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MEANINGFUL DEATHS: MARTYRDOM IN LA QUESTE DEL SAINT GRAAL

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Abstract: *The issue of martyrdom in La Queste del Saint Graal can be approached from different perspectives, and one starting point can be the meaning of the concept and how it can be construed in this text. Although in the first Christian centuries the word was usually understood in relation with sufferance and persecution, it was not originally connected necessarily with death. As the meaning shifted, death became a prerequisite of martyrdom, but confessing the Christian faith did not seem to be a condition anymore. This understanding of the term can be used when discussing various events in this 13th-century text.*

The term “martyr” does not appear many times in La Queste, and it often has negative connotations; however, the concept of sacrificing one’s life for others can be encountered several times. Moreover, the characters are aware that such a sacrifice has deep spiritual consequences and it is directly connected with salvation. Although the main protagonists do not suffer martyrdom, they all witnessed Perceval’s sister’s sacrifice, undertaken in order to cure the leprous lady, and they show great respect for her actions and reverence for her body, which is treated as if it were relics.

The author uses Thomas Aquinas’ theology as a reference point for defining martyrdom, which is analysed in connection with the practice of mystical contemplation. Although martyrdom (defined as a person’s death for a charitable cause) is highly esteemed, the text promotes mystical contemplation as the most suitable path towards salvation.

Motto:

The Christian blood you spill is like the seed you sow, it springs from the earth again, and fructifies the more. (Tertullian, Apologeticus, Chapter 50).

Sacrificing one’s life to save others has always been considered a feat of courage and moral strength, and, at the same time, upholding one’s principles as well as asserting one’s faith despite various hardships have been regarded as virtues. The beginning of Christianity is solemnised by the sacrifice of many believers, who placed their faith above their lives and the Church Fathers often spoke about the importance of renouncing one’s will and giving one’s life to Jesus Christ, accomplishing, thus, the desired union with God. Consequently, martyrdom became the ultimate way in which Christians showed their devotion to God and through which they attained sainthood.

In *La Queste del Saint Graal* there are several characters who willingly sacrifice their lives in order to save another person, but, at first glance, their

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submissiveness is not perceived as an extraordinary event which sanctifies them, but rather it is just another adventure pertaining to the Grail quest. Such examples are Sir Calogrenant and an elderly hermit, who save Bors' life, as well as Percival's sister who accepts her death in order to save a leprous lady and indirectly the three Grail knights. It remains to be ascertain if this kind of sacrifice can be regarded as martyrdom, and, furthermore, if the protagonists can be considered saints.

Being a Martyr

The word *martyr* (which has the same form in Latin) comes from the Greek word μάρτυρ (*mártur*) or μάρτυς (*mártus*), and its original meaning is "witness", in other words a person who bears witness. A more precise meaning of the term "martyr" defines a person who asserts the Christian truth and subsequently dies because he/she does not want to give up his/her faith. During Roman times the accepted definition was that a martyr was "anyone who confesses his or her faith openly and dies as a direct result of that confession" (Cunnigham 14). The Christians who suffered martyrdom during the Jewish and Roman persecutions fit this description perfectly, however the term itself was sometimes used about people who were not dead, but were questioned in connection with their faith, which they openly confessed: "prior to the middle of the second century, there is no Christian literature that ever designates the term "martyr" as one who necessarily dies for his beliefs . . . Tertullian¹ is addressing those Christians who are, presumably, going to die; yet he is already referring to them as martyrs" (York 35). In addition there was also the possibility that such a person would recant at the very last moment, and in this case even a martyr (in this definition) might fall from grace (York 36).

Aquinas insists on the importance of death in defining the term, when he states, in *Summa Theologiae*, that "martyrdom consists essentially in standing firmly to truth and justice against the assaults of persecution . . . the perfect notion of martyrdom requires that a man suffers death for Christ's sake" (*Summa Theologiae*, Second Part, Question 124). But, at the same time, he uses the term with a rather loose meaning that connected a virtuous life with a violent death, because "Saint Thomas Aquinas defeated the appellation of martyr for the Holy Innocents and for John the Baptist" (Cunnigham 14) although neither could be considered a Christian confessor of faith. So, in other words the martyrdom need not have been directly related to a confession of faith, but rather to principles that come from a virtuous life and this is the definition that I will use when discussing Percival's sister's death.

