

rthurian studies lix

THE GRAIL LEGEND
IN MODERN LITERATURE

John B. Marino

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D. S. BREWER

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Introduction

Popular Culture and Grail Scholarship

"The Grail story is a good story. Granted. But it's a dangerous story. It could get out of hand," says the editor of a newspaper in Naomi Mitchison's *To the Chapel Perilous* (56). The Holy Grail legend has indeed gotten out of hand if one adds up the number both of medieval Grail texts and of adaptations written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The same can be said of the Arthurian material as a whole, which is continually being rewritten at an incredible rate. The legend shows no signs of being exhausted, as new Grail texts are always being written. The legend's popularity continues in novels, poetry and now film. The last named medium is now the most powerful way of getting the legend out to the public, and the screen has indirectly exposed a wide audience to the main trends in Arthurian scholarship and nineteenth- and twentieth-century transformations of the Grail; indeed the Arthurian legends as a whole have been a popular subject of film, and this is made evident by the scholarship of Kevin J. Harty.¹ Film reveals the popular views of the Grail, and so popular is the Grail it must be a "good story."

A close look at some of these films reveals the way that trends in Arthurian scholarship reach the public audience, whether or not that audience is aware of the presence of scholarly trends in the films. A wide audience familiar with a Christian Grail is exposed to a pagan Grail, a metaphorical Grail and an esoteric occult Grail through Arthurian films. One prominent example, John Boorman's film *Excalibur* (1981), begins when Britain is a wasteland without a proper king. Contestants for the throne try to draw the famous sword from a stone while a holy man prays, "God, send us a true king. We aren't worthy, but the land bleeds, the people suffer, we have sinned." Young Arthur, of course, draws the sword and is declared king, not without some dissent, and begins his lessons from Merlin. When he asks the meaning of kingship, he is told, "You will be the land and the land will be you. If you fail, the land will perish. As you thrive, the land will blossom." Arthur unites the people, and he has a glorious reign – until he finds Lancelot and Guenevere naked in the forest and drives Excalibur into the ground between them, simultaneously wounding Merlin's power and leaving his own, which comes from the sword. Lancelot laments, "The king without a sword. The land without a king." The court is then besieged by Morgana's witchery and Mordred's attacks, and the

¹ Harty, ed. *Cinema Arthuriana: Essays on Arthurian Film* (1991); ed., *King Arthur on Film: New Essays on Arthurian Cinema* (1999); *The Reel Middle Ages: American Western and Eastern European, Middle Eastern, and Asian Films about Medieval Europe* (1999); ed., *Cinema Arthuriana: Twenty Essays* (2002).

people die of famine and plague. Arthur is ill and impotent in his kingship and tells his knights, "We must find what was lost, the Grail. Only the Grail can restore leaf and flower." In the end, only Perceval remains and, in a vision, he enters Camelot and is asked "What is the secret of the Grail? Whom does it serve?" He flees, but in his second vision he answers, "You, my lord." The voice questions further, "Who am I?", to which he responds, "You are my lord and king. You are Arthur." Behind the apparition of the Grail appears Arthur, as if the king and the Grail are essentially the same. The voice asks, "Have you found the secret that I have lost?" He answers, "Yes. You and the land are one." He then takes the Grail to Arthur, instantly rejuvenates him with a drink, and tells him the secret of the Grail, "You and the land are one." The king rides out to battle Mordred, and the land blossoms when he passes.

The credits of the film claim Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* as the source, but scholar Jessie Weston's study *From Ritual to Romance* should be given most of the credit for Boorman's version of the story (Shictman, "Hollywood's" 41–44; Umland and Umland 141). Inspired by mythographer James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, Weston claims the Grail, traditionally interpreted as the cup Christ used at the Last Supper, was originally part of a pagan fertility myth connecting the prosperity of the land and the health of its king, who is known as the "Fisher King" in the Arthurian texts. When the king is wounded the land is blighted, a wasteland, and healing only comes by way of a quester who asks what ails him and steps in as the new king. Boorman's audience, then, encounters a more pagan kind of Grail, rather than the Christian relic well-known from Malory.

