

Monica Oancă*

**ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS OF
IMAGINARY VISIONS IN
LA QUESTE DEL SAINT GRAAL:
BORS' VISION OF THE WHITE AND THE BLACK BIRDS**

Keywords: *Arthurian literature; mystical theology; Thomas Aquinas.*

Abstract: *As a mystical text, La Queste del Saint Graal abounds in events with ambiguous meanings which can only be deciphered by a person who understands God's visions, namely a priest, a hermit or a nun. Some of these events are actually "visions", which can differ in form, and the most common are those defined by Thomas Aquinas' phrase: imaginarias visiones. The significance of these "imaginary visions" may often be multi-layered, and in La Queste the anticipation of their meaning creates the suspense which is part of the appeal of the story.*

However, the ambiguity of an interpretation might be disturbing and this is the case of Bors' vision of the two birds, one white and one black, which is explained in two completely different ways. I will study this senefiance – which is the original French term used to designate these visions – in La Queste del Saint Graal and in Mallory's text Le Morte Dartur, and I will try to ascertain the difference in the two presentations and the significance of these alterations.

Mystical Visions – A Warning or a Means of Conveying the Will of God?

The first aspect to be considered when discussing the visions received by the questers is the fact that there are different types of such revelations and they can be categorised starting from Saint Bernard's ideas presented by Étienne Gilson in his article "La mystique de la grâce dans *La Queste del Saint Graal*":

Bernard distingue en effet les révélations divines qui se font par des songes, celles qui se font par des visions, et celles qui s'adressent à la pensée pure. Les deux premiers genres sont déjà de hautes prérogatives mystiques, mais restent d'ordre inférieur au dernier¹ (Gilson 322).

This idea, that divine revelations are offered in different degrees through dreams, visions and directly into the pure intellect, is clearly observed in *La Queste*, as questers without a profound spiritual life (like Gawain and Hector) receive

* University of Bucharest; Romania.

¹ Bernard distinguishes in fact between the divine revelations which are made through dreams, those which are made through visions and those which address the pure intellect. The first two types are already high mystical prerogatives, but are placed on an inferior level in comparison with the last (my translation).

revelations only in their sleep.² The visions that form this first type often have the purpose of guiding/warning the knights who mistake the quest for an ordinary adventure and apply mundane rules to their journey. These unsuccessful knights are asked to comply with a new set of rules and a different lifestyle, and are taught how to behave through these dreams, which are always correctly interpreted by priests or hermits. At the same time, because of their disinterest in a deep spiritual life, they are unable to recognise the real adventures of the Grail, of which the *senefiances* are the most significant, and thus they complain that they do not encounter meaningful events.

Perceval and Bors, on the other hand, are faced with various tests and tribulations and receive vivid dreams and visions.³ Perceval is very close to fall into temptation at least twice and is saved at the very last moment by the sign of the cross (he crosses himself⁴ and the devilish illusions disappear). Equally, the illusions that plague Bors vanish when he crosses himself. Bors' revelation of the two birds: white and black, although received in a dream, is not less important than other visions. But the really unique revelation is ineffable and it changes the human being so deeply that he cannot return to his ordinary life. It is the one given to Galahad when he looked inside the Grail, and it had such a powerful reverberation that it became possible for him to ascend to Heaven.

Aquinas mentions the term '*imaginarias visiones*' when he defines the revelations received by prophets, and it refers to various truths presented in a veiled way – so it has no connection with the idea of fantastic imagination. The visions often represent a high mode of prophecy, and they are mental images which appear before a person's eyes or inside a person's mind as a result of divine influence. Therefore, Aquinas' phrase, '*imaginarias visiones*', may be used to describe the visions/revelations received by all the knights in *La Queste* as they often have a prophetic meaning, foretelling their personal success, or failure in the Quest, or other events that occur during the Quest.

Moreover, Aquinas differentiates between various degrees of prophecy, and mentions firstly visions which appear in front of people's eyes ("imaginary visions"). Such a revelation is given to someone "who needs to be taken by the hand and helped by means of examples taken from objects of the senses" (S.T., 2nd Part of the 2nd Part, Q.174, Art.2). Ordinary people cannot perceive the work of God around them and need to be sensitised through such visions, but the goal is not reached unless these visions are also explained to them. Secondly, the 'intellectual vision',

² For instance, while sleeping in a chapel they received some prophetic dreams (which refer to the general story of the Quest and to Hector's personal failure to fulfil it).

