

An Arthurian Knight in Ivory and Ink: Visualizations of Chrétien de Troyes' 'Le Conte du Graal' in Fourteenth-Century Paris

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Abstract. Manuscript Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fr. 12577 and ivory casket Musée du Louvre, OA 122, and are two of three extant fourteenth-century visualizations of Chrétien's *Le Conte du Graal*, produced in Paris circa 1310-1330. Although the objects' shared era of production suggests similarities of iconography, artistic influences, and production methods, little research has been conducted regarding visual and cultural connections between MS fr. 12577 and OA 122. Through iconographic and stylistic analysis of the scenes each artisan depicted within his respective medium, I elucidate how the casket and manuscript's imagery personifies Perceval's dual nature, a young knight symbolic of the secular and sacred. As visualizations of Chrétien's most religiously-minded legend, MS fr. 12577 and OA 122 exemplify the intertwining of the sacred and secular within fourteenth-century French romantic art, specifically within illuminated manuscripts and carved ivory, materials that through their refinement, rarity, and expense, signified leisure, luxury, and nobility. By examining these two opulent objects, I provide insights into their purpose and significance in late medieval France, especially cultural crossover between the porous realms of sacred and secular medieval life.

Keywords: Medieval; France; Manuscripts; Illumination; Ivories; Arthurian Legends.

[es] Un caballero arturiano en marfil y tinta: visualizaciones de 'Le Conte du Graal' de Chrétien de Troyes en el París del siglo XIV

Resumen. Manuscrito Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fr. 12577 y cofre de marfil Musée du Louvre, OA 122, son dos de las tres visualizaciones existentes del siglo XIV de *Le Conte du Graal* de Chrétien, producidas en París alrededor de 1310-1330. Aunque la era de producción compartida de los objetos sugiere similitudes de iconografía, influencias artísticas y métodos de producción, se han realizado pocas investigaciones sobre las conexiones visuales y culturales entre MS fr. 12577 y OA 122. A través del análisis iconográfico y estilístico de las escenas que cada artesano representa en su medio respectivo, elucido cómo el cofre y las imágenes del manuscrito personifican la naturaleza dual de Perceval, un joven caballero simbólico de lo secular y lo sagrado. Como visualizaciones de la leyenda más religiosa de Chrétien, MS fr. 12577 y OA 122 ejemplifican el entrelazamiento de lo sagrado y lo secular dentro del arte romántico francés del siglo XIV, específicamente dentro de manuscritos iluminados y marfil tallado, materiales que, por su refinamiento, rareza y gasto, significaban ocio, lujo y nobleza. Al examinar estos dos opulentos objetos, proporciono ideas sobre su propósito y significado en la Francia medieval tardía, especialmente el cruce cultural entre los porosos reinos de la vida medieval sagrada y secular.

Palabras clave: Medieval; Francia; manuscritos; iluminación; teclas, Leyendas Artúricas.

Summary. 1. Introduction. 2. The Sacred and the Secular in the Medieval World. 3. *Le Conte du Graal*. 4. The Miniatures of MS fr. 12577. 5. The Frontispiece of MS fr. 12577. 6. The Perceval Casket. 7. MS fr. 12577 and OA 122 Compared. 8. The Grail in MS fr. 12577. 9. Christianity in MS fr. 12577 and OA 122. 10. MS fr. 12577 and OA 122 in Fourteenth-Century France. 11. Conclusions. 12. Written sources and bibliographical references.

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1. Introduction

This article explores the manner in which Chrétien de Troyes' final legend, *Le Conte du Graal* (*Perceval*), was

translated from written to visual form within two diverse mediums, manuscript illumination and carved ivory. The manuscript Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fr. 12577 and the ivory casket Musée du Louvre, OA 122

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are two of only three extant fourteenth-century visual representations of Chrétien's *Le Conte du Graal*, both produced in Paris *circa* 1310-1330². Although MS fr. 12577's and OA 122's shared era of production would appear to speak to similarities of iconography, artistic influences, and methods of production, to date little research has been conducted as to the possibility of visual and cultural connections between the manuscript and casket.

Of the forty-five extant manuscripts and fragments of Chrétien's Arthurian legends, only fifteen include all or part of *Le Conte du Graal*. Five of these fifteen include the entirety of *Le Conte du Graal*, plus a selection of the four *Perceval* continuations, written in the late twelfth or early thirteenth centuries, within fifty years of Chrétien's completion of *Le Conte du Graal*, *circa* 1160-1190³. Three of these five manuscripts were produced within the late thirteenth to fourteenth centuries: Bibliothèque nationale de France, MSS fr. 1453, fr. 12576, and fr. 12577⁴. MS fr. 12577 is the most lavishly illuminated extant *Perceval* manuscript, illuminated with 52 miniatures throughout *Le Conte du Graal* and the continuations, likely completed by a group of three artisans⁵. Within MS fr. 12577, Chrétien's *Perceval* is accompanied by eight miniatures. These first eight miniatures within the manuscript were painted by one artisan, possibly Richard de Montbason. Although Paris was the recognized center of production for high quality manuscripts and ivory carvings in the late thirteenth and early to mid-fourteenth centuries, the creation of Arthurian manuscripts in late medieval Paris is unusual. Overall, the Arthurian romances were more popular, and thus more commonly produced, in Flanders⁶. Relatedly, it is

rare to come across a fourteenth-century manuscript of Chrétien's work, as by the late Middle Ages, the thirteenth-century, anonymous prose Vulgate Cycle was on the whole more popular and more widely copied than Chrétien's late twelfth-century verse poems. This was perhaps due to the Vulgate Cycle's detailed account of the Grail, which is little more than a mysterious object in Chrétien's *Le Conte du Graal*⁷.

OA 122 is an uncommon piece of Gothic ivory carving; it is the only extant casket to depict the legend of Perceval, a story seldom depicted in any medieval artistic medium⁸. The casket's uniqueness is further enhanced by the religious imagery that adorns its lid, which juxtaposes the sacred and profane, and its illustration of one as opposed to several medieval legends or tropes on its side panels⁹.

MS fr. 12577's and OA 122's shared identity as overtly secular, romantic objects raise questions regarding their creation and purpose. For example, who, in early fourteenth-century Paris, would have commissioned an illuminated manuscript devoted entirely to *Perceval*, an Arthurian legend established by a twelfth-century court poet? Similarly, who ordered the production of such a specialized ivory casket? More broadly, for whom were the manuscript and ivory intended? What were their intended uses? What were the artists' visual influences? And finally, what can the Parisian production of these two materially different, yet visually similar, luxury objects impart about courtly culture in early fourteenth-century Paris, a time of great political and social upheaval for the nobility, the likely owners of two such luxurious objects?

