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**The Collaborative Lens:
Robert de Boron's Overshadowing of Chrétien de Troyes**

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Notions of authorship, writing, and originality significantly differ today from their medieval connotations. In France, the sixteenth century saw a shift in attitudes toward originality, beginning with Joachim Du Bellay's *La Deffence, et illustration de la langue françoise*, which asserts the need for innovation while also praising *imitatio*. It marks a rupture with medieval practices that esteemed the mention of sources to authenticate works and that recognized the individuality of the author only to the degree to which he or she remained faithful to those sources while transferring oral stories into print. In this examination of the grail narratives by Chrétien de Troyes and Robert de Boron, I aim to establish that the very process of *translatio* is in fact a form of collaboration, one which stems from the work itself, rather than the authors. Their grail narratives illustrate that collaboration could not only drastically change a story in the Middle Ages, but also reinvent the way in which future readers would interpret it. In light of this analysis, I will suggest a reevaluation of the term "collaboration" and its application to modern texts.

Collaboration can be defined as working collectively with another or a group, often in an intellectual capacity. A close examination proves that collaboration was almost unavoidable to medieval authors. Obvious examples include works such as *Le Voir dit*, in which a poet and his lover

exchange poems, and *Le Roman de la rose* by Guillaume de Lorris, whose open-ended conclusion is adapted and extended by Jean de Meun, more than doubling the length of the original poem.ⁱ Although the term “collaboration” can also refer to works attributed to a single author, the process of writing in the Middle Ages almost always required collaboration, or a mediator of some sort. Whether it was a scribe jotting down a dictation, a clerk copying a manuscript, or an author picking up the pages where a predecessor left off, the medieval *oeuvre* rarely, if ever, the work of a single pair of hands. As Thomas Inge so aptly demonstrates:

There has seldom been a time when someone did not stand between author and audience in the role of a mediator, reviser, or collaborator. When monks copied manuscripts in medieval monasteries, they had the opportunity to correct or amend the texts by their best lights, and the illuminations they added appear intended as glosses and interpretations. They could claim co-ownership of the texts resulting from their handiwork. (624)

Medieval manuscripts are collaborative by nature, and it is easy to deduce that the carefully compiled pages, the ornate writing, and the vividly colored images derive from a collective effort.ⁱⁱ

In addition to the various tasks involved in creating a manuscript, the concept of literary authorship in the Middle Ages contributes to the collaborative nature of the texts. While authors asserted their individuality through subtle techniques, they did not claim ownership over their works or lay any claims to originality in the modern sense of the term. Unlike modern authorship, authorship in the Middle Ages

did not involve notions of plagiarism or copyright. Authorial merit derived not from originality, but from appeals to an authoritative source. To write literary texts was to participate in *translatio*, a process through which works are transferred, in a sense, from one author to another. The concept of *translatio*, or transference, lies at the very center of medieval literary and political theory. For example, the notion of *translatio studii* acknowledges the transfer of knowledge and learning from Athens to Rome to Paris just as *translatio imperii* recognizes Charlemagne’s empire as the successor to the former Roman Empire. When applied to literature, *translatio* discouraged complete originality in its insistence on an authoritative source.

Medieval authors often adapted or continued stories from their predecessors, rewriting them for a contemporary audience through a process of *translatio*. Writers such as Marie de France, Chrétien de Troyes, or *fabliaux* authors prefaced their tales by crediting their source, whether it was another writer, their patron, or a member of the court. For example, Chrétien de Troyes states in his prologue to *Perceval* that his story is not his own and goes as far as to reveal the source of the story he puts into rhyme:

Therefore Chrétien’s efforts will not be in vain, since he aims and strives by command of the count to put into rhyme the greatest story that has ever been told in royal court: it is the Story of the Grail, the book of which was given to him by the count. Hear now how he acquits himself of it. (*Perceval* 60–66)