In fact, Boorman uses this theory of the pagan origin of the Grail to synthesize Arthurian texts both medieval and modern, including Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* and T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*. The structure of the film, which changes the order of events and some characters' roles from the way they are in Malory's version, demonstrates Boorman's attempt to reconcile many versions of the story by attaching Weston's ideas to the sword Excalibur. The film begins and ends with the chaos of war, the land initially divided with Uther fighting to become the one king and finally Arthur fighting against Mordred when the kingdom is again split. Boorman introduces the sword immediately, and makes Excalibur and the sword in the stone one and the same. Uther gets the sword from the Lady of the Lake, with Merlin's help, and uses it to unite the people. (It is said to have been forged when nature and humanity were one and death a dream, but without death then why a sword?) The sword unites the king with the land and puts its underlying supernatural power at his disposal. Uther shoves it into the stone, and Arthur later pulls it out to prove himself the chosen one. The film ends with Arthur having Perceval, instead of Malory's Bedivere, throw the sword back to the Lady of the Lake. In this way, the sword is a framing device.

Boorman connects the sword and the adulterous affair to the Fisher King and wasteland motifs he adopts from Weston. He refers to the power of the land as "The Dragon" (which may be associated with the king or "Pendragon") and Merlin works his magic by calling on the power of this Dragon. Merlin is, then, tied to the wasteland myth. Also, Excalibur is part of the Dragon. So Boorman weaves the narrative threads together and rearranges them under the central Westonian/Frazerian motif. In a cave called "The Coils of the Dragon," Merlin threatens

Morgana with the glowing “eyes of the Dragon” in his face, and at the same moment Arthur finds Lancelot and Guenevere together in the forest. When the king stabs the sword into the land, Merlin is simultaneously run through with it and imprisoned by Morgana in the cave. The adulterous lovers wake up, see the discarded sword and mourn the separation of king, sword and land. The same night Morgana seduces Arthur to beget Mordred, and later her witchery and Mordred’s attacks devastate the land and its people. Then Arthur sends his knights for the Grail. The affair, the disappearance of Merlin, and the attacks of Morgana and Mordred all become parts of the central wasteland motif. Boorman accomplishes this by moving the discovery of the affair and the war against Mordred from their positions after the quest in Malory’s text. Malory, however, lets the Grail quest be virtually forgotten before he focuses on the tragic love affair and its role in the downfall of Camelot. Boorman hints at his connection of the affair and the quest early on when Lancelot first shows up with images of the Grail on his breastplate and shield.

In order to further unite the affair and the quest, the character of Galahad is thrown out and some aspects of his quest are transferred to the quest of Perceval, who is the main Grail knight in the film. On one hand, this may be a wise choice because the modern audience can more easily identify with Perceval’s coming-of-age story than with an excessively pious Galahad. On the other hand, the audience knows the story mostly through Malory, whether directly or indirectly, and may expect Galahad. Either way, Boorman prefers the Perceval quest because it is most instrumental to Weston’s fertility myth theory. So he puts Perceval to work by making him fill in for several of Malory’s characters. The accusation of Guenevere as an adulteress occurs early in the narrative so that a young Perceval can defend her in Lancelot’s absence, a duty Malory gives to Bors. As a wild youth in the forest he follows Lancelot to Camelot, not very dissimilar to the plot of the Perceval romances, and aspires to knighthood. But he is sent to the kitchens by Kay, like Malory’s Gareth. Here Boorman is getting in trouble and struggles to maintain the essence of Malory. So his changes beget changes. He has now lost Gareth, but he wants to keep the feud between Lancelot and Gawain, which occurs near the end of Malory’s entire narrative after Lancelot accidentally kills Gawain’s brothers, Gareth and Gaheris, while rescuing the queen from burning for adultery. Thus Boorman must have Gawain accuse the queen and fight Lancelot, who returns in time to relieve Perceval. The young man volunteered to defend her and was knighted for the task. Now the future Grail knight is defending a potential adulteress. This spiral of changes significantly transforms the Grail quest. Perceval’s defense of Guenevere does not mix well with his Galahad-like role as chief Grail knight, and the quest is not a holy venture in the same way that it is in the ascetic-minded *Queste del Saint Graal*, which is the source of Malory’s version of the quest. So there is not much that is identifiably Christian in Boorman’s quest. Unlike Malory’s text, which Boorman claims as his source, there are neither hermits nor sermons, except for a brief encounter with a raving zealous Lancelot. The Grail has to be made completely pagan in order to complement more closely Weston’s fertility myth theory.

