

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

---

**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>

Arthurian Grail quest from mythic spiritual journeys in other cultures, what makes it uniquely and definitively Western, is the emphasis on the individual. In the East (if you'll forgive the broad, sweeping generalization) the emphasis in spiritual seeking is apart from the individual. Seekers often wear pictures of a guru to remind them to keep their focus on the path and away from the individual, the ego, or the self. The *way* is important; the *self* is not (or at least much less so). But the knights seeking the Grail all enter the forest alone, apart from their fellows, in a place where the wood is thickest and *where there is no path*. When there is no path, only the self remains.

I won't bother to summarize the Grail myth or its significance. It's probably not necessary for this audience, and Emma Jung, Maria Von Franz, John and Caitlin Matthews, and Robert Johnson have already done so very well. If you're unfamiliar with the stories or the symbolism that empowers them, I'm sure you can find plenty of information on the bookstore table at the next Jung Society meeting. In short, the Fisher King is wounded as a youth. The nature of the wound varies from source to source, but to be delicate, the wound is above the thighs as below the belt. Ouch! As a result of the wound, the land is waste. The inner state is reflected in the outer world. A knight must achieve the quest for the Grail before the wounded king, and the land, can be healed. If you'll pardon a gross oversimplification (to go along with the sweeping generalization above), most Jungians view the archetype of the Grail quest as Animus' quest for Anima—a joining of opposites resulting in the healing of the inner Wasteland of the soul, or individuation. The knight achieves the symbol of femininity, uniting the opposites and healing the wound. Ironically, the symbol of feminine healing comes from a male source, the Fisher King in later romances, and even the king of Annwn (Ah-noon), the land of the dead, in the legendary Welsh bard Taliesin's mysterious poem *The Spoils of Annwn*, which may be an early source of the Grail romances.

The point is a pretty simple one. Like all good myths, the Grail quest is a roadmap, a trail of breadcrumbs that leads us through the dark forests of life. It shows us how we heal our own inner wounds and become the whole and functional (or individuated) people we were meant to be.

**I** think, however, that focusing solely on the Grail is a mistake, because we're missing half the story when we do. We de-emphasize the other primary archetypal treasure in the Arthur story—the Sword Excalibur.

Like the Grail, the sword of power is an artifact of supernatural (even Divine) power, surrounded with golden light. In many ways the polar opposite of the Grail, Excalibur is a symbol of power in the world—of victory in battle and ruling a kingdom. The feminine Grail comes from a masculine source, the Fisher King in his Grail castle, but the sword comes from a woman—a goddess figure, no less—the Lady of the Lake.

While Animus quests for Anima, Anima is busy, too. While Arthur sends his knights off to find the Grail, his shadow, his sister Morgan le Fey (herself a goddess figure), is attempting to steal Excalibur. She has no interest in the Grail—in fact, when the Grail part of the sword, the scabbard that heals wounds, is briefly in her possession, she throws it away. She has no interest in it at all, because she doesn't need it. Anima



E.B. Leighton, *The Accolade*, 1901

has no need for the feminine—she *is* the feminine. Arthur needs the Grail; Morgan needs the sword. They're both looking for something missing in themselves. There's a clue here.

I think it's fair to say that the Arthurian story is a longing for the missing half, an attempt to unify the missing elements into a whole—sword and Grail, anima and animus, man and woman. Throughout the stories, you find clumsy attempts to unite the two, to find that missing... something. Some few are successful (Gawain's union with the goddess in the Marriage of Sir Gawain), but most fail. Think of Uther's conquest of Igraine (the "rape" that leads to Arthur's conception), Arthur's unfortunate coupling with his sister (the tryst that leads to the birth of Mordred), Lancelot's affair with Elaine, and of course, the doomed love of Lancelot and Guinevere. These characters are forgetting that they're supposed to be looking inside, not outside. A man can't expect a woman to be his Grail—it's tremendously unfair to the woman. He has to find the Grail himself, inside, before he can have a healthy relationship. The reverse is also true. The Arthur myth gives us this clue, too.