Through an examination and comparison of the various scenes and iconography that each artisan chose to depict within his respective medium, I will elucidate how the imagery of both MS fr. 12577 and OA 122 personify Perceval's dual nature, a young knight symbolic of both the sacred and secular. As visualizations of Chrétien's most religiously minded legend, MS fr. 12577 and OA 122 exemplify the intertwining of the sacred and secular within the realm of fourteenth-century French romantic art, specifically within the mediums of illuminated manuscripts and carved ivory objects, materials that through their refinement, rarity, and great expense, signified leisure, luxury, and nobility. By analyzing these two opulent objects, I will provide insight into their purpose and

² The third and final fourteenth-century object to depict *Le Conte du Graal* is another manuscript, MS fr. 1453 (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France), produced in Paris *circa* 1315-1325. I have chosen not to include this manuscript in the discussion due to the overall poor preservation of the manuscript's miniatures, some of which have been badly rubbed.

³ The five extant illuminated *Le Conte du Graal* manuscripts are: MS 331/206 (Mons: Bibliothèque publique de la ville), MS H 249 (Paris: Bibliothèque de l'École de Médecine), MS fr. 1453 (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France), MS fr. 12576 (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France), MS fr. 12577 (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France); Lori Walters, "The Use of Multi-Compartment Opening Miniatures in the Illustrated Manuscripts of Chrétien de Troyes", in *The Manuscripts of Chrétien de Troyes*, eds. Keith Busby, Terry Nixon, Alison Stones and Lori Walters (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), 1: 332; Joseph J. Duggan, *The Romances of Chrétien de Troyes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 35; Alison Stones, "General Introduction", in *The Manuscripts of Chrétien de Troyes*, 1: 6.

⁴ MS fr. 1453 (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France) includes the continuation of Gauchier de Dordan, MS fr. 12576 (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France) includes the continuations of Gauchier de Dordan, Manessier, and Gerbert de Montreuil, and MS fr. 12577 (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France) also includes the continuations of Gauchier de Dordan, Manessier, and Gerbert de Montreuil. The continuations' appearance in manuscript copies of Chrétien's *Perceval* suggests that medieval readers viewed the continuations as natural extensions to Chrétien's seemingly unfinished work and enjoyed reading them along with *Le Conte du Graal*. Within this article, however, I will limit my discussion of the manuscript to Chrétien's work, the original, and most inherently religious, telling of *Perceval*; Leah Tether, *The Continuations of Chrétien's Perceval: Content and Construction, Extension and Ending* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2012), 45.

⁵ Muriel Whitaker, *The Legends of King Arthur in Art* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990), 40; Tether, *The Continuations of...*, 45.

⁶ Robert L. McGrath, "A Newly Discovered Illustrated Manuscript of Chrétien de Troyes: Yvain and Lancelot in the Princeton University Library", *Speculum* 38, no. 4 (1963): 593.

⁷ Alison Stones, "Arthurian Legends in Medieval Art", *Oxford Art Online*, accessed October 2, 2014, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T2089125>.

⁸ Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The New Arthurian Encyclopaedia* (London: Saint James Press, 1991), 250.

⁹ The composite form is more common among extant fourteenth-century ivory caskets, as exemplified by the group of eight caskets that depict various romantic scenes: Arthurian legends such as *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* (*The Knight of the Cart*, Chrétien's tale of Lancelot), to the Siege of the Castle of Love, to the moralizing tale of Aristotle and Phyllis. The group of eight composite caskets was likely created in either the same or several collaborating Parisian workshops *circa* the first half of the fourteenth century. The eight composite caskets are: Baltimore, Walters Art Museum, Inv. 71.264; Birmingham, Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Inv. 39.26; Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Inv. 123 C.; Krakow, Krakow Cathedral Treasury, Casket of Queen Jadwiga of Poland; London, British Museum, 1856,0623.166 (Dalton 368); London, Victoria & Albert Museum, 146-1866; New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 17.190.173; Paris, Musée de Cluny, Cl. 23840.

significance in late medieval France, including their production, patronage, and contemporary usage. In doing so, I will illustrate how MS fr. 12577 and OA 122 serve as tangible exemplars of cultural crossover between the interconnected realms of sacred and secular medieval life.

2. The Sacred and the Secular in the Medieval World

In the Middle Ages, a clear distinction between the sacred and the secular was often lacking. As Timothy Husband has commented, “Holy and profane thought were constantly intermingling. The ordinary was transmuted to the sacred and the sacred to the commonplace with such consistency that any real distinction between religious and secular thought virtually disappeared”¹⁰. Although to our contemporary sensibilities the sacred and secular may appear theoretically opposed, when considering the medieval connotations of sacred and secular, religious and profane, it can be helpful to view the terms as occupying opposite ends of a spectrum, wherein the terms ecclesiastical and religious, courtly and profane, also appear. In other words, during the Middle Ages, nothing was wholly sacred or secular, but rather existed as a compilation of these two concepts, with the sacred and secular both occurring to a greater or lesser degree, dependent on where the given object, legend, or value existed on the aforementioned spectrum. As Maurice Keen aptly notes, “We are in a world in which a purely secular ethic, divorced from a religious framework of value, was almost impossible to conceive of”¹¹. Indeed, although Chrétien’s *Le Conte du Graal* is ostensibly a secular romance, it contains undercurrents of religiosity and morality, which, when translated into visual form, as in MS fr. 12577 and OA 122, speak to the images’ duality as both sacred and secular illustrations.

3. *Le Conte du Graal*

As the most innately religious of Chrétien’s five Arthurian legends, and the first Arthurian legend to introduce the Holy Grail, *Le Conte du Graal* is imbued with Christian symbolism. The legend tells of Perceval, a naïve young Welshman who rashly decides he desires nothing more than to be knighted by King Arthur. *Le Conte du Graal* describes Perceval’s chivalric adventures and comic mishaps as he gains knightly acumen, if not spiritual understanding. It is only after witnessing the mysterious procession of the Grail and Bleeding Lance but failing to question the use and meaning of both, followed by his mother’s death, and five years of solitary travel and hardship, that Perceval gains spiritual enlightenment. Upon speaking to a hermit on Good Friday, Perceval finally comprehends the integral role religion must play in his life if he is to be a model Christian knight. At this point in the

story, Chrétien turns away from Perceval, to focus instead on the wholly secular adventures of the gallant Sir Gawain, whose story parallels, or provides an *entrelacement* to, the story of Perceval. Due to the unfinished nature of *Le Conte du Graal*, Chrétien does not return to Perceval’s adventures, and the reader is left to ponder the juxtaposition of Perceval and Gawain, the former, a bumbling youth turned pious Christian knight, and the latter, an experienced, highly regarded knight, yet whose exploits are entirely secular. It is this marked contrast between the sacred and secular that renders *Le Conte du Graal* such an intriguing and multivalent story. Although on a superficial level the legend is a romance, at its core are medieval Christian values: the importance of piety and confession, God’s forgiving nature, and acknowledgment and gratitude for Christ’s sacrifice. The legend’s light-hearted, secular exterior belies its solemn, sacred, even moralizing interior, which is gradually revealed as the story progresses. This dichotomy between outwardly secular and inwardly sacred is also applicable to the imagery of MS fr. 12577 and OA 122, both of which juxtapose scenes of romantic love, secular chivalry, and bawdy comedy with pious Christian symbolism, allowing for a complex layering of visual understanding, albeit in two distinct manners due to physical differences of material.

