

Jessie L. Weston on *Parsifal*

Introduction

The name of Jessie L. Weston is familiar to scholars of European literature on account of her studies of medieval literature in relation to Celtic and Germanic mythology, and in particular for her books and articles about the Grail legend. In *Legends of the Wagner Drama* Weston discussed the relation between various Wagner dramas and those medieval poems and sagas on which, in her view, Wagner had based his dramas. In her treatment of *Parsifal*, extracts from which follow below, Weston compares and contrasts the action of Wagner's drama with the poem *Parzival* of the German poet-knight **Wolfram von Eschenbach** and with the earlier *Perceval* or *Li Conte del Graal* of the French poet **Chrétien de Troyes**, together with other, lesser poems of the same period. Weston is perceptive in identifying the elements of these sources that were adopted and adapted by Wagner. She also indicates where Wagner has deviated from the story as told by **Wolfram** for purposes of his own that Weston does not attempt to explain. Weston's interpretation of *Parsifal* has been (and continues to be) highly influential for the understanding of Wagner's last drama throughout the English speaking world. Quotations from **Wolfram**'s poem were taken from Miss Weston's own English translation.

Parsifal

Extracts from Weston's *Legends of the Wagner Drama*

- The Grail Castle
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Above: *The Grail Castle in the midst of a forest. Cover of King Ludwig's Diary.*

The Grail Castle

The keynote of the drama is struck in the peace of the opening scene; the repose of the **Grail** watchers, the solemn call to prayer from the castle, and the rising sun flashing the lake mists in the background. Wagner has followed his source [i.e. **Wolfram**] in placing the mysterious castle in the midst of a forest, and representing its discovery as a task in which both human skill and energy are unavailing. Both in the poem and in the drama the guidance must come from above; and the fact that Wagner apparently considers the guiding power to be the **Grail** itself, while **Wolfram** believes the guidance to come directly and immediately from God, is apparently due to the more definitely Christian character ascribed to the **Grail** by the dramatist.

The name of the castle, *Monsalvat*, is of course derived from the Monsalväsich of the *Parzival* (a name peculiar to the legend), where the derivation appears to be 'Mont Sauvage', from the wild and

lonely character of the surrounding district, a feature emphasized in the poem; but some scholars would explain the terms rather as signifying Mount of Healing (or Salvation), a rendering to which Wagner, from the form given to the name, seems to incline.

A^s to its locality **Wolfram** is by no means explicit: he certainly never says it is in Northern Spain, where Wagner places it; according to his statements it was within thirty-six hours' ride from Nantes. Writers later than **Wolfram**, however, do locate the **Grail** Castle in Spain, and the idea seems to have originated with the writer of *Der jünger Titurel*, a poem which deals very fully with the **Grail** and its guardians, and, long attributed to **Wolfram**, is now known to be the work of a certain Albert von Scharffenburg, a very inferior poet.

This location of the **Grail** Castle in Spain is of course favoured by those scholars who regard the **Grail** myth as of Oriental origin, and the Spanish Moors the medium of communication to Europe; but as a matter of fact there is practically no evidence to connect the **Grail** with Spain, saving the statement, which **Wolfram** refers, and probably correctly, to his French source, that the legend of the **Grail** was originally found in an Arabic manuscript at Toledo. The truth of this statement may be gauged by the fact that the same manuscript is stated to have contained the story of *Parzival*, the Aryan-Celtic origin of which is beyond doubt. It is much more in accordance with the general indications of the legend to believe that the poets imagined the castle to be situated in the northwest of France.

But in the process of development which the legend has



undergone, the nature of the castle to which the hero pays at first an abortive, and afterwards a successful, visit has passed through various transformations. At first it probably symbolised the abode of the departed, and was as such identical with the castle of Brynhild which figures in the *Thidreksaga* [the saga of Dietrich von Bern] and the *Nibelungenlied*; and the hero's task was to break the spell of death or slumber binding the inhabitants. In the performance of this task certain talismans not infrequently played an important part; gradually these talismans became Christianised; and now in the **Grail** legends we have **two** castles -- one, that of the **Grail**, the other, retaining its pre-Christian character, being known by varying names, the Castle of Maidens, the Château Merveil, or as here, **Klingsor's** Castle. Such a bespelled castle is undoubtedly an original and essential feature of the **Perceval** story.