Chrétien’s blatant recognition of Count Philip of Flanders as his source for the “book” reaffirms that the notion of *owning* a work, or even claims to originality, played little to no part in

translatio. This becomes evident in the very anonymity or pseudonymity of many medieval texts. Several manuscripts offer no clues about their creator; others merely hint at it. Some authors shaded themselves in anonymity with their ambiguous pseudonyms, like “Marie, from France” and “Chrétien” (a given name, or does this simply mean a Christian?) from the city of Troyes. Though not opposed to showing off their intellectual prowess, these authors demonstrate concern for the story they are telling rather than the legacy of their personal history.ⁱⁱⁱ Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner offers an especially appropriate metaphor for medieval writing by likening the task to a relay race, in which each author passes the “baton of shared text” (13). In this respect, collaboration can be considered a medieval commonplace.

In suggesting that *translatio* serves as a form of collaboration, I maintain that medieval authors consciously partook in a tradition linking them not only to their predecessors, but also to future writers who would in turn alter their literary creations. In other words, each author engaged in a group effort, cogently aware of his or her role as one of many who might take up the same literary material. In *Bloodless Genealogies of the French Middle Ages: Translatio, Kinship, and Metaphor*, Zrinka Stahuljak compares hereditary succession to *translatio imperii* and *translatio studii*, arguing that “linguistic betrayal” serves as the impetus for transfer in each case (147). She demonstrates that each new version of a text corrupts the “original” and that authors know “their texts will not remain intact, precisely because they are incomplete: their texts will be corrupted because any translation is an act of corruption” (147). Her focus on *translatio* as a simultaneous veiling and unveiling of a text can be used to elucidate the relationship between Chrétien’s and Robert’s grails. I would

like to extend Stahuljak’s argument to show that this corruption may, in some cases, change the way that we view an “original,” as it does for Chrétien’s *Conte du graal*.

Though little is known of his life, Chrétien de Troyes wrote several narratives between 1160 and 1189, including *Cligès*, *Erec et Enide*, *Yvain*, *Lancelot*, and arguably his most famous, *Perceval, ou le conte du graal*, which he dedicates to Count Philip of Flanders. His works offer a perfect example of medieval writing and rewriting,^{iv} as Michelle Freeman demonstrates in her extensive criticism on the subject. Not only does Chrétien demonstrate knowledge of his role in *translatio*, but his works are also adapted by future authors. In her examination of *Cligès*, Freeman claims: “Each romance, instead of being merely a reperformance of a mode or paradigm, constitutes a *link* in a chain of texts—a textuality—that absorbs and rearticulates its predecessors together with articulating a reading or an interpretation of them” (149). As a work of the first author to incorporate the grail into written literature, Chrétien’s narrative *Perceval, ou le conte du graal* initiates a chain that will produce four continuations, several adaptations, the tales of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, and countless other works.

Perhaps the most prominent and influential “linguistic betrayal” of the *Conte du graal* is Robert de Boron’s famous *Estoire du graal*, an adaptation that dates from the thirteenth century. A contemporary of Chrétien, Robert de Boron wrote three works that remain available to modern readers, compiled into a trilogy: *Joseph of Arimathea*, *Merlin*, and *Perceval*.^v This work comprised of several parts intertwines the grail story with biblical history. Robert is the first to refer to the grail as the Holy Grail and, consequently, to place it at the Last Supper, as the cup that would collect the blood from Christ upon the cross. In doing so, he actively modifies the

nature of the grail. Although the text fails to provide comment on this change, Gina L. Greco argues that it reflects a conscious choice by the author:

Of course, not all authors were as self-conscious about their roles in textual productions as Marie and Chrétien. Some, who may not have commented directly on their participation in *translatio*, did so indirectly through images and structures that thematize the process. Robert de Boron's rewriting of the grail material exemplifies such subtle theorizing. (42)

Regardless of whether Robert de Boron purposely assumed his role in *translatio* in changing the nature of the grail, it becomes "clearly, unambiguously Christian," as Nigel Bryant explains in the introduction to *Merlin and the Grail* (4). Robert de Boron divided *L'Estoire du graal* into three parts: the first is a biblically historical narrative, the second contains a more secular history, and the third recounts a Breton romance. Well-versed in the Bible, "he wove the story of the Grail into the story of Christ" (Greco 43). Thus, he revives Chrétien's work only to obscure it in a shroud of Christianity by attributing biblical elements to secular parts of the narrative.