Giving Arthur the Fisher King’s role and making his kingdom the wasteland brings what otherwise would be a sacred otherworldly quest into the secular

sphere and ties together the narrative strands under Weston's (and Frazer's) identification of the land and king. Boorman makes Arthur central to his presentation of the legend, more so than he is in the medieval texts, and transforms him into the Fisher King and suffering Christ-figure (Lacy, "Mythopoeia" 128–29). Making him the Fisher King radically changes the role of the quest in the entire narrative. In Malory's text and some modern fiction, Arthur is far from happy about the quest, because it takes his knights away from their duty to king and country. But since Boorman makes Arthur the wounded king, and his land wounded with him, the quest is the way to heal the kingdom. So Arthur sends his knights on the quest, rather than merely tolerating the quest. And Perceval must achieve the Grail, like Galahad, and bring it back to heal Arthur, which Galahad did not have to do. According to Malory the Grail was taken out of the world, and Perceval and Galahad never returned to court. Boorman also puts the quest late in the narrative so that the wasteland ties in with Mordred's insurrection. In Malory's text the Grail is nearly forgotten by this time, with little significance in the big picture, but according to Boorman the quest enables Arthur to face evil in his final battle. On the way to his confrontation with Mordred, Arthur visits Guenevere in a convent (Malory has Lancelot visit her there after the final battle) and she returns Excalibur, which she kept when he discarded it on finding the adulterous lovers together. The sword that began the war against evil in the beginning of the film has returned for the finale. Boorman makes many changes in the order of events and roles of characters in order to reconcile variant texts. But his main purpose is to unite Arthur, the wasteland, the sword and even the adulterous affair by way of Weston's theory that behind the Grail is a fertility myth declaring that the health of a king and the well-being of his land are inseparable.

Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), inspired by Frazer and Weston (and directly inspired by Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*), applies the Fisher King and wasteland myth as metaphor to the Vietnam War. The medieval myth is interpreted to express a modern ideology; Martin B. Shichtman discusses such an appropriation of myth in Steven Spielberg's films (one of which I shall discuss shortly) in his essay "Whom Does the Grail Serve? Wagner, Spielberg, and the Issue of Jewish Appropriation." Coppola's film begins with a special forces agent remembering helicopter attacks and napalm strikes while the song "The End," by the 1960s rock band The Doors, tells of a people "desperately in need of some stranger's hand / in a desperate land," a "wilderness of pain / and all the children are insane / waiting for the summer rain." Coppola makes this an allusion to an infertile land's need for a rejuvenating rain to bring back vitality and so ties the beginning and the end of the film to the wasteland myth. The quester is a special forces agent sent upriver into Vietnam and Cambodia to assassinate a colonel gone insane (named "Kurtz" like Conrad's mysterious character), who fills the role of the Fisher King. The agent finds the colonel reclining on a cot, like the Fisher King in the medieval Grail texts, and the colonel sits up to wash himself from a bowl of water, like the Grail itself. On his nightstand, as explicit allusions, are Frazer's and Weston's books. His troops and the Cambodian locals worship him, and in this he resembles Frazer's and Weston's "dying god" central to the fertility myth, the divine figure who must be sacrificed for the seasonal rejuvenation of the land and its people and replaced by a young king. So on a night that the locals and troops

are distracted by their ritual animal sacrifice, the agent kills the insane colonel in an ancient temple while the rain falls and “The End” plays again. He puts him to death with the same kind of blade used in the ritual sacrifice, and the two killings are visually juxtaposed. The agent emerges from the temple, and all the people kneel and drop their weapons at his feet. According to Frazer’s and Weston’s theories he should now be their new god-king, but he leaves in the boat in which he travelled upriver. The film fades out with only the sound of the rain, which should be the healing of the land according to the mythic pattern, yet the land has not been healed. The agent remembers the helicopter attacks, the same way the film began, and the dying words of the colonel echo in his mind, “the horror, the horror,” the same words spoken by Conrad’s dying Kurtz.