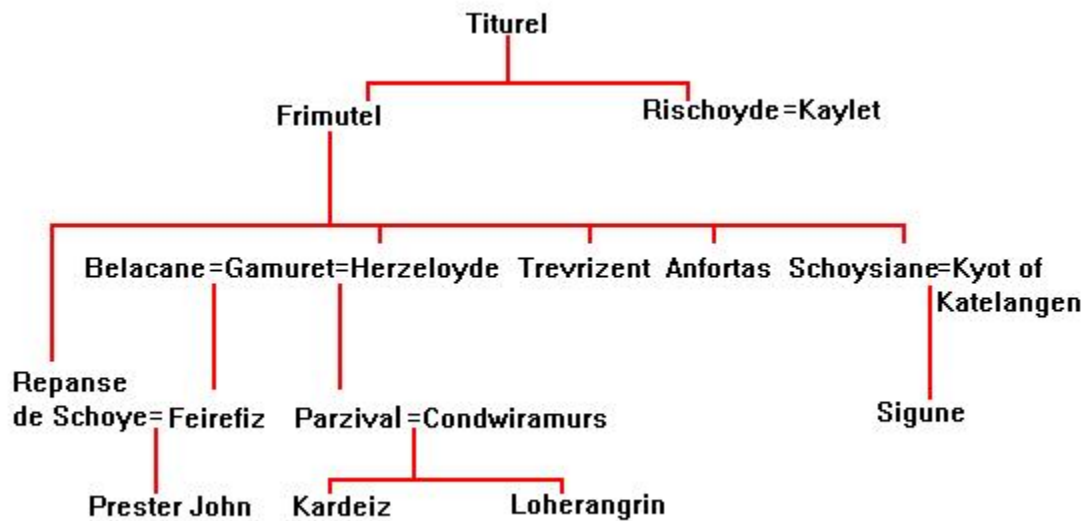
Titirel and Gurnemanz

The *Parzival* gives no account of the building of Monsalväsch, such as Wagner puts into the mouth of **Gurnemanz**, but simply speaks of **Titirel** as being first king and ruler of the **Grail** and its knights; but elsewhere **Wolfram** is more explicit. Among the works which the poet-knight has left are poems, or songs, dealing with the loves of **Sigune** and Schionatulander, four in all, but critics are doubtful whether more than the first two can be rightly ascribed to **Wolfram**. In the first of these poems, which are classed together under the name of *Titirel*, we find the old king, oppressed with the infirmities of age, resigning his kingdom to his son **Frimutel**, and telling him that he received the **Grail** from the hands of angels, that he was the first mortal to whose charge it was committed, and that the rules for the order of **Grail** knights were found on the mystic stone. There is no mention of the **Spear** here, nor of the building of Monsalväsch, the reason probably being that both castle and weapon were older than the **Grail** myth, and the writer accepted them as he found them.

It is doubtful whether the ***Titurel*** preceded or followed the ***Parzival***; probably the latter, and **Wolfram**'s intention was to fill up lacunae in the history of **Sigune**, who plays an important part in the ***Parzival***. Its statements agree with those of the more important work, and a common source is evidently at the root of both.

The old knight **Gurnemanz**, who is so prominent in the drama, is also a characteristic figure in the original **Perceval** legend, where his office is to instruct the hero in knightly customs and bearing - - instruction of which he has much need. The Welsh (***Peredur***) version represents this character as identical with the Fisher-King, and as uncle to the hero; but he is, as a rule, distinct from both, and the relationship of uncle rather pertains to the Hermit, also an essential character of the legend, whose office it is to direct the hero's spiritual development, whereas the old knight's teaching is directed rather to his outward bearing (combined in the case of **Gurnemanz** of Graharz with a good deal of ethical teaching).