Which leads me (at last!) to the point of this article. No one succeeds in the Arthur stories. Galahad finds the Grail, but it does no good. Why? He goes off to Heaven. According to Joseph Campbell (as Susan Olson reminded us in her Tolkien lecture), the hero's journey ends with the refusal of the return (the longing to stay in the place of bliss), which must be overcome so that the hero can bring the object of the

quest back to his people, the ones who need it. Galahad doesn't do this. He is lost in bliss. He has achieved the Grail, but the quest has failed all the same. He didn't bring it back. Don't be too hard on poor Galahad, though. He's not alone. Morgan never successfully steals the sword—at least not for long—and the lovers, Lancelot and Guinevere, Tristan and Iseult, all seem to find only disaster, not wholeness and unity. No one is ever able to combine the two opposites into a successful whole. No one is able to combine the powers and use them together. In achieving the Grail, Galahad leaves the sword behind. In the end, everything falls apart.

Our only brief glimpse of what should have been happens in the moment of Arthur's death (or, if you prefer, when he is taken to the Isle of Avalon to heal). At Arthur's command, the last knight, Sir Bedivere, casts the sword back into the Lake. It is caught by a feminine hand, the hand of the Divine female herself, the goddess, and brandished three times before it disappears beneath the waves. The masculine symbol is reunited with the feminine. Only then can Arthur rest in peace.

Everyone fails and Camelot falls. But all is not lost. The legend ends with a promise. Arthur is the once and future king, after all. He is destined to return someday. This, too, is a clue. The Arthurian legends are incomplete. Arthur must come back to us in our hour of need, because something is left undone. What? That's the real question and, of course, we are not given the answer.

When Robert Johnson wrote his book on the Grail, *He*, he worked with an incomplete version of the quest myth. In the last chapters, he could only speculate on how the myth might have ended, or what might have happened when the knight achieved the Grail. Using his example, I think it is fair to look at the clues we have in the Arthurian canon, and guess what might come next. I've tried to briefly sketch those clues above, a few of them anyway. We have the main characters

seeking their opposites, the "something" that's missing in themselves. The Grail quest fails because the knight, Galahad, leaves the sword behind, getting lost in the inner world so that the outer world (the one that needs its hero!) is left forgotten. In the end, Excalibur is reunited with the goddess, masculine with feminine, before Arthur can rest. Now, what do those clues suggest?

When Arthur returns, the sword must be reunited with the Grail. (I say reunited, even though the two are never actually together. Nonetheless, the Grail is accompanied by a Spear, a similar archetype, and Arthur draws a sword from a stone, a feminine symbol. Remember, in some of the early romances, the Grail is a stone that fell from Heaven.) The two powers must be used together. How? For now, that's a question yet to be answered. I don't know the answer, but I'm challenging you to solve the riddle. At least until Arthur returns, the quest is yours.

**I** think artists will answer it with new Arthurian tales—something new and different, as opposed to the countless retellings that currently fill even the tiny mall bookstores. After all, as Joseph Campbell reminded us, "the people who can keep myth alive are the artists of one kind or another. The function of the artist is the mythologization of the environment and the world." That's how I personally intend to explore the question.

But the artists aren't the only ones who should explore the idea. After all, if therapists and analysts (if someone can explain the difference to me at one of the Jung meetings, I will be grateful) use the Grail myth, shouldn't they use the entire myth? If the fragment is powerful, shouldn't the complete archetype be even more so? Shouldn't Jungians use both the Grail *and* the sword?

Again, I'm not sure what the answer is. I only mean to raise the question in the hope that others will explore it. But if the Grail is a symbol of internal healing, perhaps the sword is the tool for taking that healing beyond the individual and out into the world.

The Grail focuses our attention internally. It's the symbol of our ultimate spiritual destiny, our individuation after trials. Excalibur is something different, and it is something that, perhaps, is missing in Jungian psychology. Excalibur is the tool of power in the world. Coupled with the Grail, however, it becomes something new, a sword that both cuts and heals. Perhaps the time has come to combine the two into a new archetype.

**J**ames Hillman is fond of talking about psychological activism, complaining that, generally speaking, therapists are trained to listen and focus on the individual, not to speak out and challenge the things in the outer world, the things that wound us in the first place. Hillman claims that so much emphasis is focused on treating the disease in the individual that it is easy to forget to eliminate the metaphorical "germs" in the



John Waterhouse, *The Lady of Shalott*, 1888

