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REVIEWS

BRIGITTE CAZELLES, *The Unholy Grail: A Social Reading of Chrétien de Troyes's "Conte du Graal"* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1996), 325 pp.

Aware that her book is the latest in the very vast corpus of Grail scholarship, Brigitte Cazelles somewhat understandably opens *The Unholy Grail: A Social Reading of Chrétien de Troyes's "Conte du Graal"* by quoting Jessie L. Weston's apology for adding to an already too extensive literature. It was, after all, 1919 when Weston felt obliged to explain her publication of yet another Grail text, and indeed the bibliography has much expanded since then. Yet rhetorical apology aside, it becomes markedly clear from the outset of her book that Cazelles does more than echo long-established readings of Chrétien's final and incomplete romance. As promised by the rich interpretive jolt of her title, Cazelles approaches the enigmatic aspect of Chrétien's text from a secular rather than religious viewpoint. Not focusing on Chrétien's text as the origin of later redemptive quests for an unmistakably Holy Grail, Cazelles instead rereads the *Conte* with keen sensitivity to undercurrents of earthly factionalism, rivalry, and revenge.

With an eye to the complex political geography of Chrétien's career, Cazelles grounds her thesis in contemporary social history by drawing a parallel between the fictional world of the *Conte* and similarly competitive, strategic alliances that fueled the dynastic rivalry among Plantagenets and Capetians. Building upon the work of others who have likewise emphasized the centrality of rivalry to the *Conte*—most notably Madeleine Blaess, Philippe Ménard, and Jean-Claude Lozachmeur—Cazelles traces ties of patronage to situate Chrétien within a "network of political opposition to the French monarchy" (6). It seems very likely that the violent, aggressive nature of chivalry in the *Conte* indeed finds "its analogue in the social world for which it was intended and in the histories of the patron for whom it was composed" (7). The historically detailed elaboration of

Cazelles's reading in many ways makes the introduction the most compelling and provocative segment of the book.

A brief look at organization. From the broader framework of her introduction, Cazelles narrows the field of her first chapter to focus on a textual analysis of Arthur's royal power. She incorporates into her reading an able familiarity with all of Chrétien's romances, and her discussion of the White Stag hunt which opens *Erec et Enide* provides a particularly noteworthy insight into the nature of Arthur's rule. Chapter Two elaborates the larger sphere of Arthur's influence by mapping the travels of his judicial agent, Gawain. Cazelles adds much to current scholarship here, nuancing the standard view of Gawain as the politically savvy, most diplomatic knight in Arthur's service. In Chapter Three, Cazelles turns her attention from Arthur to what she identifies as the Grail faction. She details the lineal foundation of Perceval's adventures, contrasting his movement with that of Gawain. In her fourth and final chapter, Cazelles compares Arthur's brand of power to that of the Grail contingent, demonstrating an equally predatory aspect to what might otherwise seem to be contradictory performances of chivalric conduct. By way of conclusion, Cazelles compares the *Conte* to Jean de Meung's *Romance of the Rose*, suggesting that Jean's text—more so than any Grail continuation—grapples with rather than obscures the serious social and familial issues raised by Chrétien's unfinished text.

Cazelles shows that the very core of Chrétien's narrative structure exudes martial contention, and that the almost dueling episodes which shift alternately from Gawain's exploits to Perceval's adventures play out an age-old dispute between Arthur and the Grail faction. In her reading, the Grail becomes a secular dream vision, a "mirage concocted by a declining clan" (226). By making it a Holy Grail, post-Chrétien continuations only "deproblematize without answering" the fundamental question of why Perceval initially seeks Arthur's court instead of one more closely tied to his own lineage (226). Far from the sacred relic of later legend, the Grail in Cazelles's social interpretation thus represents an aggressive terrestrial dynasty, one at long-standing odds with the prevailing and equally violent hegemony of King Arthur's rule. So while not wholly discounting recurrent interpretations of the *Conte* as emblematic of a new, spiritual chivalry, Cazelles nonetheless strongly questions the reliability of the hermit's religious but clearly biased explanation of the Grail procession, positing dynastic rivalry rather than spiritual asceticism as the foundation of the Grail's importance. As she focuses on the

web of lineal ties and feuding factions that structures the narrative, Cazelles persuasively discusses rivalry as the fundamental coherence of a text most often analyzed in terms of lack, ambiguity, and religious mystery.

Despite a focus on the equally violent and aggressive efforts on the part of both factions to retain or regain territorial power, the bipartite sides defined by Cazelles's book at times strike as being too clear-cut. Emphasizing geographic similarities between accounts of popular history and Chrétien's *Conte*, for instance, Cazelles reconstructs areas of resistance to Arthur's rule. Stories of Arthur's fierce campaign in Scotland, as chronicled in the widely circulated pseudohistories of Geoffrey of Monmouth and Wace, allow her to piece together the backdrop of hatred and revenge so basic to the structure of the *Conte*. Juxtaposing pseudohistorical scenes with Chrétien's account of Perceval's family history—in particular as told by his mother early in the *Conte*—Cazelles seems to align too categorically the people of “the Islands” against Arthur. “Resorting to extratextual arguments”—as she herself rather disparagingly refers to another scholar's analytic use of material found outside a primary text—Cazelles's splicing permits the speculation that “Rion, Clamedeu, and Perceval's father would share similarly hostile feelings toward Arthur,” and further that “the origin of their resentment may well be the king's unfair aggression against the Scots as recounted in Wace's pseudohistorical chronicle” (284 n. 62; 51). Though hardly unfounded to assume that Chrétien was familiar with the works of Geoffrey and Wace, it seems more difficult to assume that victims of Arthur's legendary violence aligned themselves by default as members of the Grail faction.