An important point to be made is that a Christian's death (and, if it was the case, confession) needs to be public in order to acquire the fullness of its significance, as people will be strengthened in their faith when they witness the determination and serenity of the martyrs who usually acknowledge the divine

¹ For Tertullian, who coined the term confessor, the difference with term martyr is only on the emphasis places either on confession that preceded death or on the torture, suffered by the Christian, and the two terms were often used in similar contexts. Cyprian and other later Church Fathers preserve the difference in meaning better, as he "never applies the term confessor to one who has already died" (York 26-7).

presence before they die. “Martyrdom requires an audience, it needs to be emphasised by retelling and/or interpretation . . . In order for martyrdom to emerge, both the violence and its suffering must be infused with particular meanings” (Castelli 34). It is often said in legends recounting the martyrdom of different influent people, that they were followed by other believers who declared themselves ready to share the same fate in order to partake of the beatitude of Heaven.

There is another aspect worth mentioning that emerges in the stories written about the martyrdom of Christian people, namely the insistence on the persecution² of virgins (beautiful, rich, educated, young maidens) who believe that their faith and implicitly their love for Christ are more important than family, social status, or erotic love. One possible reason for medieval religious writers’ insistence on virginity could be related to their desire to emphasise the difference between laity and clergy, who were, at least in theory, chaste and very often even virgin (both men and women).

This is reinforced by the fact that during the early Middle Ages, “monasteries became the principal centres of cultural production. . . . Indeed by the sixth century the Christian heroine was almost invariably a virgin; what is more, she was almost always a beautiful, young virgin with a distinguished pedigree” (Winstead 9). This is especially true in *La Queste*, since chastity and virginity are constantly praised. In addition, Persival’s sister, whose arrival at the leprous lady castle has been foreseen, is a young noble virgin, and it is precisely because of this, that her sacrifice is requested by the lady’s dependents. That is to say they identify her as the noble/royal virgin whose life can save the lady of the castle, and therefore her sacrifice shapes her identity.

In iconography, the representation of saints is related to the most impressive element(s) in their lives, which, very often, is their martyrdom. The image of a young, innocent, but beautiful, woman suffering an excruciating, but serenely-endured, martyrdom has a strong psychological impact and remains etched in the memories of her fellow citizens. Images such as this dictated the way they were depicted³, namely during their martyrdom, or with the instruments with which they were tortured. The paradoxical situation is that their gruesome martyrdom, which was meant to erase their identity by forcing them to deny their Christian allegiance, is used in icons (or statues) to proclaim the martyrs’ identity, and thus the horrible emblems of their sufferance are used to further assert their triumph.

Talking about martyrdom in *La Queste*

After so detailed a presentation of the concept of martyrdom and its theological importance, it comes as an anti-climax to realise that in *La Queste* the

² In a paradoxical way their martyrdom empowers them because they always have the choice to renounce their faith and to marry, but they exercise their power and determinedly refuse it.

³ For instance there are representations of Saint Cecilia showing her neck wounds, as she died after being struck three times with a sword, and Saint Catherine of Alexandria appears holding a wheel, which, according to the legend, was intended as an object of torture, but it broke when touched by the saint. Male saints are also represented with the instruments of their martyrdom: Saint Bartholomew is carrying, or displaying, his skin (as he was skinned to death), while Saint Sebastian’s body is pierced by arrows.

term as well as the concept (accepting death for upholding Christian principles) are very little used. The word itself (martyrdom, i.e. *martire*, or those derived from it: martyriized, i.e. *martirié*, and martyrs, i.e. *martirs*) can only be found four times. In most of these instances the term is used with the significance of pain, torment and/or extreme anxiety, and thus it has negative connotations. Only in the last situation, when the holy martyrs are mentioned, is the word given its proper and conventional meaning. Since there are only four moments in which it appears, I can discuss them one by one:

When the term is used for the first time, it describes the people's state of unhappiness and apprehension, as well as of sleep deprivation, because they lament the imminence of the knights' departure in the Quest. "En tel duel et en tel *martire* furent toute la nuit li haut baron de laienc et cil del reume de Logres (*La Queste*, 21; Thus racked in mind and spirit did the barons of the household and those of the Kingdom of Logres spend the night, QHG 48) So the meaning of *martire* (martyrdom) is "torment", and it is connected with *duel* (pain).

The same significance can be given to the word in the next occurrence, namely when the wise man warns Perceval not to fall into temptation, because he might be sentenced to hell "ce est en enfer, ou tu soffreras honte et dolor et *martire* autant longuement come la poesté Jhesucrist durra." (*La Queste* 102; ... hell, where you will suffer shame and pain and torment as long as the dominion of Jesus Christ shall last, QHG 122).