³ The vision of Christ coming out of the chalice at Corbenic Castle, witnessed by the twelve knights (the three questers included) is of a higher level than the dreams, however it is still a vision and it is not of a different nature than all the others received by the questers.

⁴ He crosses himself in awe when he is afraid of the devilish horse which prepares to make a treacherous jump over the river (with the probable intent of killing him) and later on when he sees his sword in the temptress's tent. The sign of the cross is salvific because the devilish illusions disappear once the protagonists perform it.

which is more valuable and represents “the bare contemplation of the truth itself”⁵ and this could be associated with a mystical revelation, when the understanding of God’s spiritual or transcendental reality is possible without the mediation of figurative images. Galahad’s experience of looking inside the Holy Grail can be associated with such an event, since he is inwardly changed.

Thirdly, Aquinas remarks on the importance of ‘intellectual light’, by which he refers to the gift of understanding the signs sent by God; in other words, the ability to decipher the “imaginary visions”, a gift which might be considered even more important than receiving divine visions (S.T. 2nd Part of the 2nd Part, Q 174, Art.3). Such a gift is bestowed only on those who live in meditation and dedicate their lives to God, i.e. hermits, priests, nuns, etc. It is this ‘intellectual light’ which all the knights lack and which is supplied by the intervention of the priests and/or hermits.

Most importantly, Aquinas’ concept does not allow for any degree of ambiguity or falsity (S.T. 2nd Part of 2nd Part, Q. 170, Art. 6). Thus, according to Aquinas, there can be no alternative interpretation of a vision, on the contrary, as the divine truth is unique, so is the meaning of any vision. However, if any degree of ambiguity is found, it is a devilish temptation, since the devil, also, can send images to tempt and deceive people.

Beside the visions experienced by the three companions in which the truth is presented through symbols, which need deciphering, in *La Queste*, the knights encounter another situation, when they live “an experience during which the individual has access to a reality which is beyond the normal reach of man’s senses... It is this ‘*veraie semblance*’ that the assembled knights are permitted to see during the mass at Corbenic” (Matarasso 163). The equivalent of such a vision is the *Transfiguration*; i.e. for a short period of time the ordinary world is transparent to the divine reality which always lies within it. This instance clearly proves the fact that reality is always far more than what ordinary people can see; moreover, even true believers are often unable to comprehend its ‘true face’ because of their own limited spiritual depth. So the intervention of priests (or saintly people) is necessary as mediators who have the insight to explain the hidden meaning of the real events that occur before their eyes. Perhaps this is the most surprising part of the hermits’ work of interpreting, when they assign heavenly connotation to earthly events.

Therefore, various theories can be used in order to analyse the origin and the purpose, as well as the significance of the divinely sent visions in *La Queste*. However, when some visions seem to have alternative meanings, great caution must be exercised, because ambiguity and uncertainty are the work of the devil, and if some visions or events may seem to have various different interpretations, it might mean that some explanations are maliciously misleading, and strong, unwavering faith is necessary in order to discern the truth.

⁵ “The prophecy whereby a supernatural truth is seen by intellectual vision, is more excellent than that in which a supernatural truth is manifested by means of the similitudes of corporeal things in the imaginary visions” (Second Part of the Second Part, Question 174: *Of the Division of Prophecy*, Article 2 “Whether the prophecy which is accompanied by intellective and imaginative vision ...”).

Bors' Dream Vision: *La Queste* vs *Le Morte Darthur*

The starting point of this analysis is the fact that all the important plot lines regarding Bors' vision of the two birds are found in both texts: the French *La Queste* and Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. While in a young lady's castle, Bors dreams two different visions/ revelations. In the first one he sees two birds, each pleading with him to serve and obey her, the white bird offers him riches and the black one warns him that its blackness is more valuable than the other's whiteness. The second vision is independent from the first one and its meaning is more mundane.⁶

Despite being just a dream, the vision of the two birds has a profound significance and should be treated as an 'imaginary vision' according to Aquinas' definition, and as it is delivered in a dream, it belongs to the first level of Saint Bernard's classification. There is a slight difference between the renderings of this dream in the two texts, namely in *La Queste* Bors addresses the white bird, asking it to reveal its identity, but the white bird's answer is a repetition of the original boast with its beauty. The dialogue makes the scene more vivid, as it shows Bors' effort to understand the significance of the revelation. However, he is confused and in need of guidance.