Robert de Boron indeed took several liberties in his interpretation and representation of the grail quest. Although precise dates are unknown, most studies date Chrétien's *Le Conte du graal* between 1176 and 1190.^{vi} The author presumably died before finishing the tale, thus leaving the nature of the grail a subject of mystery and interest for many scholars, and even contemporary authors. The use of the word "graal" in the twelfth century referred to a bowl-shaped vessel. Derived neither from French nor Latin, the word is of

Catalan origin, its root in the ancient word "gradal" which signifies a bowl or basin (Goering 14). It first appears in the will of Count Ermengol I of Urgel in 1010, then again in another will in 1030. In both instances, it refers to a domestic utensil (Goering 14). Since the Old French term "graal" derived from "gradal" proves almost completely absent from literature before Chrétien's work, it appears likely that he intended such a meaning. This contradicts the "typical" image of the Grail as a cup, which refers to its form in *Estoire du graal*. Despite efforts to attribute Christian characteristics to the tale, *Le Conte du graal* is not a story strongly influenced by Church doctrine relevant to communion.

In order to point out the error in calling Chrétien's grail quest a Christian story, Roger S. Loomis examines its Celtic influences and quotes the late Arthur Rémy as saying: "The legend contained elements of which the Church could not approve" (845). The scene of the grail procession in the Fisher King's castle draws Robert's interpretation most into question. While dining there, Perceval sees the Grail pass by him many times in a procession that continually attracts his attention (*Perceval* verse 3158). The reader cannot help but notice who carries it: "A maiden accompanying the two young men was carrying a grail with her two hands; she was beautiful, noble, and richly attired" (*Perceval* 3158–3159). According to ecclesiastic rulings at the time, women could not carry or administer the host (Roach 161). This passage thus undermines the final scene, in which the hermit explains to Perceval that the grail carries the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. In addition, the hermit himself raises skepticism in the way he describes the grail:

The man served from it is my brother. Your mother was his sister and mine; and the rich Fisher King, I

believe, is the son of the king who is served from the grail. And do not imagine he is served pike or lamprey or salmon. A single host that is brought to him in that grail sustains and brings comfort to that holy man—such is the holiness of the grail! (Perceval 6346–6350)

If the grail serves as a recipient for only one host, why does it pass by the table several times while Perceval eats? Moreover, verses 6346 and 6347 attest to the size of the grail. If it carries a fish, it could certainly carry several hosts in a single passing (Frappier 189). Whether sick or dying, the Fisher King who receives the host repeatedly throughout Perceval's meal renders the hermit's justification unlikely. The grail ultimately contains a mysterious object for an unknown person.

By associating his own grail with the beginnings of Christianity, Robert de Boron decides to eliminate one of the most striking elements of Chrétien's grail: its mystery. Consequently, he redefines the grail and obscures Chrétien's representation with his own. Although many other examples illustrate the unorthodox nature of Chrétien's narrative, the contradictory aspects of the procession and its explanation best demonstrate the ways in which collaboration can change an "original" work and how it is perceived. The grail may have had a certain significance lost to modern readers, or it may have been an object of mystery. In either case, the differences between Chrétien's and Robert's grails shed light on the ways in which collaboration can eliminate interpretive possibilities, a detrimental effect by modern standards that value the unique and "original" work of an author or a source work. Though it would be impossible to conjecture whether Chrétien might have approved of Robert's changes to his grail

narrative, he would doubtless have considered it customary to reinterpret his text in the rewriting process, given medieval traditions.