The next instance when the word appears is in a derived form: *martirié*, i.e. martyriized. However, the context does not refer to a common form of martyrdom, but on the contrary, Bors refers to the evil knights killed by the three Grail knights, who had to defend themselves when they entered the grounds of a castle. Thus, in this case the meaning of "martyriized" is slaughtered, and it refers to the fate of sinful and evil people. "Certes, fet Boorz, je ne cuit mie que Nostre Sires les amast de riens, qu'il fussent si *martirié* come il sont. (*La Queste*, 230; "In truth" said Bors "it is my firm belief Our Lord cannot have loved these men, for them to be thus slaughtered" QHG, 240). So, in this instance the evil people who were "martyriized" were actually killed without any regards for their identity or the salvation of their souls. It appears that death is not the only punishment, but rather the sufferance is connected with their lack of identity, as they have become just anonymous soulless bodies.

Only in its last occurrence, the term "martyr" can be interpreted in connection with the Kingdom of God. It is used by Galahad, when he describes his mystical experience: Car il avoit devant moi si grant compaignie d'angleres et si grant plenté de choses esperitex que je fusse lors translatez de la terrienne vie en la celestiel, en la joie des glorieus martirs et des amis Nostre Seignor. (*La Queste* 274 ; For so great a host of angels was before me, and such a multitude of heavenly beings, that I was translated in that moment from the earthly plane to the celestial, to the joy of the glorious martyrs and the beloved of Our Lord, QHG 280). The word clearly refers to saints, without any reference to the manner of their death or life. Moreover, it seems to be an appellation that refers to all saints, and all those who rejoice in the love of God.

Therefore, in many instances, the word “martyrdom” seems to be associated with pain torture and death, but not as a beginning towards salvation, but rather it is used to signify unwanted and dramatic events. This may hint to the author’s lack of care or interest in this concept, which is used in a loose sense. When the word is used to designate the saints who live in Heaven in the presence of God, the meaning is rather general and there is no indication that the author refers to a specific interpretation of the word.

The term is never used to mean the killing of a Christian for his confession of faith. However, the selfless actions of some virtuous character, who gives his/her life in order to save someone else, can be interpreted as martyrdom, even though the term itself is not used in such an instance.

The Sacrifice as Martyrdom: Perceval’s Sister

One of the most knowledgeable characters in *La Queste*, Perceval’s sister, explains many aspects of this spiritual endeavour for the benefit of the successful questers, and she is especially helpful on the miraculous ship when she answers questions about the meaning of several objects they encounter. In addition, she provides the belt (made from her own hair) for “the Sword of the Strange Belt”, (i.e. *l’Espee as estranges renges*). She faithfully and modestly accompanies⁴ the three questers and witnesses several miraculous adventures, the last one being the fighting at the Castle of the leprous lady, where she is asked to give her blood in order for the lady to be cured.

Perceval’s sister is not a victim! She has witnessed the valiant knights’ fight for her and she is aware that, she is protected so she does not feel fear or act because of it. On the contrary, it is clearly stated that she is given the choice to refuse the lady’s dependents’ request or to sacrifice herself. She agrees and she allows her blood to be gathered in a bowl, in front of all the inhabitants of the castle in a public dramatic act.

One of the most important aspects of her sacrifice is the Christ-like image that is projected, as she willingly gives her blood (and life), in order to save another woman’s life. “In the loss of her life, she attains a spiritual connection to God” (Lopez 50). So it needs to be emphasised that the way in which her death occurs defines her and shapes her identity, as she is not only the divinely inspired virgin, but also a martyr following Christ’s example.

An essential detail is her awareness regarding the significance of her act, as she expects to be respected and honoured because of her sacrifice: “Par foi, fet ele, se je moroie por ceste garison, ce seroit honors a moi et a tût mon parenté. Et je le doi bien fere, partie por vos et partie por ax.” (*La Queste* 240, “In faith should I die to give her healing; honour would accrue to me and mine. Indeed I must perform this act, in part for them, in part also for you”, QHG 248). Her death will also end the

⁴ It has been said that Perceval’s sister becomes a person with authority: “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” (Lopez 50).

fighting, because the three questers do not have to engage in battle in order to protect her anymore. Undeniably, her actions are admired and appreciated by the questers and all the people, as her body is respectfully displayed in the miraculous ship and later on buried in Sarras into the sacred palace, probably in the chapel (the customary place for burials).

