

Howard Pyle, *King Arthur*

## The Sword and the Grail

### Restoring the Forgotten Archetype in Arthurian Myth

John Adcox

If it were even possible to assemble them in one place, the volumes written on Jungian approaches to the Grail quest in Arthurian myth would bend even the sturdiest, stout oak bookshelves. From Emma Jung and Maria Von Franz's definitive work, *The Grail Legend*, to the work of later luminaries ranging from Joseph Campbell to Robert Johnson, the Grail quest is a metaphor of astonishing power that continues to guide generations of seekers on their own journeys to individuation.

It's not too great a stretch to call the Matter Britain, the cycles of legends surrounding King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, *the* definitive myth of Western civilization. Here

we find our modern concepts of equality (the Round Table had no "head" and no corners), romantic love, strength protecting the weak, and spiritual growth and enlightenment based on the achievements of the individual expressed in a single source—and arguably expressed with more power and greater resonance than in any other myth cycle. How else can one explain the enduring popularity of the Arthur story? There have certainly been other romantic stories, probably even greater ones. Adventure? Our heritage of myth is full of it. Magic? We're lousy with it. Fellowship and super human accomplishment? Look no further than the adventure tales of Fionn McCumhail, Jason and the Argonauts, or Robin Hood and his Merry Men. All of these cycles, and thousands of others, have been enormously popular through the ages. Robin Hood and the men of Sherwood, especially, have inspired countless novels, songs, poems, films, and television productions. But none of them have approached the Arthur stories for enduring and significant popularity. It's more than a sub genre—it's an industry.

Dreams of lost, golden ages are called "Camelot." Remember the Kennedy administration? A Google search on the Internet reveals more than 100 different companies and products with Excalibur in the name. Truly special treasures are "Holy Grails." Remember the "Holy Grail of Christmas presents," the coveted Red Ryder BB gun, in *A Christmas Story*? Metro Atlanta boasts at least five different neighborhoods with streets named after Lancelot, Galahad, Guinevere, and King Arthur himself.

When I began thinking about this article last month, I stopped by a tiny mall bookstore, and quickly located no less than 16 different contemporary novels, not counting children's books, books that use the theme but aren't specifically or overtly Arthurian (Bernard Malamud's *The Natural*, Stephen King's *Dark Tower*, or C.S. Lewis' *That Hideous Strength*, for example), or classics, on the Arthurian legends—in three different categories.

At present, two big-budget King Arthur films and one new television series are in various stages of development. Dan Brown's current bestselling novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, offers a new take on the Grail quest, but the core elements are the same: a man's quest through terrible danger for a healing symbol of the Divine feminine. For some reason, the Arthurian legends have struck a chord that is arguably unmatched in Western culture, surpassing even the myths of classical Greece.

The question, again, is why? Why the Arthur stories, over so many other romances, adventures, wonder tales, and myth cycles? One possible answer, of course, lies in the image of the Grail itself. Something about that image endures, even as the shape of the image evolves (is the Grail a stone, a Celtic cauldron, a chalice, or the womb of Mary Magdalene?), and strikes a chord somewhere deep in the psyche. This answer is compelling, if only because it points to something missing in the other tales. The gold stolen by Robin Hood certainly doesn't resonate as deeply as the Grail (not that I'd turn it down, mind) and even Jason's Golden Fleece doesn't promise spiritual healing.

Perhaps part of the answer lies in the quest itself, rather than merely in its object—the journey rather than the destination. In this sense, the Grail story serves as a roadmap rather than a simple travelogue describing the destination. The Grail tells us *what*, the quest tells us *how*. What differentiates the

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**John Adcox** is the Executive Director of the Mythic Journeys 2004 conference and performance festival. For information about Mythic Journeys, see: <http://www.mythicjourneys.org>