In **Chrétien**'s poem the name of the knight is Gonemans de Gelbort; Gerbert, one of **Chrétien**'s continuators, calls him Gornumant, of which form **Gurnemanz** is obviously the German rendering. It will be seen that in the drama Wagner has united the characters of these two instructors in the person of his rather didactic old knight: the **Gurnemanz** of the **First** Act answering to **Gurnemanz** of Graharz, who appears in the Third Book of the poem and not again, though he is frequently alluded to as a model of knightly wisdom, skill and courtesy; the **Gurnemanz** of the **Third** Act answering to the Hermit **Trevrezent**, who in the Ninth Book of the poem unfolds to **Parzival** the mystery of the **Grail**, and restores him to faith in God.



Family Tree of Parzival, according to Wolfram von Eschenbach

Wagner's Treatment of the Legend

And here it may be well to remark that Wagner's treatment of the **Perceval** legend differs in some essential characters from his treatment of the other legends he has dramatised; he has handled it with far more freedom and boldness, and, while adhering faithfully to the **spirit** of the original, he has recast the incidents with great gain to the dramatic form, and in more than one detail with a happy insistence on what was probably an original feature of the legend. The result of this treatment has been that, though the story of **Parzival** is really longer and more full of incident than is that of Siegfried, the salient points are so happily brought out, and the balance of the whole is so well preserved, that, though treated in **one** drama instead of in **two**, it in no way suffers from compression. It **is** a new rendering of an old myth ...

Amfortas and the Fisher King

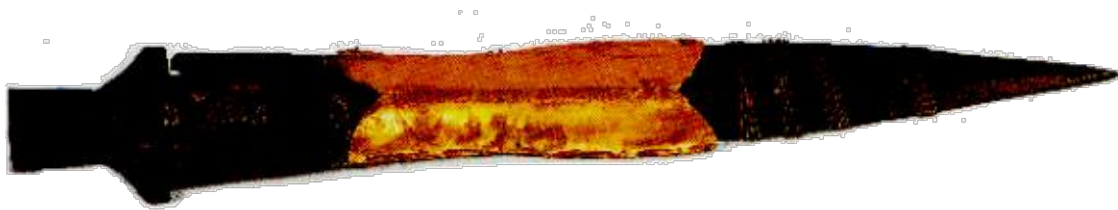
The Fisher-King, the wounded lord of the **Grail**, appears in every version of the **Grail** myth; in the English *Sir Percyvelle*, in which the **Grail** does not appear, alone is he missing. Belonging to that part of the **Perceval** legend which has been most strongly and directly affected by the development of the **Grail** myth, the character of the wounded king has now become so closely associated with the Christian talisman, that even when the earlier form of the legend has become obscured, and **Perceval** himself has ceased to be par excellence the hero of the quest, the wounded king, the Rich Fisher (varying names for the same character), still retains his connection with the object of that quest.

As a rule the king is represented [in the romances] as an old man; that **Anfortas**, in the *Parzival*, appears in the prime of life and manly beauty is due to the youth-bestowing properties of the **Grail**; **Trevrezent**, the Hermit, who is spoken of throughout as an aged man, is **Anfortas'** younger brother. In his representation of the **Grail** king, Wagner has, on the whole, followed the indications of his source; one generation has been dropped out, and **Amfortas** appears as **Titurel's** son, and not his grandson, thus heightening the tragic effect of the king's refusal to unveil the **Grail**; and the relationship between himself and **Parsifal** no longer exists. The distinctive feature of **Wolfram's** version, and that which has given Wagner the hint for the colouring 'motif' of his drama, lies in the fact that he represents **Anfortas** as wounded in punishment for an unlawful love; in other versions the king is wounded in battle, or accidentally, by handling a mysterious sword destined for the use of another. This change, thoroughly in harmony with the high spiritual and ethical treatment which raises **Wolfram's** version of the legend so immeasurably above those of the French poets, has been utilised by Wagner to the great benefit of the character of **Amfortas**, which in the drama possesses a significance altogether lacking in the legend.

Why Wagner changed the name of the king from **Anfortas** to **Amfortas** does not appear: the original form is supposed to have been derived from the French **Enfertez** = the sick man, with Provençal ending -as; names derived from Provençal French being a marked feature in **Wolfram's** poem.