4. The Miniatures of MS fr. 12577

By considering the division of miniatures within MS fr. 12577’s telling of Chrétien’s *Le Conte du Graal*, it can be surmised that the illuminator decided that the Perceval thread of the legend was more important than the Gawain thread. Of the eight miniatures that illustrate *Le Conte du Graal*, six depict episodes of Perceval, leaving a mere two to illustrate the adventures of Gawain. This decision elevates the role and status of Perceval, while debasing that of Gawain. This is a seemingly intentional, although surprising effect, considering both the seniority and respect that is traditionally awarded Gawain, one of the best-known knights of King Arthur’s Round Table¹². L.T. Topsfield provides an explanation for this reversal of knightly status in *Le Conte du Graal*, noting that Gawain’s purely secular rather than spiritual chivalry and adventures “reflect the triviality of worldly fame, the quest for *vaine gloire*, the sin of violence which can only be ‘redressed’ by further violence, the topsy-turvy quality of a world which is controlled by self-interest”¹³. These characteristics aptly describe the overwhelmingly corrupt status of knighthood in fourteenth-century France, wherein chivalry had become disconnected from its Christian origins¹⁴. It is fitting that within this manuscript copy of Chrétien’s most innately Christian Arthu-

¹⁰ Timothy Husband and Gloria Gilmore-House, *The Wild Man: Medieval Myth and Symbolism* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1980), 1.

¹¹ Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 81.

¹² Thomas Hinton, *The Conte du Graal Cycle: Chrétien du Troyes’ Perceval, the Continuations, and French Arthurian Romance* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2012), 101.

¹³ Leslie T. Topsfield, *Chrétien de Troyes: A Study of the Arthurian Romances* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 225.

¹⁴ For more on the relationship between medieval knighthood and Christianity, see Martin Aurell and Catalina Girbea, *Chevalerie et christianisme aux XIIe et XIIIe siècles* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2011).

rian poem, Perceval, the more spiritually minded knight, is awarded greater visual prominence. In choosing to focus the majority of his miniatures on Perceval rather than Gawain, the illuminator of MS fr. 12577 may have influenced the reader's comprehension of the legend, directing his or her attention towards the story's Christian connotations. This is further evidenced by the specific textual episodes that the illuminator rendered in visual form¹⁵. The illuminator of MS fr. 12577 supervises the reader's visual encounter of the manuscript through his selection and rendering of *Le Conte du Graal's* most religiously imbued scenes and characters.

5. The Frontispiece of MS fr. 12577

The frontispiece of MS fr. 12577 (Fig. 1) is dominated by a double miniature, the largest image in the manuscript, leaving room for a mere eight lines of text. The two registers of the miniature illustrate four connected scenes from the beginning of *Le Conte du Graal*, creating a four-square pattern delineated by alternating blue and red borders that enclose the scenes. The first scene, at top left, depicts Perceval waving farewell to his mother as he sets out for a day of hunting. This introductory image of Perceval is key, as it exemplifies Perceval's Welsh lineage (he wears a red garment with a peaked cap) and rustic, simplistic upbringing (he carries javelins, instead of the knightly and sophisticated sword and lance), two integral characteristics of Perceval that the legend will soon question and alter. The next scene, on the upper right of the folio, depicts Perceval kneeling in veneration before a group of five knights. In his ignorance, he mistakes them for angels, the first hint of the legend's Christian undertones. Despite the evident care the artist took in terms of figural details, such as facial expressions, there is a lack of continuity within these initial two scenes, as Perceval's horse is first painted black as he sets out from home, and then white as he encounters the knights. This may have been a deliberate artistic decision, the differing colors of Perceval's steed differentiating between the two scenes. Few visual cues are provided to alert the reader to the separation of the left and right sides of the miniature, apart from the repetition of Perceval and the changing color of the border.

In the lower register, the left-hand image illustrates Perceval setting out for King Arthur's court, where, as Perceval understands it, they "[make] men knights"¹⁶. Here the illuminator awkwardly depicts Perceval's mother in the midst of a faint, her arms outstretched as she falls to the ground, already pining for her departing son. This is a defining moment in the story, as it is upon his departure from home that Perceval first sins; his mother dies of grief for her absent son, an event that reverberates throughout the entirety of the legend¹⁷. This introductory image foreshadows events to come, creating a roadmap for the reader through its visual accentuation of key mo-

ments within *Le Conte du Graal*. Within the third image there is again a lack of consistency, for although it remains architecturally the same, the color of Perceval's childhood home is here a grey blue, as opposed to the light purple in which it is rendered above. Is this once again an attempt by the illuminator to exemplify the progression of scenes or passage of time? This question is further complicated by the fourth and final scene, which is also subtly shown as separate from the previous scene by a change of border color. In this last scene, the color of Perceval's horse changes for a third time, once again causing the viewer to question whether this was a deliberate tool of visual transition used by the illuminator.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits, Français 12577

Figure 1. *Roman de Perceval le Gallois*, by Chrétien de Troyes. MS fr. 12577, f. 1r. (c.1310-1330). Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France. Source: gallica.bnf.fr

Although Roger Loomis has noted that the illuminator appears to have been unfamiliar with the text, a fact that hampered his illustration of the legend (further exemplified by the orange, rather than red clothing and arms of the Red Knight), it seems more likely that the changing color of Perceval's horse was an attempt at signifying narrative progression¹⁸. Were the illuminator to have painted the two overlapping images of Perceval's steed the same color, it would have been difficult to visually read the two animals as separate entities. Further-

¹⁵ Hinton, *The Conte du Graal...*, 103.

¹⁶ Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval: The Story of the Grail*, trans. Nigel Bryant (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), 387.

¹⁷ Walters, "The Use of Multi-Compartment...", 336.