In her study on *Writing as Relic*, Lisa Robeson uses Guibert of Nogent's work *On the Saints and their Relics* (a text which appeared about one hundred years before *La Queste*) as a starting point for analysing the requirements necessary to acknowledge a holy person as a saint. When evaluating the respect paid to Perceval's sister's body after her death: the way she was placed in the boat moved by divine forces and the letter Perceval wrote, Robeson draws the conclusion that the young virgin could be indeed identified as a saint:

This letter provides exactly the information Guibert suggests to authenticate sainthood. Perceval's sister dies because the blood of a virgin was necessary to save a noble woman. Perceval writes a letter containing an account of his sister's parentage, the manner of her death, and her role in aiding the knights in their quest. . . . In short, it includes all the information Guibert specifies. Finally, Lancelot is also provided with the names of living witnesses—Perceval and Galahad—who could confirm the contents of the letter if necessary. (Robeson 440-1)

Therefore, the text can be interpreted as suggesting Perceval's sister's sainthood, because of the miraculous power of her blood (which heals the leprous lady) and because of the knights' reverence to her death. Although she does not die as a direct result of her confession of faith, her death is violent and she is a devoted Christian, who repeatedly shows her insight into divine matters and, thus, she might be regarded as a martyr, since, as stated before, the term *martyr* may refer to Christians who lose their lives because of their devotion to God.

She tells them exactly what to do with her body: "Si fêtes tant por moi et por honor que vos mon cors façoiz enterrer ou paies esperitel", *La Queste*, 241, "bury my body for mine and honour's sake within the spiritual palace" (QHG, 249), and she ends her request by giving instructions to the questers: "Départez vos, fet ele, demain, et aille chascuns sa voie . . . Car ainsi le velt li Hauz Mestres, et por ce le vos mande il par moi, que vos le façoiz ainsi.", *La Queste* 241, "Disperse tomorrow and go your separate ways . . . For such is the Master's will and that is His command to you through me" (QHG 249), showing once again her deep knowledge of divine matters.

Another example of martyrdom is Sir Calogrenant's death, since he dies trying to stop Lionel from killing his brother, Bors, and he is successful in delaying him long enough for Bors to recover. Furthermore, Sir Calogrenant is aware that he risks his life and prays to God to help him, stating clearly his commitment to Christianity in his last words:

diex biax dols peres ihesu crist en qui seruce ie mestoie mis ne mie si dignement comme ie deu[s]se aies merci de' moi & absolues moi en tel maniere que ceste dolours que mes cors souffera [ia pour bien faire] que ce soit penitance & assouagemens a l'ame de moi (si uoirement comme ie por bien et por aumosne le fis

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(*La Queste* 193). “Ah! Gracious Lord Jesus Christ, who didst suffer me to serve Thee in spite of the shortcomings of my service, have mercy on my soul in such a wise that this anguish which my body shall endure in lieu of the good deeds and the almsgiving that I intended, may be accounted to me as a penance and be an easement to this soul of mine. (QHG 204)

It is clear that the valiant knight believes that his painful death could become a way of ascending into Heavens and it can erase his former sins and he prays that it might be considered equal to a lifetime of good deeds and charity. Although Sir Calogrenant is aware that his sacrifice will not turn him into a saint (or martyr), still, he believes that it might be salvific, i.e. he could receive forgiveness for his sins and ultimately salvation.

The hermit, on the other hand, is not given time to confess his Christian faith, or to express his hope that his sacrifice has some redeeming quality, because Lionel slays him without any concern for his person. However, his salvation is not uncertain, since his life was characterised by humility as well as devotion, and it was dedicated to God and to serving his fellows, a fact which is confirmed by his sacrifice.

In all the three examples mentioned before, the sacrifice is willing, public, and the three protagonists are motivated by their devotion to Christian principles, especially love for their fellows and humility in valuing the other person's life more than their own. More importantly, all of them hope to achieve salvation after their untimely death and while Perceval's sister and the hermit could have probably attained salvation because of their pure lives, Sir Calogrenant openly conveys his hopes that his sacrifice will atone for his various sins.