The land and its people still suffer a psychic wound, which is the insanity of the whole war effort. Throughout the film there is ongoing implication of the military for hypocrisy in charging the colonel with insanity and murder when insane and murderous practices are the norm among the armed forces from the highest commanders to the common soldier, including the agent himself. As the framing song says, “all the children are insane.” The consequence is a wasteland of death and destruction for Vietnam and a mental wasteland for American soldiers. This is mirrored by the setting, as the trip upriver becomes progressively chaotic with troops under little or no control, even without a commanding officer at one outpost, and “military organization” is an oxymoron. In the end Coppola shows how the Grail myth applied to modernity points to the horrible condition of wounded humanity. However, the myth fails to make sense of it all and offers no healing. In the same way, T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* puts forth the potential of this myth for humanity’s need for meaning, but the end of the poem offers no immediate healing for modern civilization. (The same can be said of Eliot’s “The Hollow Men,” the first epigraph of which quotes Conrad: “Mistah Kurtz—he dead.”) Coppola obviously finds the Grail myth, by way of Frazer and Weston, useful in its application to modernity, while he questions its power in that application.

Terry Gilliam’s *The Fisher King* (1991), from the work of screenwriter Richard LaGravenese, follows Frazer, Weston and psychologists who use Carl Jung’s notion of archetypes to transform the Grail into mythic metaphor relevant to modern humanity and make it at once universal and subjective (Blanch 124–25; Umland and Umland 175–77, 181). Medieval myth represents a psychic integration and wholeness in contrast to modern fragmentation (Osberg, “Pages” 205–15). This is never more clear than when Jack, the protagonist, finds amid the papers of a medieval professor gone insane, Parry, one titled “The Fisher King: A Mythic Journey for Modern Man.” Gilliam’s film responds to *Apocalypse Now* by applying the myth as metaphor to modernity and allowing it to improve the human condition, even if its healing effect is limited to a few lives in the wasteland of New York City, where compassion is rare. The homeless are beaten or ignored, and gays are cruelly bashed. Jack, a radio DJ by trade, lacks compassion and is intensely self-absorbed. He is just a voice with a trademark line, a sarcastic “Forgive me.” When he is on the air, his distance from humanity is emphasized by the film’s sense of fragmentation, which is created by shifting camera angles that show his sound crew separated from him by a window and then Jack himself with a distant

overhead shot (Osberg, "Pages" 201). A lonely man tries to reach out for friendship through Jack's radio show, and Jack's callous remarks inspire the man to shoot up an upscale yuppie restaurant. Jack is psychically wounded when on the TV news he sees how his remarks have a tragically substantial effect on humanity; his comfortable distance is shattered when he sees the bloody faces at the other end of his disembodied voice. And, furthermore, the loss of his radio job puts him at the level of the spurned underclass. He becomes a misanthrope and so lacks the compassion needed to heal the wasteland of a cruel and indifferent society. He is a Fisher King figure identified with that sick society by his suffering; and this identification is made obvious by the imprint on his T-shirt: "New York."

The solution for his and the land's wounds is suggested when a rich boy shows him compassion, thinking he is one of the many ignored homeless, by giving him a Pinocchio doll, which refers to the tale of a wooden boy who wants to become human. Jack and the society around him must reach out with compassion and share the human experience. Jack asks Pinocchio if he ever feels he is being punished for his sins, and this is what Coppola's special agent suspects is behind his appointment as an assassin. But Gilliam gives his protagonist a chance to right his wrongs and find healing. Jack decides to help Parry, the insane and homeless former professor, who watched his wife die at the restaurant and who represses this tragedy beneath an Arthurian fantasy. When Parry is catatonic in an institution, Jack steals a trophy cup from the castle-shaped home of a billionaire, a cup which Parry saw in a magazine and immediately thought to be the Holy Grail. Jack brings it to Parry, who soon awakens able to face the tragic experience.