¹⁸ Roger S. Loomis, *Arthurian Legends in Medieval Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), 101.

more, the illuminator has taken care to repeatedly depict Perceval in his signature Welsh garment, which speaks to a certain level of exactness employed for visual continuity¹⁹. In addition, Perceval is shown killing the Red Knight with a lance, rather than the javelin originally described by Chrétien. Although a javelin and lance exhibit a similar spear-like appearance, the two weapons differ in use. Whereas a lance is held, usually while the combatant is astride a horse, a javelin is thrown. Rather than reading this as yet another example of the illuminator's ignorance of the text, Thomas Hinton interprets this discontinuity of weapons as symbolic of Perceval's great desire to become a knight, a "transformative" episode that is a catalyst for future events, leading to Perceval's fateful encounter with the Grail and Bleeding Lance, two objects evocative of items associated with the Crucifixion; the lance that pierced Christ's side, and the cup that Joseph of Arimathea, father of Josephus, used to collect his blood, as referenced in the Vulgate *L'Estoire del saint Graal*²⁰. It is further possible that this image can, like that of Perceval's dying mother, be seen to foreshadow events to come; Perceval's dubbing as a knight, as well as his future successful knightly combats²¹. Throughout *Le Conte du Graal*, Perceval defeats a series of base knights whom he sends in disgrace to King Arthur's court, thereby promoting his knightly prowess. A similar hypothesis is raised by Lori Walters in regard to the late thirteenth-century manuscript, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fr. 12576. Walters comments that MS fr. 12576's frontispiece miniature (Fig. 2), whose iconography is almost identical to that of MS fr. 12577, and may, therefore, have served as a model for the illumination of MS fr. 12577, introduces themes integral to the romance as a whole, namely Perceval's *niceté*, his future successful knightly conquests, and his search for the Grail²².

The possible intentionality and significance of the illuminator's iconography is lent further credence when the corresponding scene on OA 122 is examined. The front left half of the casket (Fig. 3) similarly depicts Perceval's battle against the Red Knight, and again depicts Perceval wielding a lance rather than a javelin. The repetition of this supposed visual mistake in two different artistic mediums from the same time period lends credence to the possibility that the swapping of a lance for the textually specified javelin was, in fact, intended, and may conceal a deeper meaning. It is also possible that any established iconography of *Le Conte du Graal*, such as Perceval's battle with the Red Knight, circulated independently of the text, allowing for the unconscious repetition of certain textually inaccurate tropes, like Perceval's use of a lance rather than a javelin. This

would suggest the cross-medium sharing of visual references between manuscript and ivory artisans.



Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Figure 2. *Le Conte du Graal*, by Chrétien de Troyes.

MS fr. 12576, f. 1r. (c. late 13th century). Paris:

Bibliothèque nationale de France. Source: gallica.bnf.fr

Based on a thorough examination of the miniatures that illuminate the frontispiece of MS fr. 12577, it is possible to characterize the manuscript's first illuminator as an artisan who although relatively skilled, was unfamiliar with the text and thus reliant on a combination of previously produced visual references, artistic creativity, and the rubrics that accompany the illuminations. The text rubricated in red above or below each miniature narrates the depicted scene and having been written prior to the illumination of the manuscript, could have served as a textual aid to artists who were literate, yet unfamiliar with the text as a whole. The content of the rubrics of MS fr. 12577 match the scenes depicted. These rubrics do not, however, preclude the use of artistic invention. Keith Busby characterizes the inconsistencies between the text and images within MS fr. 12577 not as idle mistakes, but as products of the illuminator's artistic license, describing the manuscript's miniatures as "some of the most ambitious, detailed, and successful of all late thirteenth and early fourteenth-century Perceval illustrations"²³. Whether such visual decisions as Perceval's

¹⁹ According to Chrétien, Perceval's mother "outfitted and dressed him in a coarse canvas shirt and breeches made in the style of Wales, where breeches and hose are of one piece, I believe; and he had a cloak and hood of buckskin fastened about him"; Chrétien de Troyes, "The Story of the Grail (Perceval)", in *Arthurian Romances*, trans. William W. Kibler (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 387.

²⁰ Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation, The History of the Holy Grail*, trans. Carol J. Chase (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010), 1: 16-17.

²¹ Lacy, *The Lancelot-Grail*..., 103.

²² Walters, "The Use of Multi-Compartment...", 335.

²³ Keith Busby, "The Illustrated Manuscripts of Chrétien's Perceval", in *The Manuscripts of Chrétien de Troyes*, eds. Keith Busby, Terry Nixon, Alison Stones and Lori Walters (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), 1: 363.



Figure 3. *Perceval* casket, front panel. OA 122. (c.1310-1330). Paris: Musée du Louvre.
Source: ©Réunion des musées nationaux.

use of a lance rather than a javelin can be seen to have a symbolic connotation would have been dependent on the viewers and their varying levels of Christian devotion and textual and iconographic knowledge.

The layout of MS fr. 12577's frontispiece is typical for secular books of the early fourteenth century, as by *circa* 1300 it was an established practice to illuminate the opening page of secular manuscripts with either a series of several related miniatures, or one large miniature divided into compartments, as seen in MS fr. 12577²⁴. Alison Stones suggests that the division of a single large introductory miniature into multiple registers, as seen on folio 1r of MS fr. 12577, is an artistic decision derived from the decoration of psalters, in which full-page miniatures were often sub-divided into individual scenes²⁵. If Stones' hypothesis is correct, it emphasizes the links in the production of religious and secular manuscripts, illustrating one way in which the creation of late medieval objects of visual culture resulted in an intertwining of the sacred and secular. From surviving documentation such as tax records and town plans, it is known that the various craftsmen involved in the production of manuscripts, including scribes, illuminators, parchment makers, book dealers, and book binders, often had their workshops located on the same or neighboring streets, regardless of whether the manuscripts produced were sacred or secular in nature²⁶. For example, there is evidence that illuminators of vernacular romances such as *Le Conte du Graal* also illuminated religious texts²⁷. Although the illuminator of MS fr. 12577's *Le Conte du Graal* is not definitively known, the illuminations bear a distinct resemblance to those found in manuscripts illuminated by the artisan Richard de Montbason, a known *libraire* and illuminator, who worked in mid-fourteenth-century Paris on the Rue neuve Notre Dame, the heart of manuscript production in late medieval Paris²⁸.