In an article examining the historical context for *L'Estoire du graal*, Mary E. Giffin shows no lack of outside influences which may have induced Robert to alter Chrétien's narrative. She suggests the marriages of Burgundy, Champagne, and Alsace as possible inspirations for combining Christian and Celtic elements, the school of theology at Lincoln Cathedral as an impetus for the incorporation of transubstantiation into the tale, and the sculptures of Giselbertus as models for iconology, among other influences. Additionally, Giffin states quite simply that "the writer is a contemporary of Chrétien de Troyes, but writing with a wholly different purpose" (501). Similarly, Brigitte Cazelles accredits the transformation from grail to Holy Grail in part to the cult of the precious blood, which was prominent at the time Robert de Boron wrote his poem (168). Undoubtedly, such influences help to explain what factors may have led the author to stray from his source(s).

It is undeniable that Robert's version of the grail narrative altered the way that readers and scholars look at Chrétien's tale. Scholars wrote for decades on the Christian aspects of *Le Conte du graal*, often ignoring those elements less appealing to the Church. Why would they have falsely attributed a Christian character to the work? Such an oversight was surely not intentional, but may be explained by the success of Robert's collaboration. Although recent scholarship admits the unorthodox nature of *Perceval*, it was long viewed through Robert's eyes. His influence remains evident in modern-day notions of the grail, proving the extent to which a work can evolve through the process of collaboration. In his rendering of the Holy Grail, Robert

turned a story into a legend that would inspire works for centuries to come. In addition to many medieval and Renaissance adaptations, the nineteenth-century revival of the Middle Ages brought with it Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and Wagner's opera *Parsifal*. Twentieth- and twenty-first-century book and film adaptations would pursue the Holy Grail with works like *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

Juliette Wood offers an account of grail material that traces the subject matter from its origins in Chrétien to modern-day adaptations. Though the number of these works is virtually endless, Wood provides a thorough account of both scholarly and literary works that alter the meaning of the grail. She aptly explains: "Books purporting to reveal the secret behind the Holy Grail literature of the Middle Ages are a widespread phenomenon of modern popular culture. Indeed so prevalent are they that any attempt at a comprehensive survey would be out of date as soon as it was printed" (169). Wood traces Chrétien's story of "un graal" to *The Continuations*, which give the object a "sacramental" character, to Robert's blatant Christianization of the Holy Grail, to a heretical object protected by the Cathars and Templars, culminating in the transformation of the grail into a person, whereby Mary Magdalene becomes the bearer of Christ's bloodline. This chain of narratives continues to grow today, with tales such as Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and Michel Zink's grail novel entitled *Déodat, ou la transparence: un roman du graal*.

A prominent medieval scholar in France, Zink draws from numerous sources to pen his own grail narrative. As if writing with Stahuljak's research in mind, Zink creates what one might call a *grail lineage*, to which the principle character of the novel, Déodat, does not belong. This recent example

illustrates how authors continue to participate in *translatio* as a collaborative effort, as if they were kings whose care for the grail guaranteed the lineage of a kingdom, each making the laws by which to rule—or, in this case, to write. Rather than recount the story of a naïve Perceval on a quest for a mysterious object, modern works send their heroes on a quest for the Holy Grail as Robert redefined it. The case of Chrétien de Troyes and Robert de Boron serves as an example—perhaps extreme—of the problematic power games involved in collaboration based on a single source work. Authors focused on the same work run the risk of being drowned out by a more powerful, more appealing, or more convincing voice, creating what I would call *the collaborative lens*: a way of viewing a work through another author's eyes.

The collaborative lens raises questions about more general notions surrounding collaboration, as well. As I have defined it here, collaboration stems more from the work than from the author, as no work can ever be entirely original. There are always outside influences driving the author or authors. Regardless of Robert's position as the founder of a Holy Grail, his successors continue to perpetuate this depiction of the object through their own interpretations of the work. The categorization of *L'Estoire du graal* as a collective work suggests that all subsequent grail quests should be at least indirect products of collaboration. Silvia Bigliuzzi expresses a similar idea in her introduction to a collection of essays entitled *Collaboration in the Arts from the Middle Ages to the Present*, where she states: "In the context of medieval literature authority is located less in the physical body of the author than in intertextuality, in a collaborative engagement with the *auctores*" (2). Despite any claims to originality, modern authors participate more or less consciously in *translatio*, just as Chrétien and Robert before

them. By adapting a story to a contemporary audience, an author contributes to the chain of textuality already woven by his or her predecessors.