At first selfish Jack tries to help Parry in order to ease his own guilt for Parry's insanity, and at this time he maintains a comfortable distance. He thinks he can just give Parry money and be gone, as so many do with the homeless, but what Parry really needs is Jack's friendship, the very thing a misanthrope does not want to give. As long as Jack's intention is only to ease his own pain, he can heal neither himself nor another. What Parry needs, what all New York needs, is a willful act of selfless compassion. Thus Jack's real healing begins after Parry is violently beaten and has an intense flashback regarding the tragedy. At Parry's bedside Jack decides to seek the Grail because he wants to help Parry, not just because he feels obligated. Both characters are at once a wounded Fisher King and a questing Perceval for the other (Blanch 124). Jack is healed when he gains compassion, and Parry is healed when he can face the loss of his wife.

Whereas previously he refused to accept Parry's Holy Grail myth and just grudgingly went along with him, Jack now chooses to act out this myth in modern New York City. He would not believe in the myth because he thought it divorced from harsh reality. He views Parry the same way, as a lunatic who acts the part of a questing knight. And he knows Parry cannot face reality because he unsuccessfully tried to remind Parry of his tragic identity outside the myth he hides behind. But the irony is that Jack in his own way hides from a wound. So who is more insane, Parry or Jack? Parry wants to believe in the Grail myth's truth and power to effect healing compassion if applied to a ruthless and uncaring society. To him the myth has meaning and makes absolute sense in that it suggests active compassion as the solution for society's ills. This is the highest sanity. He suggests this when he relates the myth to Jack in Central Park, telling him how the hero

asks the king "What ails you?" and gives him water from the Grail.² Jack's facial expression during this lecture indicates that he sees the parallel between the Fisher King's wound and his own, and perhaps he also sees his own role as Perceval to Fisher King Parry. But Jack stubbornly resists the myth's power to show him the way to healing. In this respect he stands for an insane society that refuses to accept myth's relevance to our modern wasteland.

Like modernity in Eliot's poem (60–65), people choose to walk past each other without sharing their mutual human experience. Like Coppola, Gilliam portrays a society gone insane. The irony is that this society considers Parry insane even though he offers a solution through a myth in which they refuse to believe. Parry knows applied myth can improve reality because of its truth on a level deeper than the literal narrative. On this timeless level, a medieval legend offers social health to modernity. Even when Parry was a sane professor before the tragedy, his chosen subject, medieval literature, could have been considered irrelevant, out of touch with modern reality. Of course, he certainly appears out of touch when he acts out the myth on a literal level by his Don Quixote-like imitation of a questing knight.

When Jack finally chooses to live the myth too and steals the cup, he puts it on Parry's chest and waits. But nothing happens immediately. An interval between Jack's participation in the myth and Parry's healing questions the myth's power for modern humanity. But when Parry awakens and is consciously able to face reality, to let himself miss his wife, the myth is shown to have healing power. Parry can deal with the tragedy, and Jack can have active compassion, when the Grail is passed from the hero to the wounded king. There is a changing of the guard when the myth is passed on from one to another, within the film when Jack gives the Grail to Parry and outside the film when Gilliam hands the myth to his modern audience and proposes it as the solution for our uncompassionate wasteland. Gilliam wishes us to know that the Grail myth has relevance for us today. He is confident that the solution for Jack's and Parry's wounds is also the solution for our own communal wound. The film ends with fireworks over New York City spelling out "The End," which is, of course, appropriate for the end of the film. But if this also alludes to the title of The Doors song framing *Apocalypse Now's* hopelessness, Gilliam may be responding to Coppola by saying that the Grail myth can heal our social ills in a very real way.