Indeed, territorial alliances of the day were typically unstable, a fact well noted by Cazelles, who, in an early reference to the on-again, off-again dealings between Henry II and Philippe of Alsace, qualifies her discussion of political collaboration by stressing “that alliances...were in constant flux” (6). So it is perhaps not surprising that, if the kings of the Islands were ever united against Arthur at some point in what Cazelles terms the “prediegetic history” of the *Conte*, this alliance has become decidedly more murky by the time Perceval intervenes on Blancheflor's behalf at the castle of Biaurepaire. Consider Clamedeu and his evil seneschal, Enguigeron. If anything, far from rising against Arthur, they rather seek the refuge of his service. True, Enguigeron clearly engages in some kind of factional dispute by besieging the castle of Biaurepaire with the intent

of claiming the castle for himself and Lady Blancheflor for his lord. To this end, Enguigeron has captured, imprisoned, or killed many of Blancheflor's knights, and we learn that he was even present at the death of Blancheflor's father. Moreover, by admitting that he recently killed one of Gornemant de Gohort's brothers,¹ he discloses some connection between Blancheflor's father and Gornemant's brother. Even so, Chrétien provides no details of an alliance between Biaurepaire and Arthur. As far as the reader is informed, Enguigeron does not knowingly challenge Arthur's power when he refuses to renounce his claim to the city. Indeed, far from being hostile toward Arthur, as might be expected from both the text and Cazelles's reconstructed alliance, Enguigeron and Clamedeu both seem instead to regard Arthur's court as a haven of nonpartisan protection. Whereas both vehemently resist the certain death of yielding themselves as prisoners to either Blancheflor or Gornemant, they feel unthreatened by Arthur, agreeing quite contentedly to render service to his apparently more merciful code of chivalry.

This kind of argument does not diminish the interpretive force of Cazelles's emphasis on the Biaurepaire episode as central to the *Conte* in general and to Perceval's development in particular. Comparing this episode to the immediately subsequent episode of the Grail castle, she focuses on Perceval's actions as well as on Blancheflor's intuitive understanding of his silence. Cazelles reveals the integrity of Perceval's motivations, finding in the Biaurepaire episode a refutation of the shameful blame later leveled against him by both his distraught cousin and his hermit uncle. Cazelles also identifies the singularity within Chrétien's romances of the reciprocal relationship developed between Perceval and Blancheflor, a "consensual rather than contractual type of alliance," which further accentuates the scene's overall importance (221).

Comments aside about rigidly defined factions, Gornemant's role in the Arthurian camp could stand to be credited with exerting more power over Perceval's development. As Cazelles notes with some elaboration, Gornemant is indeed a strong ally to Arthur. He is the first to bestow a sword upon Perceval, thereby completing the dubbing ceremony and materially binding the new knight to Ar-

¹ Gornemant's name is never mentioned explicitly, but Perceval refers very clearly to the "gentleman" he encountered previously. See William W. Kibler's translation, *The Story of the Grail*, in *Arthurian Romances by Chrétien de Troyes* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 409.

thur's cause. Moreover, it is Gornemant who insists on Perceval's transformation from recognizably foreign Welshman into Arthurian knight. Interestingly and significantly, Gornemant has to coerce Perceval with the bind of past oaths before he can get the boy to discard his ethnically distinct clothing.² This is in contrast to Cazelles's assertion that it is Perceval himself who "endeavors to eliminate all the external marks that distinguish him as a 'foreigner,' a Welshman" (177). It is likewise Gornemant who warns "against excessive loquacity," advice which later guides Perceval's irreversible silence in the Grail castle, and which consequently proves an essential aspect of Gornemant's lasting influence on Perceval. Cazelles does not ignore this influence, but integrates it into her analysis only late and off-handedly.³ The potential implication here is that Gornemant's influence—rather than Perceval's conscious decision—pointedly steers Perceval away from his connection to both Wales and the Grail castle. Closer consideration of Gornemant's role might thus significantly complicate Cazelles's notion of Perceval's choice to remain with Arthur at the expense of fulfilling familial obligation.

Indeed, the overall strength and insight of Cazelles's textual analysis forcefully belies whatever weakness may reside in the tendency toward a neat classification of two rival factions. Cazelles's book proves a worthy and engaging contribution to current scholarship, delivering on the fresh and provocative outlook promised by title and introduction.

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² "[Gornemant] had a shift and linen underclothing brought there for the boy, and red-dyed hose and a cloak of violet silk which had been woven in India. He had them brought to him to wear, and said: 'Friend, you will wear this clothing you see here, if you'll heed my advice.' And the boy replied: 'Good sir, surely you don't mean that! Aren't the clothes my mother made me better than any of these? And yet you want me to wear these!' 'Young man,' said the gentleman, 'by my head, yours are worse! You assured me, dear friend, when I brought you here that you would heed my every command.' 'And so I shall,' said the boy, 'I'll never oppose you in anything at all.' He hesitated no longer in putting on his new clothes, and left aside those his mother had made for him" (Kibler, 401). Following Gornemant's fashion advice does not keep Perceval from later identifying himself to both his cousin and Gawain as "Perceval the Welshman." See Kibler, 425, 437.

³ "Perceval's silence also results from Gornemant's warning against excessive loquacity" (292 n. 119).