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Susanne Friede, ed., *Autour du Graal: Questions d'approche(s)*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2020. 297 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. €68.00. (hb). ISBN 9782406104308; €29.00. (pb). ISBN 9782406104292.

Review by Miranda Griffin, University of Cambridge.

A certain Gerbert, the author of one of the *Continuations* of Chrétien de Troyes' *Conte du Graal*, informs his reader that Chrétien was unable to finish his romance because he died before he could do so. As a result, the romance as it stood left its protagonist, the naïve young knight Perceval, seeking in vain for the Grail, the strange vessel he had witnessed in a mysterious procession in an enchanted castle. Chrétien was known to leave—or appear to leave—his work unfinished: his earlier romance, *Le Chevalier de la Charette* (the earliest written representation of the love between Lancelot and Guinevere), ends with an announcement that it is not Chrétien, but an otherwise obscure author called Godefroi de Leigni, who has been recounting the final portion of the tale.[1] Whether Chrétien did die in the last decade of the twelfth century, or whether there is another reason for the *Conte du Graal's* incomplete form, it is an incompleteness that has elicited speculation, amplification, explication, and elucidation of various sorts ever since. Gerbert's is just one of several *Continuations* and elaborations transmitted with the *Conte du Graal*. From the thirteenth century, manuscripts of texts in prose and verse compete to present a more complete version of this story.[2]

A major factor in this fascination with Chrétien's tale is surely the Grail itself, which makes its first appearance as a mystical Arthurian artefact in *Le Conte du Graal* simply as *un graal*, a sort of large serving dish. It is joined in the procession by another extraordinary object, a bleeding lance. Perceval has been warned that the best knights do not talk too much, so keeps silent as he gazes at the extraordinary spectacle, although he longs to know more about the Grail. In particular, the question he wishes to ask is not about what the Grail *is*, but *cui l'en en servoit* (whom it served).[3] His question unasked, Perceval discovers that he must seek the Grail, yet it seems not to be an object that stays in a fixed location. Answers to his question, and to the wider questions of the Grail's essence and provenance, are given in the *Conte* and its *Continuations*. Scholars continue to ponder them, circling the Grail and its mysteries. A fugitive centre of a universe which blends the courtly and Christian, the Grail tends also to be at the centre of discourses of investigation, inquiries which arrange themselves in orbit around the Grail. Like Perceval, critics have questions, and try to approach the Grail from different directions.

This is the configuration adopted by the volume of essays edited by Susanne Friede, *Autour du Graal: Questions d'approche(s)*, essays which started life as papers at a conference at the University

of Klagenfurt in 2015. The essays are organised into four sections, each of which is allocated an *approche* and *questions*, in keeping with the subtitle of the collection. The collection's main title echoes Jean Frappier's 1977 monograph on *Le Conte du Graal* (which is, strangely, missing from the bibliography to this volume)[4], but broadens Frappier's focus to examine not simply Chrétien's romance and its continuations, but also the verse and prose works which attempt to answer the questions about the Grail by placing it more firmly in a Biblical narrative. In the *Conte du Graal*, the vessel is described as *tant sainte chose* (such a holy thing), that it can sustain the maimed king who rules the Grail Castle.[5] But it is a later written tradition which expands upon this sanctity, inserting the Grail (now insistently referred to as *le Saint Graal*) into the life of Christ. Taking inspiration from the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, the Grail is represented as gracing the table of the Last Supper, and later as a vessel (now more like a cup or chalice than a dish) in which Joseph of Arimathea caught the blood of the crucified Christ. The thirteenth-century prose romances, *L'Estoire del saint Graal* and *La Queste del saint Graal*, themselves part of a much larger romance cycle known as the *Lancelot-Grail* or Vulgate Cycle, recount the arrival of the Grail in Britain (brought by Joseph of Arimathea and his followers, who sailed from the Holy Land on a shirt) and the integration of the Grail into Arthurian hierarchy, such that the Round Table is designed by Merlin to await the best knight of all, who will be the one to accomplish the Grail quest. That knight, in the Vulgate Cycle, is not Perceval—who is relegated to the role of supporter or side-kick—but Galahad, the son of the valiant, yet sinful Lancelot. Galahad is the apogee of what is known in this Cycle, and especially in the *Queste*, as *chevalerie celestielle* (heavenly chivalry). This category of knighthood is opposed to the more familiar *chevalerie terriane* (earthly chivalry). This latter is evident elsewhere in the Cycle—as well as in the verse romances of Chrétien de Troyes and others—in the behaviour of knights whose interests lie firmly in proving their worth via triumphs at tournaments and courtly behaviour (which is certainly not synonymous with chaste love, or even necessarily consensual sex) towards ladies, rather than questing for a Christological relic.