Death as Deliverance: Galahad's Prayer

Every Christian's ultimate purpose in life is salvation, and in order to achieve this it is required for a believer to lead a virtuous life, and to resist temptations. Therefore, salvation is usually the result of a lifetime of prayer and devotion to God, but, when this was not possible, because of the persecutions, Christians were saved through their sufferance and the unjust and unjustified violence done against them. For centuries, before Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, martyrdom had been a way to reach heaven.

However, a totally different way towards salvation is offered by asceticism and spiritual contemplation, and one of the first and most famous promoters of this way of life was Saint Anthony, who chose to live in the desert. It is said that he felt nostalgia after the period of martyrdom and chose to live a hard life in the Desert as an alternative to martyrdom, namely as a way of mortifying his body in order to uplift his soul.

. . . the first condemned Christians were taken away to Alexandria, Anthony hastened to follow them. He himself experienced a longing for martyrdom, for the opportunity to testify with his blood. . . . The ascetic's yearning is understandable only if one has the great faith of an Anthony. His whole life already consisted of dying [to self] in Christ, and so he would have been ready also to imitate his divine

Master totally by giving his life. . . . Anthony realized, no doubt, that he was permitted to long for martyrdom, but could not obtain it by force. (Görg 30-31)

The same reasoning can be applied to Galahad's asceticism and dedication to the Holy Grail. Since Galahad prays several times for death and longs to embrace it, such a desire could be associated with Saint Anthony's longing for martyrdom, and thus his contemplative attitude, which meant completely renouncing his chivalric life, could be interpreted as an alternative to martyrdom, which was not possible for him. The fact that the three successful questers are sent to jail immediately after reaching Sarras, although they are completely innocent, might be interpreted as an act of persecution, which would imply that they suffer unjustly for God's sake. The answer to this unfair human treatment is an endless divine reward, namely the state of bliss in the presence of the Holy Grail, which is a foretaste of heaven.

Galahad, who is praised as being perfectly beautiful and strong, has a heavenly appearance radiating through his face and body, because his soul is entirely pure. Actually it can be said that Galahad followed the four steps of contemplation as explained by Aquinas, namely: moral virtues (as he is always seen as a pure knight), acts of contemplation (as he prays and partakes of the Holy Grail), witnessing the divine effects of contemplation (he has visions, like the one of Jesus Christ as a stag, and he can perform miracles with God's grace) and finally the contemplation of the divine truth itself (when he watches inside the Holy Grail).⁵

As a matter of fact, all the three knights are examples of contemplative attitude, since their regular adoration of the sacred vessel, as well as the frequent sharing of the Holy Communion are means through which they achieve a spiritual union with God, which represents the culmination of a life of virtues and chastity. Although only three knights are successful in their endeavour, all the Arthurian knights had the potential to fulfil this vocation as they all were called to join the Quest, which might hint to an invitation to all believers to embrace such a life of contemplation. Their spiritualised and ritualised way of life is presented as a model, whereas martyrdom remains just an exception.

Conclusions

Perceval's sister's death can be considered a form of martyrdom, and her body is the object of deep respect, if not veneration. Martyrdom may be a way of attaining salvation in spite of any mistakes committed during a person's life, and Sir Calogrenant could be such an example. However, this is not the devotion promoted by the text, which argues for a profound and intense mystical communion with God, mediated through physical objects like the Holy Grail, but which is, ultimately, spiritual and individual.

⁵ "Accordingly it is clear from what has been said ... that four things pertain, in a certain order, to the contemplative life; first, the moral virtues; secondly, other acts exclusive of contemplation; thirdly, contemplation of the divine effects; fourthly, the complement of all which is the contemplation of the divine truth itself" (Summa Theologiae, Part II, Question 180, Art 3).

The three questers suffer persecutions as they are locked for a year in a dungeon, when they arrive at Sarras. Nonetheless, there is no torment or suffering involved, and they lack nothing, since they are blessed by the daily presence of the Holy Grail. On the contrary, their seclusion is a desired situation as it helps them pursue their mystical path. Although Galahad prays for death and he does this repeatedly, there is no hint of pain or torment in his life, which seems secure and tranquil. His death is also a peaceful and calm transition, and is perceived as a reward for his devotion.

Moreover, it can be said that the text contrasts Galahad's asceticism and spiritual contemplation with martyrdom; and the mystical contemplation is more profound because it is more long-lasting and it offers a perfect way towards salvation, as it is superior to any other way of life or death. The ultimate philosophy of the text is that intense mystical union with God should be the aim of Christian life, whereas other forms of devotion, like martyrdom or even a long life of charity and performing good deeds can only have the second place in importance.

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