HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Parzifal

Wolfram von Eschenbach

Wolfram von Eschenbach.. Wolfram von Eschenbach (1170-1220), the author of Parzifal, was a serving knight—that is a man at arms in the service of a provincial lord, a position on which he prided himself far more than on his role as poet. (As one of the greatest of the minnesingers he was thus by poetic as well as military profession, a creator constantly on the move.) From the little we know of his background, we believe he was born in Bavaria, near the city of Ansbach, that he found his way eventually into vassalage under a certain Hermann von Thuringia--with whom Walther von der Vogelweide was also connected—and that he composed his work—Parzifal itself, and two lesser verse pieces, Willehelm and Titurel-- in the first quarter of the twelfth century. (This work thus belongs to the era of the Minnesingers.)

Parzifal. Parzifal is the first major work of German imaginative literature to tap directly into the Christian tradition, which, as we see in the Niebelungenlied and the work of a Meistersinger like Hans Sachs, was not yet fully at home in German culture. (Christian sacramental symbols are widely scattered throughout that literature, but the background against which we read those symbols seems rural and pagan.) Von Eschenbach's work is vast and ambitious, an extensive tale through the personscape of Arthurian legend, search for the grail (which for the protagonist Parzifal is a sacred rock), pregnant encounters with the Fisher King, Amfortas, who suffers from the lance that pierced Christi's side, and that pierces his own, and, throughout it all, a gradual growth in Parzifal's own maturity and insight —though he mocks himself throughout, claiming, for instance, that he is 'illiterate; and permitting himself startling comic digressions. This vast epic stretches to 24, 810 lines, staged in the conventional four stress lines in rhyming couplets. (Though clearly, in fact, von Eschenbach was literate, it is likely that this minnesinger creation was backed up by oral presentation.)

The Grail background of the epic. Parzifal itself deals with the Grail legend, which refers to the legend of the chalice (or stone, or salver, or jewell) which had been preserved from the time of Christ's Last Supper: a relic worship given its strongest Mediaeval form by Chretien de Troyes, in his Perceval. The elaborate story concerns a Knight on a spiritual adventure quest, and in both epics—those of Chretien and Wolfram--ultimately involves a transformative encounter with the Holy Grail, the chalice (or other relic) alleged to have been used by Jesus Christ at the Last Supper. (Though the meaning of the grail itself is cloudy in Parzifal, and to a large part this sacred symbol serves as a useful literary quest device.) While in Chretien's Perceval we are concerned with the education of a crude young knight, Wolfram introduces us to a quest character who is untutored but not stupid; working his way to self-understanding through a fundamentally 'religious' milieu.

Wolfram and the meaning of his work. Read Parzifal, please, with an eye for the thriller story in which ultimate Christian mystery is embedded. Do you find this text of contemporary (to us) interest? What is most living in it? To note: Richard Wagner also made Parzifal into an opera, loosely but powerfully modeled on the blending of hero quest and sacred symbol

Reading

Primary Source Reading
Hatto, A.T, *Parzifal. Wolfram von Eschenbach,* 1980.

Secondary Source Reading
Hasty, Will, *A Companion to Wolfram's Parzifal,* 1999.

Further Reading
Groos, Arthur, *Romancing the Grail: Genre, Science, and Quest in Wolfram von Echenbach's Parzifal,* 1995.

Original language reading
Bumke, Joachim, *Wolfram von Eschenbach,* 1990.

Suggested paper topics
Does Wolfram's work, in *Parzifal*, reflect the minnesinger tradition to which we customarily assign Wolfram? What connections do you see between the lyrical work of Walther von der Vogelweide and Wolfram? Is the work of either writer deeply infused with Christian motifs?

What do you make of the kind of untutored but intelligent quester to whom Wolfram confides his narrative of a quest for the Holy Grail? Do you take this to be the author's self-portrait? What kind of self-transformation, then, do you take to be implied in the effort to find the grail?

EXCERPT http://products.ilrn-support.com/wawc1c01c/content/wciv1/readings/parzifal.html

Thus, Parzival parted from them, and courteous he now might bear
His knightly garb, and he knew them, the customs of knighthood fair.
But alas! He full sore was troubled with many a bitter pain,
And the world was too close, and too narrow with width of the spreading plain,
And the greenswald he thought was faded, and his harness had paled to white;
So the heart of the eye constraineth and dimmeth awhile the sight.
For since he had waxed less simple somewhat of his father's lore,
The desire of the man for the maiden, in his wakening heart he bore;
And he thought but of fair Liassé, that maiden so true and sweet,
How never her love she proffered, yet with honour the guest would greet.
And wherever his horse, might turn it he took in his grief no heed,
And if slowly it paced or swiftly he thought not to guide its speed.
Nor many a field well-fenced nor wayside cross he found;
Nor chariot-wheel nor horse-hoof had furrowed with tracks the ground;
Untrodden the woodland pathway, nor wide was I ween the way,
And he knew not the hills and the valleys — Full oft shall yea hear men say,
'Who rideth astray, in his wandering the lost axe may often find.'
They lay here unnumbered round him, if for axe ye have trees in mind.
Yet tho' far was the road he journeyed yet he went in no wise astray,
And thus from the land of Graharz he rode through the livelong day,
Till he came to the kingdom of Brobarz thro' mountains wild and high —
When the shadows of evening lengthened, and red flushed the western sky,
Then he came to a mountain torrent, and the voice of the raging flood
Rang clear as its waves rushed foaming round the crags that amid them stood.
So he rode adown by the waters till he came to the city fair
Which a king had bequeathed to his daughter; 'twas the city of Pelrapär,
And I wot that tho' fair the maiden who bare of that land the crown,
Great grief and small gladness had they who dwelt in that noble town!
Like an arrow that swiftly speedeth from the bow by a strong arm bent,
The waters onward rushing on their downward pathway went;
And a bridge hung high above them with woven work so fair,
And the stream it flowed swift to the ocean — Well-guarded was Pelrapär,
As children in swings delight them, and swing themselves to and fro,
So swung the bridge, yet ropeless, youthful gladness it scarce might know!
And on either side were standing, with helmets for battle bound,
Of knights e'en more than thirty, and they bade him to turn him round,
And with lifted swords, tho' feeble, the strife would they gladly wait,
They thought 'twas the King Klamidé whom they oft had seen of late,
So royally rode the hero to the bridge o'er the field so wide —

And thus to the youth they shouted, and with one voice his arms defied,
Tho' he spurred his steed full sharply it shrank from the bridge in fright,
But ne'er knew he a thought of terror — To the ground sprang the gallant knight.
And he led his horse by the bridle where the bridge hung high in air,
Too faint were a coward's courage so bitter a strife to dare!
And well must he watch his footsteps for he feared lest his steed should fall —