The story of the young lady who is Bors' hostess is also relevant, as she had been given lands by a king, but was subsequently unjustly dispossessed by her older sister, and she asks Bors to help her claim back what was rightfully hers. Naturally, he complies with her request and defeats the older lady's champion, confirming and securing, thus, his hostess' supremacy.

Bors leaves and meets a false priest⁷ who deceitfully interprets his vision as an invitation to compromise his chastity.⁸ The test occurs in a beautiful proud lady's castle, who is very amorous and deferential towards Bors, but soon threatens to kill herself (and other young ladies follow her suit), because he will not reciprocate her affection. Despite his willingness to help and serve the lady, Bors cannot break his principles and he is adamant in his refusal to comply with the lady's dishonest request. While the ladies throw themselves from the high tower, Bors crosses himself in horror and instantly the lady, her attendants, her tower, and the fiendish priest all vanish in howling smoke. The sign of the cross is salvific now, as it has been in other several instances before.

The lady does not, in fact, have a real identity, she is just a vision, sent by the devil, and her presence could be analysed in contrast with the good lady in

⁶ There are, actually, two scenes on either side of a chair: on the left side, a worm-eaten trunk of a tree (representing his sinful unrepentant brother, who is irremediably lost) and on the right side two lilies which are inwardly pure and need saving (signifying two young people whose souls are in danger because, in a moment of recklessness, the man wants to rape the young lady and as Bors helps the young lady, the young man repents and the subsequent conflict is avoided).

⁷ li anemis t'aparut en semblance d'ome de religio, *La Queste*, 186.

⁸ While the white bird is a beautiful lady, the black bird is interpreted as being the sin of rejecting the lady, which would have dire consequences. Lancelot's life is threatened, as it appears that he would be killed by the rejected lady's relatives, if Bors does not comply with the lady's desires.

whose castle Bors received the vision of the two birds: They both treated him very well and demanded services from him. But, while the former was honest and the knight could comply with her request, the latter was just a temptation. Bors' limitation is visible in the fact that, at first, he does not recognise the difference, and he treats the illusory lady the same as the real one, but, unintentionally (or not), he applies the test of the cross, and the demonic temptation disappears.

When comparing the French *La Queste* with Malory's text, one can see that the stories run along the same lines, but the prayer which Bors says in *La Queste* before going to sleep in the young lady's castle, a practice which is meant to stress Bors' adherence to the ritual of prayers as it was promoted by the Church, is missing in *Le Morte*. Another detail missing from *Le Morte* is the interference of the demonic lady's attendants (both men and women), who add their supplications to hers and whose beseeching arguments are quite passionate. Malory seems to be interested in simplifying the story, by eliminating several fragments which contain details (like prayers or dialogues), a fact which makes the story more fluid. However, one cannot escape the feeling that a certain degree of theatricality is lost in Malory's more direct approach.

After this horrendous experience, Bors is finally guided towards an abbey, where a real priest explains the hidden meaning of all his visions and reveals that the proud white bird is a representation of the Old Law and the Devil, as it symbolises hypocrisy, whereas the humble black bird symbolises the New Law, and the Holy Church, and it is black because it is in mourning due to people's sins and neglect of religious duties. At the same time black is also a sign of modesty and lack of pride, contrary to the white swan's whiteness. Therefore in the correct interpretation of the vision, one can witness a reversal of the white-black symbolism, as it appears in the rest of the work. It is actually the only instance when white has negative connotations in *La Queste* (Oanca, 129). It is important to point out that this final explanation is rendered in Malory's text with all the details that can be found in the French text. One can see how in *Le Morte* the elucidation of the mystery of the vision is treated with utmost care and the logical connection between vision and explanation is emphasised.

Moreover, the cleric also reveals that the young lady (in whose castle the vision was revealed to Bors) symbolises the Holy Church, whereas her older sister, who attempted to dispossess her of what the King (God) had given to her, signifies the Old Law. The interpretation of the two birds as an opposition between the Old (imperfect) Law and the New (Christian and complete) Law, which has to be followed and obeyed, is not unexpected, but when the two sisters, who have a clear worldly identity, are similarly interpreted, the reader is taken aback, because reality becomes subject to metaphorical interpretation, in the same style as are the visions.