The first of the *approches* adopted by Friede's collection, "L'Approche théologique: questions de spiritualité", investigates the productive tensions at work in the notion of *chevalerie celestielle*. In her introduction, Friede presents this first section as touching on the similarities between Grail romance and hagiography, pointing out that Joseph of Arimathea shares several qualities with saints depicted in *Vitae* of the Middle Ages. The first essay, by Catalina Girbea, proposes the term "*transcléricalisme*" to describe the ways in which celestial chivalry and the Grail to which it aspires "introduisent dans le récit généralement appelé arthurien un modèle de fonctionnement qui se place entre la christianisation et la cléricalisation" (p. 46). Girbea focuses on the transmission of the *Queste* in manuscript Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal 5218, whose illustrative programme, she argues, represents members of the clergy as passive observers to key moments in Galahad's chivalric career. Grail chivalry reaches the parts of the secular community that the clergy cannot, she maintains, and the women who occasionally take centre stage in the *Queste* also speak to this tendency to bypass the official church.

Likewise, Thomas Ollig detects in the literary motifs of *chevalerie celestielle* a means of slipping free from theological constraints. His essay argues that representations of dreams, visions, and *avisions* in the Vulgate Cycle offer a mode of interpreting the world which does not adhere strictly to, yet subtly refers to, church doctrine. He cites what is surely the most disturbing example in this corpus, a dream that seems to defy conventional readings—that of the knight Cahus, at the beginning of a strange, dark prose romance known as *Le Haut Livre du Graal* and *Perlesvaus*. In this episode, Cahus dreams he has been fatally wounded, and awakens only to die. Ollig's reading

of this sinister event links it to *kairos*, timing, rather than understanding it as a comment on the sins of Arthur: an inviting idea, which could be further developed. Susanne Friede also contributes to this section with an essay that examines the closely linked developments in, on the one hand, prose writing in French and, on the other, the expansion of Grail literature. For Friede, prose was a mode that provided access for authors in the vernacular to the authority of Latin historiographical and hagiographical discourses, an essential element in the elaboration of Grail romance. This section, then, treats the varying ways in which medieval French Grail literature mediates between modes of knowledge and expression, raising some noteworthy questions and approaches.

The other three sections all comprise just two essays. The second, “L’Approche thématique,” focuses on questions of matter and history. These are explored in essays which present medieval Grail literature in non-French traditions. The argument of Helmut Birkhan’s essay on Celtic (particularly Welsh) material can be hard to follow, but coheres around a detailed summary of the *Peredur*. Birkhan demonstrates that this text is an amalgam of at least two traditions, taking issue with Roger Loomis’s mid-twentieth-century theories about the Celtic roots of Arthurian literature. This essay is presented in English, presumably translated from German, but has not been properly proofread, with distracting results. *Le Conte du Graal* is erroneously described as “a novel” on at least three occasions (the standard translation of “*un roman*” in this context is “a romance”); and the discussion of various literary and historical decapitated figures on p. 139 is made more confusing by two mentions of a “scull” (for “skull”). In addition, Birkhan misspells the name of another contributor to the collection, in a footnote to an article by “Lea [sic] Tether” (p. 140). Indeed, the inaccuracies of this essay are anticipated by a typo in Friede’s Introduction, where the *Peredur* is mentioned as having been composed “*en moyen gaulois*” (p. 19), when it is in fact “*en moyen gallois*.” More professionally presented and engaging is the second essay in this section, Volker Mertens’ clear exposition of the German adaptations and elaborations of Grail material. While both Birkhan and Mertens concentrate on exposition of their material rather than explicit comparison of it with Grail literature in French, this is an informative section in the volume. Mertens’ essay in particular elicits interest in the essential role of *translatio* in the dissemination of Grail literature beyond French.