Gilliam's previous Grail film with Terry Jones, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), portrays at least some scholarship as harmful to the Grail legend. The humorous quest is regularly interrupted by a documentary featuring "A Famous Historian" until one of the knights rides past and slays the annoying scholar in a kind of drive-by slicing. This death leads to the very unheroic police arrest of Arthur, Lancelot and Bedivere at the end of the film, preventing a mythic conclusion by way of harsh modern reality. In this way, scholarship harms the legend, and the legend fights back. Gilliam and Jones also incriminate nineteenth- and twentieth-century sentimental adaptations of the legend, especially twentieth-century films

² Richard H. Osberg points out that Parry's version of the Fisher King story is the film-maker's invention based on psychologist Robert A. Johnson's Jungian version, itself mostly an invention not based on an identifiable medieval text (Osberg, "Pages" 208–10).

that romanticize the legend for the wide public audience. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* perpetually draws attention to itself as a production without adequate props. Knights lack horses (resorting to banging coconuts to simulate the sound of horses), they carry thin plywood shields, Camelot castle is really just a model and when the court at this castle is shown singing and dancing, as in a musical now well-known to the audience, Arthur dismisses Camelot as “a silly place.” Gilliam and Jones are poking fun at previous Grail films, rather than the legend itself (Harty, “Arthurian” 17).

But the public most likely thinks the film is laughing at the legend because the legend to them is probably of the highly sentimental sort they know through past films. From the beginning humor makes ridiculous the usually heroic and mystical quest when a cartoon God, weary of worship, sends Arthur and his groveling knights after the Grail. Galahad the Chaste, normally unswerving in his search for the relic, is willing to postpone the quest while he resists rescue from a castle of lusty maidens, who lured him with a false Grail vision. And the very unheroic end, when Arthur’s attempt on the Grail castle is broken up by the police, appears to make the legend look silly to a modern audience.

But this does not mean Gilliam and Jones are irreverent towards the Arthurian myth itself. They must consider the legend relevant to modern life because they use it to incriminate modernity’s ranting political demagogues (and the monarchy too) by way of a vocal member of an “anarcho-syndicalist commune”, who refuses Arthur’s order to “be quiet” and ridicules the king’s mythic divine appointment by the Lady of the Lake’s bestowal of the sword Excalibur. In this way, Gilliam and Jones make ridiculous those who reject the legend for its failure to conform to modernity. Those who lack appreciation for such myths are portrayed as annoying. Like the demagogue, many whom the knights encounter on the quest treat them as if they are silly or irrelevant. Not even the police department, which can potentially apply Arthur’s chivalry to its order’s battle against evil, appreciates the noble ideals of the quest. Gilliam and Jones point a satiric finger at those who reject or degrade the mythic significance of the Grail legend. Gilliam and Jones may also sympathize with the police’s forceful conclusion, an arresting end to the film, as an expression of impatience with sentimental productions of the legend.

The legend is still appreciated later in the twentieth century in Steven Spielberg’s film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989). Archaeologist Indiana Jones is sent to recover the cup Christ used at the Last Supper, which was passed on to Joseph of Arimathea and into the hands of some knights of the First Crusade. His father, a medieval literature professor who specializes in the Grail legend, is missing, and so the younger Jones quests for both father and Grail. He competes against the Nazis, who somehow want to use the Grail’s power of immortality for world domination, and against the Brotherhood of the Cruciform Sword, a secret mystical group protecting the relic from undeserving humanity. The elder Jones is held by the Nazis because he has pieced together the clues to the Grail’s location from the literary texts. (In this he is like scholars who actually claim to find hidden messages in the medieval texts, such as the secret society and conspiracy theorists I discuss in a later chapter.) At the hiding place of the Grail a Nazi conspirator shoots the elder Jones to force Indiana to recover the Grail for them, since he needs it to heal

his father. Now he is forced to choose between skepticism and belief, to follow cryptic clues through a series of tests ending with a literal leap of faith into a chasm. This is most difficult for a fact-obsessed scholar who tells his students archaeology is the search for facts, not truth. Because he only values the historical facts behind the fantastic myth, not the myth itself, he declares, "We cannot afford to take mythology at face value." He probably has his father in mind, who tells him the quest is not just an archaeological matter, but a race against the evil represented by the Nazis. Like Indiana, they don't appreciate the legend for its truth, only for its usefulness. In this, Spielberg, as a Jewish-American, finds a counter-use for the Grail against anti-Semitic appropriations of the legend (Shictman, "Whom" 292-95).

