make the case for this interpretation, Cazelles attempts to deny or at least down-play the presence of an Other World journey in the *Conte*, in order to assure us that the geography which she uses to trace Perceval's family history is reliable:

Lack of cartographic consistency and stability also contributes to the apparently magical quality of the Other World in traditional romance. This does not mean, however, that this enigmatic realm serves as a fictional counterpart to the 'reality' of the human, chivalric realm that is the central concern of Arthurian fiction. (p. 42)

She later adds another argument in support of the reality of the Grail castle:

The climactic moment of Perceval's peregrination in the realm of strangeness is his experience of and at the Grail castle, whose inhabitants have the bewildering capacity to appear and disappear at will. Because the scene is narrated from Perceval's standpoint,

the castle's peculiarity informs not the site itself, but the perspective of the *niche* [fool, *i.e.* Perceval]. (p. 54)

My first reaction to this observation was to wonder how anyone could bring him or herself to discount or discredit the luminous power one immediately feels in Chrétien's account of Perceval's visit to the Grail castle. Nor is the effect produced solely by 'magical' description. The most innocent-sounding small talk between Perceval and the Fisher King can be full of meaning:

The youth sat down beside him, and the worthy man said to him: 'Friend, from what part did you come today?'

'Lord,' says he, 'this very morning I moved from Biau-repaire, thus it is named.'

'So help me God,' says the worthy man, 'too great a journey have you made today: you must have moved this morning before the watchman had sounded the horn for dawn.'

'Rather the first hour had already sounded,' says the youth, 'I assure you.' (Linker, p. 67)

It is to be hoped that the reader of this passage can catch the Fisher King's meaning, even if Perceval himself (being a fool) seems at the moment oblivious of the fact that he has entered the Other World. Turning the Grail castle into the headquarters of the anti-Arthurian faction can be achieved only at an unacceptable price.

Meanwhile we are presumably to ignore the evidence of the text itself: that Perceval *thinks* he is near his home in the Welsh forest when he reaches the river where he sees the two men in a boat, while looking for the bridge he crossed, when he had said goodbye to his mother. And on leaving the castle, he *happens* to run into his cousin, who brings him news from home: the death of his mother.

A segment entitled 'Perceval's Grail "Educators" ...' (134-56) treats Perceval's cousin (or foster-sister), the Hideous Damsel who accuses him in Arthur's court, the Hermit who counsels him on Good Friday, and the Grail king(s) (the Fisher King and the Grail King whom he never meets). In order to impose her theory the author must somehow impugn the integrity of these educators: his cousin has sinister motives and actually lies about herself, the Hideous Damsel 'openly contradicts the facts at hand' (144), and the purpose of the Hermit is to persuade Perceval to turn against Arthur and join the forces of the grail faction (145-51). In no case is the evidence for these allegations at all persuasive.

The nearest the author comes to allowing that the Hermit may have had a spiritual purpose in his disclosures is found in her comment on the significance of the Grail king:

...in the course of an unspecified event that appears to have occurred approximately at the time of Perceval's birth ('fifteen years ago'), the old king was inspired to become a spiritual man, so blessed that he has no need for terrestrial nourishment. (p. 162)

She goes on to point out carefully and accurately that the Hermit never speaks of this king as wounded, and even stresses the difference between his food (the Host) and that of the Fisher King (pike, lamprey, or salmon). I waited in vain for her to identify the 'unspecified event' of fifteen years past (the death of Perceval's father), but this is never considered, and for good reason: it would change forever her way of reading the poem.

REVIEWS

Much as I have admired certain features of this book, I must admit that the way in which it interprets the Grail theme is finally unpersuasive. How the author was able to settle on this way of reading the main theme of the *Conte* is difficult to understand. But the consequences of such an interpretation are quite honestly stated by Professor Cazelles on page 226, near the end of her final chapter:

The centrality of the Grail episode in Perceval's story points to its determining role in effecting the transformation of Perceval into an avenger of family and clan. Although the immaterial character of the castle, its mysterious atmosphere, and its fleeting appearance contribute to the dreamlike quality of the episode, these elements undermine its traditional investment as the locus from which a regenerated or religious kind of chivalry will emerge. Beneath the mystical resonance of the Grail adventure in Chrétien's last romance, we hear, loud and clear, the sound and fury of a bad dream.

DAVID C. FOWLER
University of Washington