The Bleeding Lance

In his account of the weapon with which the king has been wounded Wagner departs boldly from his source, and from what was almost certainly the oldest form of the story. For we are here confronted with what was evidently one of the original features of the legend; in most of the earlier forms, e.g. in **Chrétien**, in **Peredur**, and in the [prose] **Perceval**, we find a bleeding Lance accompanied by another talisman, which latter is eventually identified with the **Grail**. The **Spear** is in **Chrétien** the subject of a longer digression and explanation than is the **Grail** itself; and while **Perceval** goes in quest of the **Grail**, and to ask the **question** which will heal the wounded king, **Gawain** goes in search of the **Spear**...



We not infrequently meet with the statement, in print, that it was **Chrétien** de Troyes who first identified the **Spear** with the **Spear** of Longinus, and the **Grail** with the vessel of the Last Supper; but both these statements are incorrect. True, the **Spear** is so spoken of in the introduction to **Chrétien's** poem, and **Spear** and **Grail** are alike Christian symbols in the minds of **Chrétien's** continuators; but the

introduction is no less the work of a hand other than **Chrétien's**, than is the continuation (or, to be more correct, continuations), and he himself gives no account of the origin of either.

The fact seems to be that the **Spear** was, as **Wolfram** represents, the weapon with which the king was wounded; and although Wagner has radically changed the character of the weapon, yet in representing the **Spear**, rather than the **Grail**, as the object of the hero's quest, and the animating motive the desire of healing the maimed king, he is probably reproducing with fidelity original features of the story. No one can quarrel with Wagner for having represented both **Spear** and **Grail** under the more fully developed Christian character in which they are most familiar to us; the fact that he has done so bears out the contention advanced above, that in the *Parsifal* Wagner has been singularly happy in emphasizing the spiritual significance of the legend without detriment to its original form.

The Swan Episode

The episode of the **swan**, with which the hero makes his entry upon the scene, was doubtless suggested by a beautiful passage in the poem, where **Wolfram** depicts the child **Parzival** as slaying the birds in pure thoughtlessness, and then overwhelmed with remorse for the harm he has unwittingly done:

**But when the feathered songster
of the woods at his feet lay dead,
In wonder and dumb amazement
he bowed down his golden head,
And in childish wrath and
sorrow
tore the locks of his sunny hair;
... and his heart was with sorrow
filled,
And the ready tears of childhood**



flowed forth from their
fountains free
As he ran to his mother,
weeping,
and bowed him beside her knee.
"What aileth thee, child?" quoth
the mother,
"but now wast thou gay and
glad";
But childlike, he gave no answer,
scarce wist he what made him
sad!

The identification of the **swan** as the bird of the **Grail** is a later feature, due to the connection with the myth of the swan-knight, who, in the latest forms of the story, became identified with **Lohengrin**, **Parzival**'s son, and appointed heir to the **Grail** kingdom. The bird of the **Grail** is, more correctly, the **dove**, the badge of the **Grail** knights in the poem as in the drama; but **Wolfram** alone knows of this feature, and we cannot consider it part of the original legend...

Departure from the Castle

In the legend **Parzival** is not, as in the drama, driven from the hall with contumely but awakes in the morning to find himself alone in the castle, all the inhabitants having vanished; and it is as he rides forth from the castle that an unseen hand raises the drawbridge, and the voice of one unseen pours mockery upon him for his failure to ask the mystic **question**:



**Goose that thou art, ride
onward,
to the sun's hate hast thou been
born!
Thy mouth hadst thou thought to
open,
of these wonders hadst asked
thine host,
Great fame had been thine. But I
tell thee,
now hast thou this fair chance
lost!**

Left: The Grail Temple, Bayreuth 1882. After the design by Paul von Joukowsky. ©Cologne Theatre Museum.

- words in which we find the source of **Gurnemanz**'s taunt, cast by Wagner in a more homely and proverbial form. The whole incident has an unmistakable 'folk-lore' flavour about it, though perhaps it is more common [in folk-tales] to find that not the folk alone, but castle or palace itself, has vanished, and the hero awakes to find himself lying on bare ground.

<http://home.c2i.net/monsalvat/weston.htm>