Alternative/Veiled Significance of Reality

One unifying aspect of all the visions received by the questers is that regardless of the spiritual level of the recipient, all the revelations require an explanation, and none of the knights is able to understand them without the mediation of a cleric. The need for interpretation is specific to mystical experiences

as pointed out by Evelyn Underhill, who considers that “Visions and voices, then, may stand in the same relation to the mystic as pictures, poems, and musical compositions stand to the great painter, poet, musician. In both types there is a constant and involuntary work of translation (*i. e. interpretation*) going on, by which reality is interpreted in the terms of appearance” (*Mysticism* p. 251).

When reading Aquinas’ description, one realises that since neither of the questers is able to interpret his dreams (or visions) by himself, it seems that none possesses the “intellectual light”, in Aquinas’ definition, and thus they cannot see the truth directly. Although this might seem as a limitation one can also regard it as a way of integration into the Church, as these moments when the visions are explained are actually the only ones when they talk with the official members of the Church. While isolation is fruitful for introspection and mystical devotion, the believers also need the sanction of the Church for their endeavours, and this is obtained when they discuss their divine visions with various clerics. Furthermore, these conversations are usually followed or preceded by the participation in the Holy Mass and by the partaking of the Holy Communion, which represent the complete adherence to the life of the Church.

However real these visions are, they are still appearances. Actually, the greatest danger of receiving and interpreting visions is that they could be accepted instead of reality, and thus one can miss the reality that moves in front of him. The lady that tempts Perceval on an island is just a vision, as is the one tempting Bors, and these two events could also be compared and contrasted. Both knights should have known that what they see might not be real, but just a test, as Perceval had been warned that the island is a testing ground and Bors had been told that the lady was only interested in physical love, and yet they, both, believed that the visions were real. One essential aspect of these visions is their origin, as it is obvious that ‘imaginary visions’ need not come only from God, and the two temptresses are such examples of illusory imaginary visions sent by the devil.

The dream of the two birds was received while sleeping inside the young lady’s castle has a divine origin, though; and it must be interpreted in a symmetrical construction, so the fact that for the false priest one bird was a person (the white bird was ‘the gentlewoman’) and the other one a sin, was a clear indication that his interpretation was incorrect. The right interpretation, provided by a monk, namely the two birds are the Old and the New Law, focuses on the connection between them. Therefore, the black bird is associated with the Christian law, which is also represented by the young lady who is supported by Bors and in whose castle he received the vision. At the same time, symmetrically, the white bird is a symbol of the vain and proud Old Law, which is also represented by the older sister who has dispossessed the young lady of her lands. The white one comes first (the Old Law of the Old Testament) and then the black one (which stands for the New Testament/Law), so the chronological order is also respected.

This association, of the young lady for whom Bors fights with the New Law, whereas her older sister, who is defeated, is regarded as a representation of the Old Law exemplifies an opposite (or complementary) movement, namely real events are symbolically interpreted to emphasise (or to exemplify) spiritual meanings. Although they are metaphorically interpreted, the text makes it clear that the ladies

are real landowners in the world of *La Queste* and the symbolic significance of their fight (as well as their very persons) does not infringe on their physical identity. Both of them are real people with a terrestrial identity and not visions. There are also other instances when real events are given a spiritual symbolism⁹ despite the fact that they are not revelations (or visions).

When considering this double movement: finding an explanation for a vision in the real world and finding a spiritual hidden meaning in a real event, one can see that the role of visions in general in the fabric of the text is not simply to warn the quester about his inauspicious future or to show him what God's will is, but rather through these visions the recipient is made aware that the world around him is subject to the divine will and that every single detail that he can notice is a carrier of profound spiritual meaning, as it was caused by God, just like the visions.

However, in order to understand it, the quester must be always tuned to these divine signs. This state of constant awareness could be correlated with the Greek term: *nepsis* (or *nipsis*; νῆψις) which is a state of watchfulness or sobriety developed through a long period of purification and abstinence (for instance a fasting period). This acquired state of vigilance and awareness/awakeness defines the steadfast successful questers and becomes a condition for understanding the hidden significance of everything they witness.

Therefore the real world of *La Queste* should also be interpreted both in the literal sense (physical reality as such) and also the spiritual one (which is the allegorical interpretation). So not only the text (i.e. *la Queste* or *Le Morte*), but the physical reality – as perceived in both these two texts – is subject to interpretation.

In other words the quester has to be extremely careful about all the details around him because not only the visions, but also physical reality is permeated with divine rationalities and almost all events that he witnesses have a deep spiritual significance. People in general and questers in particular should see the world in constant connection with God and their understanding of it should be mediated by their own personal connection with God. Only in such a way they can comprehend its divine design and perceive its distinct brilliance beyond its appearance, which becomes transparent to God's grace.