Richard de Montbason took the oath of booksellers in 1338 and is believed to have been involved in the production of several manuscript copies of *Le Roman de la Rose*, such as Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, MS Gg.4.6, produced in Paris *circa* 1330-1340, which exhibits illuminations of a similar artistic style to that of MS fr. 12577's *Le Conte du Graal*²⁹. That Richard is recorded as *libraire* in the colophon of a manuscript containing *La Legende des Sains*, or the *Lives of the Saints* (Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fr. 241), whose illuminations are also stylistically similar to those of MS fr. 12577, suggests that he was involved in the production of both sacred and secular manuscripts. *Libraire* was an ambiguous role that likely consisted of both the selling of manuscripts and management of their production. *Libraires* could also serve as go-betweens for the patron and manuscript workshop³⁰. Similarly, the translation of religious iconography to secular images further speaks to the close ties, or cross-fertilization, between sacred and secular book production³¹.

6. The Perceval Casket

OA 122's iconography is unique in its visualization of the sacred and secular. Unlike MS fr. 12577's illuminations, in which the sacred and secular inhabit shared spaces, existing alongside one another so that there is no clear distinction between the two realms, the ivory casket depicts the sacred and profane in clearly separate spheres. Whereas the lid of the casket is decorated with images of Saints Christopher, Martin, George, and Eustace (Fig. 4), the sides of the casket (Figs. 2, 5-7) depict the inherently laical aspects of *Le Conte du Graal*. Neither the spiritually imbued episode of the Grail and Bleeding Lance, nor Perceval's religious epiphany in the forest is shown. This simultaneous separation and juxtaposition of the sacred

²⁴ Alison Stones, "Secular Manuscript Illumination in France", in *Medieval Manuscripts and Textual Criticism*, ed. Christopher Kleinhenz (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1977), 93; Walters, "The Use of Multi-Compartment...", 332.

²⁵ Stones, "Secular Manuscript Illumination...", 94.

²⁶ Alison Stones, "Sacred and Profane Art: Secular and Liturgical Book Illumination in the Thirteenth Century", in *The Epic in Medieval Society, Aesthetic and Moral Values*, ed. Harold Scholler (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1977), 104.

²⁷ Stones, "Secular Manuscript Illumination...", 90.

²⁸ Alison Stones, "The Illustrated Chrétien Manuscripts and Their Artistic Context", in *The Manuscripts of Chrétien de Troyes*, eds. Keith

Busby, Terry Nixon, Alison Stones and Lori Walters (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), 1: 262.

²⁹ Stones, "The Illustrated Chrétien...", 262; University of Cambridge Digital Library, "*Le Roman de la Rose* (MS Gg.4.6)", accessed March 30, 2017, <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-GG-00004-00006/17>.

³⁰ Alison Stones, "The Illustrations of the French Prose Lancelot in Belgium, Flanders, and Paris 1250-1340" (Ph.D., University of London, 1971), 88; Richard H. Rouse and Mary A. Rouse, *Illiterati et Uxorati: Manuscripts and Their Makers: Commercial Book Producers in Medieval Paris, 1200-1500* (Turnhout: Harvey Miller, 2000), 14.

³¹ Stones, "Sacred and Profane Art...", 109.



Figure 4. *Perceval* casket, lid. OA 122. (c.1310-1330). Paris: Musée du Louvre.
Source: ©Réunion des musées nationaux.



Figure 5. *Perceval* casket, right panel. OA 122. (c.1310-1330). Paris: Musée du Louvre.
Source: ©Réunion des musées nationaux.



Figure 6. *Perceval* casket, left panel. OA 122. (c.1310-1330). Paris: Musée du Louvre.
Source: ©Réunion des musées nationaux.

and secular on the casket's panels is intriguing, especially when compared to the more integrated sacred and secular imagery found in MS fr. 12577. Early fourteenth-century Paris was the recognized center of high quality Gothic

ivory carving. Considering that lavishly illuminated manuscripts were produced within the same time period and location as Gothic ivories, and quite probably utilized some of the same visual references, the dichotomy of tone



Figure 7. *Perceval* casket, rear panel. OA 122. (c.1310-1330). Paris: Musée du Louvre.
Source: ©Réunion des musées nationaux.

between OA 122 and MS fr. 12577 is curious, especially considering that both objects depict the same, rarely illustrated legend.

It is possible that the casket was meant to be viewed from the lid down, so that viewers would first ponder the Christian iconography of the saints, giving precedence to the religious imagery, then apply this knowledge to the images of Perceval, thereby creating an ‘interactive’ picture of Christian and Arthurian knighthood. Considering the religious significance of each saint, it can be surmised that the viewer was expected to draw connections between Christopher’s unknowing aid of the infant Christ, Martin’s generosity towards a mysterious beggar, George’s chivalry, and Eustace’s newfound piety³². All four saintly virtues can be applied to the legend of Perceval specifically, and to the concept of Christian knighthood more generally. For a viewer familiar with Chrétien’s *Le Conte du Graal*, Christopher’s unknowing aid of the infant Christ recalls Perceval’s naïve and self-serving defeat of the Red Knight, which inadvertently aids King Arthur. Perceval covets the Red Knight’s fashionable armor, and, in keeping with his youthful naiveté, slays the Red Knight with a javelin when the knight refuses to cede his armor. Coincidentally, the Red Knight is one of King Arthur’s greatest foes and has stolen the King’s prized goblet. By killing the Red Knight to aid his own selfish cause, Perceval makes possible the recovery of Arthur’s cup, placing the king in his debt³³. Meanwhile, Martin’s generosity and George’s chivalry underscore two important tenets of knighthood: boundless aid and unflinching courage. Finally, Eustace’s vision of Christ’s head between the antlers of a stag refers specifically to Perceval’s dramatic conversion and confession on Good Friday, and more generally, to the importance of Christian, as opposed to irreligious, knighthood³⁴. Viewers both with and without specific knowledge of *Le Conte du Graal* would have been able to draw connections between the religious imagery of the casket’s lid, and the secular imagery on the four side panels. Whether ruminating specifically on Perceval’s Christian progression, or more generally on the strains of Christianity inherent within medieval chivalry, con-

temporary viewers would not have found the juxtaposition of Christian saints and Arthurian knight to be at odds. Although the images of the saints appear exclusively sacred, they exemplify the subtle interweaving of the sacred and the secular within the casket’s imagery, in addition to personifying the lack of a definitive boundary between the sacred and secular within late medieval art and culture. Furthermore, the carvings on the lid of OA 122 are stylistically different from those on the casket’s side panels. The lack of standardization among Gothic ivory caskets as a whole, and the corresponding dimensions of the lid and side panels of OA 122 specifically, suggest that the lid was original to the casket, and was not added as a later addition. This lends credence to the conscious visual intertwining of the sacred and secular within a single object of late medieval visual culture.