This way of reading collaboration immediately brings to mind Julia Kristeva's use of the term *intertextuality*, which she first introduces into her writings in 1969. With reflections on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival, Kristeva points out that no work constitutes an original, but rather, each participates in a continuum of texts with borrowings and references from previous sources: "Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*" (65). Kristeva's essay in which this concept first appears, "Word, Dialogue, Novel," exemplifies *intertextuality* in her reliance upon Bakhtin's theory of carnival to elucidate her own ideas. Moreover, the credit attributed to Kristeva for the revival of Bakhtin's work illustrates the collaborative lens.

To return to Michel Zink's *Déodat*, a short note at the end of the text offers an apology for both the borrowings from medieval literature and the infidelity to it.^{vii} In contrast, Robert de Boron offers an interjection in his text that has the opposite effect: "But Chrétien de Troyes says nothing of this—nor do the other trouvères who have turned these stories into jolly rhymes. But we tell only what matters to the story" (147). Whereas Zink acknowledges his sources but highlights his own originality, Robert de Boron claims to reveal what his sources omitted from their own works, as if appealing to a greater truth. These examples show inherent differences between medieval and modern rewriting that call for a reassessment of the modern concept of collaboration. Is Michel Zink's novel more "original" than Robert's? Does the

creation of the modern manuscript require less collaboration than the medieval one? Aside from the importance of copyright, plagiarism, and originality, can the contemporary author claim more autonomy than his or her medieval counterparts? Can a work ever truly stand independently from its influences and inspirations?

I do not attempt to redefine every work as a product of collaboration. I suggest, rather, that modern conceptions of literary creation overlook the collaborative nature of texts by insisting that a work have multiple authors in order to illustrate collaboration. A problematic terminology exists at present, as do false notions of autonomous creation. Both of these speak to modern authors' perceptions of self-identity that differ drastically from the ideas of their medieval counterparts. Although the importance placed on originality may have replaced medieval appeals to authority, the processes of writing, rewriting, borrowing, adapting, and translating that play a role in *translatio* remain very much the same today as in the Middle Ages. In light of evolving attitudes toward identity and creativity, *intertextuality* might quite simply be a twentieth-century *translatio*.

The medieval author's stance towards his or her role in *translatio* often demonstrates a greater level of theoretical sophistication than commonly perceived. Both R. Howard Bloch and Michelle A. Freeman discuss this awareness of the tension between originality and authority in the *Lais* by Marie de France.^{viii} Though Bloch asserts that medieval authors like her who chose to write in the vernacular conceived of their task in historical and philological terms (33), Freeman points out that Marie also rejects *translatio*: "Marie [is] presenting an idiosyncratic variation on the very theme of *translatio studii* that she seems to be refusing outright in the General Prologue when she declares her unwillingness to translate from Latin

into the vernacular" (*Poetics of Silence* 864). This simultaneous act of rejection and acceptance exemplifies the collaborative effort as one in which an author brings his or her own "originality" to a collective enterprise. While writing in the Middle Ages required acknowledgement and dependence on the *auctores*, originality presented itself through the author's own genius and creativity in adapting the source.

Like Stahuljak, Bloch and Freeman employ the term "genealogy" to describe Marie's role in *translatio*. This provocative notion likens the book to a child who inherits traits from forbearers, while taking on unique attributes which may or may not be passed on to others.^{ix} As with children, each work is original, but almost inevitably assumes some characteristics of its source. Similarly, this comparison can be used to describe blatant aberrations from the "original" work. As I have illustrated here, Robert's grail narrative constitutes just such a departure—the illegitimate child, as it were, of Chrétien's lineage.