Conclusions

Although apparently there might be alternative interpretations, the visions in *La Queste* (and consequently in *La Morte*) have only one fixed meaning, and they cannot be assigned a different significance. Unlike modern texts, *La Queste* does not encourage several valid interpretations of the visions, but rather they are explained by clerics in the correct way, whereas the other version(s) are demonic and wrong.

⁹ The same is clearly said about the knights engaging in the tournament witnessed by Lancelot, between the white and the black knights, who symbolise the angels and the demons, according to the hermit's interpretation. It is a real event with physical causes, but at the same time it is a *senefiance de Jhesucrist* and it has a symbolic significance: "Et neporquant sanz faillance nule et sanz point de decevement estoit li tornoicmenz de chevaliers terriens; car assez i avoit greignor senefiance qu'il meismes n'i entendoient" (*La Queste* 143, "The jousting, however, without any question or deception, took place between mortal knights, who themselves were far from realizing its full significance" (QHG, 158).

However, one important significance of the activity of interpreting the visions is to make the reader aware that reality is more than what one can see with his/her eyes, and a wise person must look beyond physical reality. The language of *La Queste* is a language of signs, and not only the dreams/visions need deciphering, but also the events occurring in real life. This understanding of reality is not restricted to the monastic environment (i.e. *La Queste*), but it is also shared by the lay aristocracy (i.e. *Le Morte*).

Life around us is not a vision. It is real, physical, it has a social conventional mundane identity, however it is still made (and controlled) by God, just like visions are. Thus, it should be interpreted metaphorically and symbolically just like a vision.

There are endless studies in which reality is described as a text with several layers of interpretations and the reasons for which a person acted or reacted in a certain way can be interpreted logically as a conscious action or psychologically as an unconscious reaction. I would like to add another dimension to this post-modern approach, namely the theological perspective that the world around us works according to God's plan and the closer a person is to God, the better he/she can understand the spiritual threads that connect everything in nature, all human beings with God and also with one another. Such a theological perspective can be used to ascertain the spiritual hidden meanings of any event occurring in the physical world.

Works Cited

- ***. *La Queste del Saint Graal*, ed. A. Pauphilet, Paris: Champion, 1923. (abbreviated as *La Queste*).
- ***. *The Quest of the Holy Grail*. London: Penguin Books, 1969. (abbreviated as QHG).
- Sir Thomas Malory. *Le Morte Darthur*. Edited and Abridged with an Introduction and Notes by Helen Cooper. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. (abbreviated as *Le Morte*).
- Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologiae*.
<http://www.newadvent.org/summa/index.html>, Accessed 19.10.2017.
- Field, Rosalind. ed. *Christianity and Romance in Medieval England*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010.
- Gilson Étienne. "La mystique de la grâce dans La Queste del Saint Graal". *Romania* 51 (1925): 321-347.
- Kennedy Elspeth. "The Making of the Lancelot-Grail Cycle". *A Companion to the Lancelot-Grail Cycle*. Ed Carol Dover. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003. 13-22.
- Keskiaho, Jesse. *Dreams and Visions in the Early Middle Ages: The Reception and Use of Patristic Ideas, 400–900* (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, New Series, 99). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2015.
- Lynch, Kathryn. *The High Medieval Dream Vision: Poetry, Philosophy, and Literary Form*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988.
- Matarasso, Pauline, *The Redemption of Chivalry. A Study of the Queste del saint Graal*, Genève: Librairie Droz, 1979.

Truth(s) and Alternative Facts

- Oancă, Monica. "Identity between Black and White: Famous and Anonymous in la Queste del Saint Graal". *Între alb și negru: Culorile în simbolică medieval*. Bucharest: University of Bucharest Press, 2018. 127-136.
- Sullivan, Charles A., "Thomas Aquinas on the Prophet and *Imaginary Visions*". April 7, 2011. <https://charlesasullivan.com/2242/thomas-aquinas-on-the-prophet-and-imaginary-visions/>, accessed, 11.04. 2018.
- Underhill, Evelyn. *Mysticism: A Study in Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*. Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/underhill/mysticism.pdf?membership_type=b10f8d8331236b8b61aa39bc6f86075c12d7e005>.
- Williams, Andrea M.L. *The Adventures of the Holy Grail: A Study of La Queste del Saint Graal*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2001.