In regard to fourteenth-century ivories as a cohesive group, Keith Busby suggests that the scenes selected for depiction were chosen for their decorative effect and popularity³⁵. Although Busby’s theory is supported by the repetitive imagery found on the aforementioned group of eight composite caskets, wherein the lids of all eight depict the common romantic trope of the Siege of the Castle of Love, the inclusion of religious as well as secular imagery on OA 122 suggests that this particular casket’s imagery was chosen for reasons specific to its context and patron. Taking the casket’s knightly imagery into consideration, it is possible that the casket was originally created for a young man. Although scholars including Richard Randall Jr., Martine Meuwese and Jeanne Fox-Friedman have routinely, and without clear evidence, suggested that ivory caskets were typically used by noblewomen to store small trinkets and jewelry, OA 122’s subtle emphasis on the inherently Christian nature of medieval knighthood suggests a young male owner, to whom the legend of Perceval may have had special significance³⁶. Notwithstanding that by the early fourteenth century the golden age of dually sacred and secular chivalry was a distant memory, the casket’s imagery could still have served a dual purpose, both a form of visual pleasure; an

³⁵ Busby, “The Illustrated Manuscripts...”, 361.

³⁶ Richard H. Randall, Jr., “Popular Romances Carved in Ivory”, in *Images in Ivory: Precious Objects of the Gothic Age*, ed. Peter Barnet (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 65; Martine Meuwese, “Chrétien in Ivory”, in *Arthurian Literature XXV*, eds. Elizabeth Archibald and David F. Johnson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), 119; Jeanne Fox-Friedman, “King Arthur in Art”, in *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, ed. Helen Fulton (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 389.

³² Élisabeth Antoine, “Casket: Four Saints and the Story of Perceval”, in *Imagining the Past in France*, eds. Elizabeth Morrison and Anne D. Hedeman (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2010), 288.

³³ De Troyes, “The Story of the Grail (Perceval)”, 394-396.

³⁴ De Troyes, 460-461.

escape from the current political and social troubles of fourteenth-century France, as well as a reminder of the importance of living a moral, Christian life. The casket's possible male ownership is further supported by OA 122's lack of courtly scenes. Whereas caskets similar to OA 122 in terms of time and place of production (such as the group of eight composite caskets), commonly included romantic scenes such as Gawain receiving the key to the Castle of Maidens, the Siege of the Castle of Love, and Tristan and Isolde's tryst beneath the tree, all of which can be understood to connote feminine appeal and courtly love, OA 122 includes no such romantic scenes, focusing instead on masculine images of combat and knighthood³⁷. For example, scenes of Perceval's romantic love interest, Blanchefleur, are conspicuously absent.

7. MS fr. 12577 and OA 122 Compared

Due to the explicit juxtaposition of the casket's sacred and secular imagery, the viewing of OA 122 was likely a more active process than the viewing of images in MS fr. 12577. Whereas in the manuscript the scenes selected for illumination include Perceval witnessing the procession of the Grail and Lance, and conversing with the hermit, scenes in which the sacred and secular are inherently interwoven, the clear distinction between the religious scenes on the casket's lid, and the secular, romantic scenes that adorn its side panels requires a greater effort from the viewer, calling for complex connections to be made between the physically disconnected sacred and secular images. Such connections are required if the viewer is to fully understand the subtleties of the casket's iconographic meaning. The overall tone of the selected images is also interesting. Whereas the illuminator of MS fr. 12577 illustrated scenes that highlight Perceval's path to piety and Christian enlightenment, such as the episodes of the Grail and Bleeding Lance, and Perceval's conversation with the hermit, the maker of OA 122 chose scenes of a more light-hearted, comic nature, forgoing scenes of obvious religious connotation. Although OA 122 and MS fr. 12577 share foundational scenes such as Perceval's formative encounter with five Arthurian knights (Figs. 1 and 6), his departure from home (Figs. 1 and 7), and his battle against the Red Knight (Figs. 1 and 3), the two objects differ in their respective inclusion or exclusion of Perceval's more humorous adventures. The first half of *Le Conte du Graal* is rife with comic descriptions of Perceval's ignorance, such as his bumbling harassment of a young maiden, and lack of any knightly knowledge or prowess. None of these episodes, however, are depicted in MS fr. 12577. Instead, the illuminator's only reference to Perceval's simplicity is the hooded garment he is first shown wearing, a symbol of his Welsh, and, according to Chrétien, therefore "coarse" upbringing³⁸.

Despite MS fr. 12577's and OA 122's almost identical imagery of Perceval fighting the Red Knight, the manuscript and ivory differ in the scene each artisan de-

picts next. Whereas in MS fr. 12577, the illuminator next depicts Perceval's battle against Guingueron (the senechal who is holding his love-interest Blanchefleur and her people captive) (Fig. 8), the carver of OA 122 lingers over the vanquishing of the Red Knight, using the right side of the casket's front panel to illustrate (from left to right) Perceval's unsuccessful attempt to remove the Red Knight's armor, followed by Yvonet assisting Perceval in donning the armor, illustrating Perceval's lack of knightly qualities and his desire to present himself as an Arthurian knight³⁹. Both images have an air of absurdity, due to Perceval's awkward stance as he tugs at the fallen knight's armor, his passivity as he is dressed by Yvonet, and the carver's pointed inclusion of his Welsh hood, symbolic of Perceval's *niceté*⁴⁰. In Chrétien's *Le Conte du Graal*, this is a comical scene in which Perceval once again displays his lack of maturity and sophistication; he is dogmatic in his desire to wear the Red Knight's armor, yet refuses to part with his crude Welsh garments, failing to understand that the armor is much higher quality. The comic aspect of the situation is evident in the carving, Perceval's Welsh cap rendering him jester-like, while the awkward manner in which he stands over the fallen Red Knight, struggling to remove his armor, adds to the ridiculous nature of the situation.

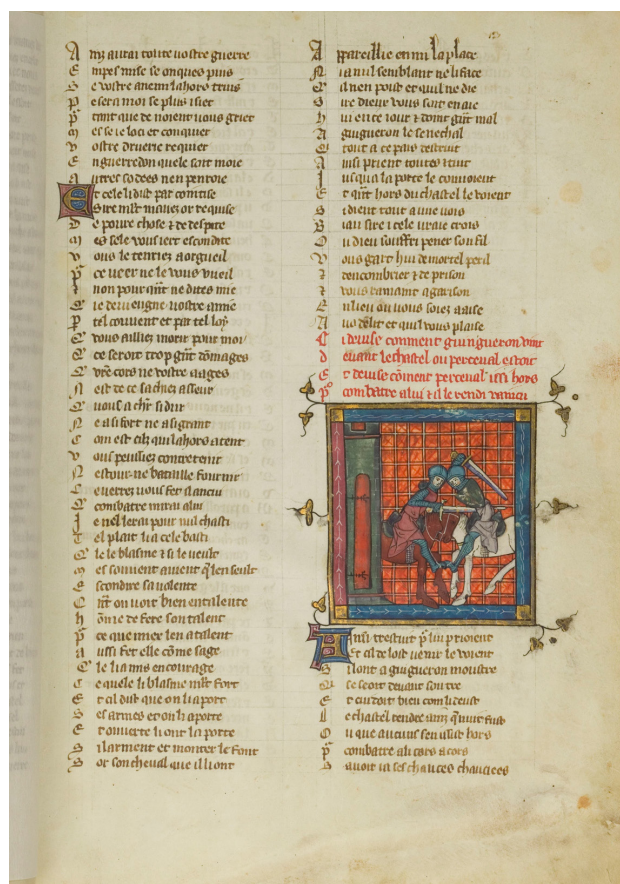


Figure 8. *Roman de Perceval le Gallois*, by Chrétien de Troyes. MS fr. 12577, f. 13r. (c.1310-1330). Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France. Source: gallica.bnf.fr