From a wide focus on the movement of Grail literature across territories and languages, the fourth section narrows in on *Le Conte du Graal* and its *Continuations* in two detailed and illuminating essays. Richard Trachsler charts the development of the character of Perceval, who is so lacking in worldly wisdom at the beginning of the *Conte* that he mistakes knights for gods. He is moreover egregiously useless at interpreting the advice given to him by his mother and Gornemant, the wise older knight who befriends him. From this *nice* (naïve, foolish young man), Perceval in Gerbert’s *Continuation* seems to undergo a *mue* (a moult, in the manner of hunting birds, or a transformation) apparently acquiring much more *engin* (cunning, ingenuity, insight). Trachsler’s convincing thesis here is that, whereas there may be apparent local inconsistencies from one part of the *Conte du Graal* Cycle to another,<sup>[6]</sup> there is space for flexibility in this corpus, as it evolves towards a more explicit Christian system of signification. Where Trachsler focuses on the mutability of character in the *Conte du Graal* Cycle, the other contributor to this section, Brigitte Burrichter, explores the mutability of a place: the chronotope of the Grail castle, which seems to shift and slip across the texts and traditions of Grail literature. It is notoriously difficult to find, which at least partly explains why Perceval and his companions struggle to achieve their quests. Sticking to one path, Burrichter suggests, is not an option for these

protagonists, in a tradition which is so profoundly characterised by misdirection and *dédoublement*.

In her final section, Friede proposes an approach centred on the material—an approach that she describes as “sûrement celle qui est la plus en vogue dans la recherche actuelle” (p. 7). This section brings together two intriguing essays, focusing in very different ways on the material and immaterial manifestations of two privileged objects in the constellation of Grail literature: the Grail itself and the book. [7] Edina Bozoky’s essay thinks through several configurations of relic, reliquary, blood, lance, and vessel as they construct the legend of the Grail in history and literature. Leah Tether’s essay considers the history of editing the *Conte du Graal*, shedding light on the processes of repackaging and marketing manuscript variance as printed text, with special attention paid to the phenomenon of the blurb. This is a mobile feature of literature, Tether observes, found in sixteenth-century printed versions of the romance, as well as on the modern websites of online booksellers. As a brief summary which highlights the content and worth of his romance, and flatters any reader discerning enough to select it, Chrétien’s prologue to *Le Conte du Graal* can also, argues Tether, be read as a type of blurb. Tether gives an appendix to her essay, which lists all the manuscripts of the *Conte du Graal*, and all the printed and digital editions of the romance produced between the sixteenth and twenty-first centuries. Another unfortunate typo creeps into this appendix, situating manuscript *P* (Bibliothèque de l’Université de Mons-Hainaut 331/206) in Paris, rather than, as its names suggests, in Mons, Belgium. It would, in fact, have been informative to look more closely at this manuscript in relation to Tether’s argument about prologues and blurbs, since the Mons manuscript does not transmit the whole of Chrétien’s prologue, suppressing the encomium to Philip of Flanders, with its extended metaphor of sowing and harvesting. Instead, Mons 331/206 is the only surviving manuscript of *Le Conte du Graal* to transmit the two prequels to this romance, the *Elucidation* and *Bliocadran*. How does the opening to Chrétien’s romance inflect a reading of this instantiation of the romance?

The wide range of approaches adopted by the contributors to this collection provokes some questions as well as answering others. Several individual essays are enlightening and stimulating; others seem less convincing, or are evidently a small part of a much more extensive project (for which they might themselves be read as a blurb). The patchy proofreading is a disadvantage to the presentation of this volume. That aside, it is a useful addition to the extensive body of work on the Grail, particularly within medieval French literature.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

Susanne Friede, “Introduction”

Part One, L’Approche Théologique: Questions de spiritualité

Catalina Girbea, “La quête du Graal entre christianisme et cléricisme”

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Édina Bozoky, “Variations autour du sang du Christ: Romans du Graal, reliques et légendes”

Leah Tether, “Manuscript, Print, Digital Publishing studies as an approach to Grail literature”

## NOTES

[1] For an audacious and cogent reading of Chrétien’s authorial strategy and identity not mentioned in this volume, see Sarah Kay, “Who Was Chrétien de Troyes?”, *Arthurian Literature* 15 (1997): 1-35.

[2] For more details on these texts, see Miranda Griffin, “The Grail” in William Burgwinkle, Nicholas Hammond and Emma Wilson, eds., *The Cambridge History of French Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 76-83.

[3] Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Roman de Perceval; ou, Le Conte du Graal: Édition critique d’après tous les manuscrits*, ed. Keith Busby (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1993), l. 3245.

[4] Jean Frappier, *Autour du Graal* (Paris: Droz, 1977).

[5] Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Conte du Graal*, l. 6425.

[6] The terminology is Thomas Hinton’s: see *The Conte du Graal Cycle: Chrétien de Troyes’ Perceval, the Continuations, and French Arthurian Romance* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2012).

[7] I have argued elsewhere that a third privileged object is the body: see Miranda Griffin, *The Object and the Cause in the Vulgate Cycle* (Oxford: Legenda, 2005).

Miranda Griffin  
University of Cambridge  
[mhg11@cam.ac.uk](mailto:mhg11@cam.ac.uk)

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