Spielberg is inspired by scholarship that claims conspiracies (particularly within Naziism) and secret occult movements behind the Grail legend, especially scholarship that makes use of archaeology to justify belief in a real supernatural Grail, whether a material object or an immaterial force. A colleague tells Indiana Jones, "The search for the cup of Christ is the search for the divine in all of us." This modern sentiment makes the Grail a personal vehicle for self-realization (Umland and Umland 172). It is the way scholars with New Age beliefs promote a spiritualized version of the legend. And at the end of the film the elder Jones claims he found "illumination." This elusive wisdom is only available to the few who are initiated into the Grail's secrets, as Indiana must undergo three tests, a sort of progressive initiation ritual, in order to recover the Grail, which in the end must remain hidden from humanity. Spielberg brings to the film-going public the Grail scholarship of esoteric mysticism, which opposes skeptical modernity with a myth that has eternal relevance for humanity.

These films reflect three trends in Grail scholarship that have made their way into popular culture: controversy over Christian or pagan origins for the legend (*Excalibur*); secularization of the legend, under the influence of skepticism and humanism, into a universal metaphor and defense or rejection of its power as myth made relevant to modernity (*The Fisher King*, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, *Apocalypse Now*) and esoteric mystical interpretations of the legend that imagine occult conspiracies (*Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*). No longer does the public see the Grail only in its traditionally Christian manifestation. Film is the best indicator of the public's awareness of the Grail and the legend's transformation for this audience since film and television are undoubtedly the most powerful media of our time. When I mention my work on the Grail legend, I am usually asked if I discuss the Monty Python and Indiana Jones films. I am never asked if I discuss Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* or Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*. Only an academic would ask about these medieval texts.

So powerful is the myth and scholarship in popular film, even when the public is not consciously aware of this, that Disney's *The Lion King* (1994) cannot resist Frazer's and Weston's theories. The film begins with a beautiful fertile land in which all the animals thrive under the rule of a lion king. The king's cub Simba is presented to his subjects as the future heir to the throne, and all bow while the song "Circle of Life" plays. The rain falls and the land prospers. But the king's brother Scar, marked by a scar on his face, usurps the throne by arranging the death of the king and young Simba's exile from the land. The land becomes a barren wasteland with a wounded / scarred king and with neither food nor water.

Simba returns as an adult, deposes his uncle, the rain falls, the land blossoms again and the film ends with the presentation of a new child-heir (Simba's) while "Circle of Life" plays again.

Most of the public, except those who have read Frazer and Weston, are perhaps not consciously aware of the scholarly theories that have influenced these films. But knowledge does filter from academia to popular culture, and from popular culture to academia too, with changing views of the Grail legend, mythology and related spirituality. The same three trends in the transformation of the Grail legend are found in scholarship on the medieval texts, in poetry, in novels and in film. Fiction writers and film-makers depend on scholarship for research prior to setting pen to paper or fingers to keyboard.³ Nathan Comfort Starr observes that the proliferation of scholarship in the twentieth century accounts for the creative outburst that makes use of new knowledge (xiv). Writers bring to their poetry, novels and films certain scholarly theories about the Grail, and then public impressions of the legend grow from the creative works and scholarly works written for a non-academic audience. Considering the vast number of modern Arthurian texts, the dissemination of the Grail legend and relevant scholarship reaches far into popular culture.

So extensive is modern Arthuriana, the scholarly community enthusiastically recognizes the importance of recent additions to the growth of the legend. There is too much scholarship on the modern texts for a full discussion here, but a few works are especially pertinent to this study. These works, like my own, are essentially studies of "medievalism," which is the representation of the Middle Ages, medieval history and culture in post-medieval scholarship, art, poetry, fiction and film. The studies discussed here examine the representation of the medieval Arthurian legends and motifs in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Margaret J. C. Reid's *The Arthurian Legend: Comparison of Treatment in Modern and Mediaeval Literature* (1938), like my study, discusses the Grail legend in both medieval and modern texts. Unlike my study, Reid's encompasses Arthuriana as a whole, not just the Grail quest. Nathan Comfort Starr's *King Arthur Today: The Arthurian Legend in English and American Literature, 1901-1953* (1954) surveys modern Arthuriana and organizes the texts within these categories: the tragedy of Camelot made to reflect modernity, the Tristram and Isolde story, Arthur as a Dark Age war chieftain, comic presentations of the Arthurian legend, the Merlin story, and the Grail quest.