³⁷ Fox-Friedman, "King Arthur in Art", 68.

³⁸ Fox-Friedman, "King Arthur in Art", 387.

³⁹ Alexandre Micha, *La Tradition manuscrite des romans de Chrétien de Troyes* (Genève: Librairie Droz S.A., 1966), 48.

⁴⁰ Walters, "The Use of Multi-Compartment...", 335.

Another scene of Perceval's boorishness is depicted on the rear panel of the casket, where Perceval is shown (again wearing his Welsh cap, as this is prior to his attainment of the Red Knight's armor) kissing the reluctant maiden (Fig. 7), reinforcing the simultaneously secular and comic nature of the scenes on the casket's side panels. It is a sign of Perceval's childish nature that his encounter with the maiden at the beginning of the legend is almost entirely non-sexual; he ignorantly believes that kissing a maiden, even against her will, is a required social grace. The inclusion of this scene on the casket provides comic relief for the viewer, especially when juxtaposed with the weighty iconography of the four saints on the lid. However, it can also be argued that this scene negatively renders Perceval a character not to be taken seriously; the inclusion of his Welsh hood in conjunction with his crude actions toward the maiden only increase his buffoon-like appearance, rendering the casket's Arthurian scenes more decorative banter than moralizing visual tropes. A final scene that illustrates Perceval's naiveté is found on the right end panel of the casket (Fig. 5). Here the carver depicts Perceval's arrival at King Arthur's court, where the young Welshman interrupts a courtly feast by riding into the hall and refusing to dismount. On this panel, the carver also makes creative use of the background, including the reluctant maiden's subsequent abuse by her lover after Perceval forces himself upon her. The inclusion of this scene increases the complexity of the panel's imagery as it successfully renders two separate yet simultaneous scenes, while also foreshadowing events to come. Later in the legend, Perceval again meets the maiden, and frees her from the unfair punishment her lover has sentenced her to. In this way Perceval absolves himself of his earlier sin against the maiden, exemplifying the progress he has made towards becoming a conscientious Christian knight.

In contrast, the illuminator of MS fr. 12577 passes over these scenes entirely, focusing solely on the religious, chivalric aspects of *Le Conte du Graal*, portraying Perceval in a more laudatory light. It is worth considering what each artist's selected scenes say about his (or his patron's) interpretation of the legend. Considering that both mediums' images draw the reader's attention to select scenes out of some 9,000 lines of verse, these particular scenes were likely considered integral to the visual (if not necessarily textual) telling of the legend⁴¹. Hence, MS fr. 12577 and OA 122 are in agreement in regard to the importance of the introductory scenes (those illustrated on the frontispiece of MS fr. 12577 and the front, back, and left side panels of OA 122), but differ in regard to their varying depictions of the sober and religious versus comic and secular aspects of the legend. This is in accordance with Busby's observation that medieval images of *Le Conte du Graal*, unlike those of other texts, both sacred and secular, cannot be observed to

have a "standard program of illustration"⁴². It is possible that this lack of artistic canon is due to the legend's overall lack of popularity in the later middle ages. Although the extant manuscripts and ivories that depict *Le Conte du Graal* are of generally high artistic quality, Chrétien's final legend was never one of the most popular Arthurian tales, especially in fourteenth-century France, when the prose Vulgate Cycle held sway.

The difference in selected scenes between MS fr. 12577 and OA 122 suggests a dichotomy between the visual references that were used by each artisan. Élisabeth Antoine has suggested that the carver of the casket worked directly from the text, translating the textual to the visual, as opposed to referring to previously created visualizations of *Le Conte du Graal*, such as the illuminations within previously produced manuscripts, like the aforementioned late thirteenth-century MS fr. 12576⁴³. However, as discussed earlier, the carver's decision to depict Perceval wielding a lance instead of the textually specified javelin suggests that the carver was not familiar with the text and used a visual model (possibly even MS fr. 12577) that included this textually incorrect detail. That OA 122 and MS fr. 12577 have both been dated *circa* 1310-1330 renders it difficult to know which, if either, visualization of *Le Conte du Graal* served as a reference for the other. Conversely, Loomis has suggested that the illuminator of MS fr. 12577 was unfamiliar with the text, relying on suggestions within the marginal rubrics to guide his work⁴⁴. Loomis' hypothesis is supported by MS fr. 12577's red rubrics, which describe the scenes depicted in the corresponding miniatures located above or below the rubrics, and were likely completed prior to the manuscript's illumination, as was customary among late medieval French manuscript production. Alexandre Micha has expressed a similar opinion, noting that the illuminator's visual translations appear to defy all aspects of logic within the text, beyond the replacement of javelin with lance in the introductory miniature. For example, the scene of the presentation of the Grail is recognizable as a standard feast scene, due in part to the incorrect appearance of a queen as well as a king. Loomis has also noted the textually incorrect form of the Grail⁴⁵. Whereas Chrétien describes it as a serving dish, or *escuelle*, the illuminator depicts it as a ciborium adorned with a cross⁴⁶. Although in Chrétien's *Le Conte du Graal* the Grail is described as a serving dish, the next legend to continue the story, the early thirteenth-century Vulgate Cycle's penultimate *La Queste del Saint Graal*, envisions it as the cup from which Christ drank at the Last Supper and which later held his blood during the Passion sequence⁴⁷. It was this retelling of the Grail legend that cemented the connection between Chrétien's mysterious and ill-defined Grail, and the better known mythical and

⁴² Busby, "The Illustrated Manuscripts...", 356.

⁴³ Antoine, "Casket: *Four Saints*...", 288.

⁴⁴ Micha, *La Tradition manuscrite*..., 193.

⁴⁵ Loomis, *Arthurian Legends*..., 101.