Perhaps a parallel can be made between ideological shifts that took place in eighteenth-century France. In the same century in which the country challenged notions of royalty, concepts of copyright came to fruition. Could the rejection of the king as patriarch be in part responsible for the move away from *auctores*? The violent shift from a system based on genealogical bloodlines—which persisted even throughout the Renaissance—corresponds to a search for new ways to regulate the "authority" of the writer. The dramatic rupture between the Holy Grail and Chrétien's narrative carries appeal in a society that considers "originality" to be a self-sufficient source of higher truth and that uses plagiarism laws to discourage faithful borrowings. While Chrétien's grail may never regain its rightful place beside Robert's in literature or popular culture, his narrative deserves as much

appreciation for its "originality" and *auctores* as do the many works it continues to inspire. It is only by focusing on the collaborative lens itself that the contemporary reader can rediscover how the myth of the Holy Grail was born.

¹ For studies relating these works to *translatio studii*, see Jean Dorbush, "'Songes est senefiance': Macrobius and Guillaume de Lorris' *Roman de la Rose*" in *Translatio studii: Essays by His Students in Honor of Karl D. Uitti on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, (ed. Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Renate, Kevin Brownlee, Mary B. Speer, and Lori J. Walters. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000. 105–116); and Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991). For Christine de Pizan's use of *translatio studii* in reaction to Jean de Meun, see David L. Pike, *Passage Through Hell: Modernist Descents, Medieval Underworlds* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1997).

¹ See Herrad Spilling, ed, *Collaboration dans la production de l'écrit médiévale: Acres du XIIIe Colloque du Comité Internationale de Paléographie Latine* (Paris: Ecole des Chartes, 2003).

¹ For works on Chrétien's artistry and "originality," see Evelyn Mullally, *The Artist at Work: Narrative Technique in Chrétien de Troyes* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1988); Alice M. Colby, *The Portrait in Twelfth-Century French Literature: An Example of the Stylistic Originality of Chrétien de Troyes* (Geneva: Droz, 1965); Norris J. Lacy, *The Craft of Chrétien de Troyes: An Essay on Narrative Art* (Leiden, the Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1980); and Norris J. Lacy, Douglas Kelly, and Keith Busby, eds, *The Legacy of Chrétien de Troyes* (2 vols. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987–1988).

¹ While rewriting constitutes an essential element, *translatio studii* also incorporates the oral tradition into its transfer of knowledge between generations and cultures. For more on medieval rewriting, see Douglas Kelly, ed, *The Medieval Opus: Imitation, Rewriting, and Transmission in the French Tradition* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996) and Anthony Bale, "From Translator to Laureate: Imagining the Medieval" (*Literature Compass* 5.5 (2008): 918–934).

¹ The validity of Robert de Boron as the *Perceval* author has been contested. For a discussion of the subject, see Nigel Bryant's introduction to his translation of *Merlin and the Grail*.

¹ See Goering.

¹ Zink states: "Le lecteur quelque peu familier de la littérature médiévale aura relevé de lui-même dans le récit qui précède les allusions aux romans de Chrétien de Troyes, aux lais bretons, aux romans arthuriens en prose, et particulièrement au *Haut Livre du Graal* ou *Perlesvaus*, auquel sont empruntées la langueur du roi Arthur et la mort de Cahus, qui en constituent le prologue, ainsi que la vengeance sanglante de Perceval et la mort de Guenièvre, veillée par Lancelot. Est-il besoin d'ajouter que j'ai inventé le personnage de Déodat, son lien avec Cahus et toutes ses aventures? Faut-il souligner aussi combien le ton et l'esprit de mon récit sont éloignés de ceux des romans médiévaux? J'espère qu'on me pardonnera les emprunts particuliers comme l'infidélité d'ensemble."

¹ See Bloch, *The Anonymous Marie de France* and Freeman, "Marie de France's Poetics of Silence: The Implications for a Feminine Translatio." For a discussion of the metaphor of the book as child, see Curtius, Ernst Robert. *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. (Trans. Willard R. Trask. New York: Pantheon Books, 1953. 132–134).

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