A few studies briefly touch on my own focus. Jimmie Elaine Thomas's *The Once and Present King: A Study of the World View Revealed in Contemporary Arthurian Adaptations* (1982) makes a point especially pertinent to my own study when Thomas says that one trend in Arthuriana is an erosion of confidence in religion with, nevertheless, an appreciation of the Grail as a symbol of hope for humanity with some kind of reassurance in the possibility of moral values. Thomas also

³ Richard Barber, in *The Holy Grail: A Study in Imagination and Belief* (2004) states, "Only the labours of the scholars could make medieval literature familiar once more, and enable authors to take up the themes of medieval romance as the basis for genuinely original works. Modernizations and translations of the medieval texts, as well as editions, were needed before Arthurian themes could become the basis of new works" (237).

explains that some modern Arthurian novels with an early medieval setting show a belief in a unified spirituality underlying religious differences between pagans and Christians (133–35). Beverly Taylor and Elisabeth Brewer's survey of the nineteenth-century Arthurian revival and the legend's continuation in the twentieth century, *The Return of King Arthur: British and American Arthurian Literature since 1900* (1983), explains how Jessie Weston's influential fertility ritual theory opened the Grail myth to new symbolic applications in T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* and in the works of writers after him and how a resurgence of mysticism and occultism brought more interest in the Grail legend and led to the writings of Arthur Edward Waite, Arthur Machen and Charles Williams (236–45). Most telling in this regard and directly pertinent to my study is Dhira B. Mahoney's observation, in the introduction to her *The Grail: A Casebook* (2000), that "The very indeterminacy of the Grail symbol allows for multiple interpretations, for appropriation by orthodox Christianity or heterodox religious groups, even by New Age psycho-religion . . . It lends itself to exploitation by groups with differing agendas" (77). The surveys of modern Arthuriana bring up issues I discuss in greater detail throughout my study: the influences of modern skepticism, questions about origin, and changing spirituality on post-medieval Arthuriana.

Two other studies also briefly discuss the Grail quest in modern Arthuriana. Maureen Fries's essay "Trends in the Modern Arthurian Novel" (1990) points out cultural trends influential to twentieth-century Arthurian novels. She identifies tendencies in the modern adaptations: an inclination to comedy, a spiritual war between good and evil centered around the Grail's appearance in the modern world, recreations of the real story based on historical and archaeological study, and an increased awareness of the women of the legend. Alan and Barbara Tapa Lupack's *King Arthur in America* (1999) shows how prevalent is Arthuriana in popular culture (especially in science fiction, fantasy and film) and how American culture has democratized many aspects of the legends (276–326). For example, they point out how the Grail quest has been transformed into a symbol or metaphor appealing to the common American on a quest for the American Dream (3, 13). Later I deal extensively with this transformation of the quest into metaphor. Lupack and Lupack discuss novels that follow Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* in transforming the central motifs of the Grail myth into metaphors for the decay of modern war-torn society (210–49). The central motifs of *The Waste Land* have indeed influenced many novels and some films. Since modern humanity cannot believe myths like the Grail legend on a literal level and still needs some stories to make sense of an often chaotic and meaningless modernity, writers (and filmmakers) after Eliot have found new applications for the Grail myth, especially its wasteland motif, which in the eyes of these writers fits well with our industrialization, military destruction and moral decay.

In several publications on modern Arthuriana (1983–90), Raymond H. Thompson divides modern Arthurian novels into categories according to genre: retellings, realistic fiction, historical fiction, science fiction and science fantasy, and fantasy ("Arthurian Legend and Modern Fantasy," "Arthurian Legend in Science Fiction and Fantasy" and *The Return from Avalon*). His second category, "realistic fiction," "places events in a contemporary setting" and can make the legend a modern manifestation of an archetypal pattern (*Return* 4). This Jungian approach