⁴⁶ Frederick W. Locke, *The Quest for the Holy Grail: A Literary Study of a Thirteenth Century French Romance* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1960), 6.

⁴⁷ Whitaker, *The Legends of King Arthur*..., 16.

⁴¹ For more on the text-image relationship in medieval manuscripts, see Sandrine Hériché-Pradeau and Maud Pérez-Simon, "Du texte à l'image et de l'image au texte: en pratique et en théorie", in *Quand l'image relit le texte, Regards croisés sur les manuscrits médiévaux*, eds. Sandrine Hériché-Pradeau and Maud Pérez-Simon (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2013), 11-38.



Figure 9. *Roman de Perceval le Gallois*, by Chrétien de Troyes. MS fr. 12577, f. 18v. (c.1310-1330). Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France. Source: gallica.bnf.fr.

inherently Christian symbol. Considering the Vulgate Cycle's widespread fame, it is possible that the Vulgate *La Queste del Saint Graal* could have influenced the illumination of MS fr. 12577, whether through the wishes of the patron (who was likely familiar with the Vulgate Cycle), transmitted to the illuminator, or as a direct result of the illuminator's own knowledge.

8. The Grail in MS fr. 12577

The next miniature in MS fr. 12577 appears on folio 18v (Fig. 9) and following the eulogistic and religious overtones of the manuscript's miniatures, bypasses scenes of Perceval's bumbling, early knightly adventures to focus instead on his mysterious experiences at the Castle of the Fisher King. Like the previous illuminations, the miniature's importance is signified by its large size: it fills the entire bottom quarter of the page and is the width of two text columns. The large scale of MS fr. 12577's miniatures speaks to the manuscript's luxury and expense; two-column wide miniatures are unusual within fourteenth-century Arthurian manuscripts, appearing only in a select few of the most lavish extant manuscripts, such as New York, Morgan Library, MS Morgan 805, *circa* 1315, and Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, MS 5218, *circa* 1351. This layout appears to date to *circa* 1274, the hypothesized production year of Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fr. 342, an extravagant manuscript in which 95 miniatures span the two columns of text⁴⁸. Also similar to the previous miniatures, here again the changing colors of the red and blue border signify the scene's left to right progression, from Perceval's arrival at the Castle of the Fisher King, to the procession of the Holy Grail and Bleeding Lance. A left to right narrative progression can also be inferred from the imagery depicted on the lid of OA 122, providing another parallel between the imagery of the Perceval manuscript and ivory casket. The four saints' legends progress in theme from grudging aid to willing Christian devotion, mirroring Perceval's evolution from self-

ish youth to Christian knight. The clear directionality of MS fr. 12577's miniatures is characteristic of illuminated verse romances, whose miniatures are generally more narrative than those of prose romances, wherein the images appear more static⁴⁹. The castle keep at the center of the miniature serves as a transitional tool between the chronology of the scene and the exterior and interior of the Fisher King's castle.

In this third miniature, the incongruity of the illuminator's high level of skill yet lack of familiarity with the text is evident. That the care the artist took in rendering the figures signifies MS fr. 12577's status as a luxury manuscript suggests that many of the 'incorrect' textual to visual translations were in fact intentional. Considering the high price the patron undoubtedly paid for such a lavishly illuminated manuscript, it is unlikely that he or she would have accepted a work riddled with errors, whether textual or visual. Furthermore, it was common practice for the patron to oversee the production of his or her manuscript in conjunction with the *libraire*, further increasing the possibility that major errors would have been noticed and amended during the production process, and that inconsistencies in the translation from the textual to the visual were indeed deliberate⁵⁰.

The illuminator emphasized the religious nature of the scene through his 'incorrect' depiction of the Grail as a ciborium rather than the serving dish described by Chrétien. It is difficult to know whether the artist's rendering of the Grail was an individual artistic decision or one prescribed by the manuscript's patron. Comparison of MS fr. 12577's Grail depiction with those of contemporaneous *Le Conte du Graal* manuscripts, such as MSS fr. 1453 and fr. 12576 suggest that the artist's depiction of the Grail in MS fr. 12577 is unique, as neither aforementioned manuscript includes a miniature depicting the Grail scene at the Castle of the Fisher King. However, both MSS fr. 1453 and fr. 12576 do similarly depict King Arthur's cup as a ciborium, allowing for a visual

⁴⁸ Whitaker, *The Legends of King Arthur...*, 30.

⁴⁹ Sandra Hindman, *Sealed in Parchment: Re-readings of Knighthood in the Illuminated Manuscripts of Chrétien de Troyes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 196.

⁵⁰ Christopher de Hamel, *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1986), 176.

comparison to be drawn with the form of the Grail in MS fr. 12577. Perhaps King Arthur's cup is here used to foreshadow Perceval's quest for the Grail, ostensibly serving as an alternative, symbolic depiction of both the Grail and Perceval's future Christian enlightenment. By depicting the Grail not as a dish, as described by Chrétien, but as a ciborium, finished with a gilded cross, the illuminator of MS fr. 12577 emphasizes the Grail's Christian connotation, reinforcing its spiritual significance for his audience. It is possible that like his 'incorrect' depiction of Perceval slaying the Red Knight with a lance rather than a javelin, the illuminator's depiction of the Grail is yet another example not of his ignorance of and lack of familiarity with the text, but rather his use of artistic license to underscore important aspects of the legend. Regardless of the illuminator's intent, the form of the Grail as depicted in MS fr. 12577 emphasizes the religious undertones of the scene, illustrating that by the early fourteenth century, a definitive connection had been drawn between Chrétien's seemingly secular romance and the holiest of Christian relics, the cup from which Christ drank and the lance that pierced his side. This connection first appears in *Li Livres du Graal*, written circa 1191-1212 by the Burgundian knight Robert de Boron, shortly after Chrétien had penned *Le Conte du Graal*, circa 1160-1190⁵¹. Scholars such as L.T. Topsfield, however, have argued that contemporary Christian readers of Chrétien's *Le Conte du Graal* would have instantly made the connection between the Grail and Lance and objects of the Passion, prior to Boron's writing of *Li Livres du Graal*, merely due to their religious knowledge⁵². Further examination of the iconography of the Grail scene in MS fr. 12577 suggests a combination of artistic innovation and direction as well as blind copying. For example, the illuminator's reliance on a secondary visual reference, such as a model book or previously produced manuscript, is suggested by the aforementioned presence of both a king and queen (possibly taken from the iconography of a biblical feast scene) at the ceremony, when according to Chrétien, the only observers of the procession of the Grail and Bleeding Lance were Perceval and the Fisher King⁵³. This juxtaposition of unique interpretations with stereotypical religious scenes thus suggests a certain degree of communication between the artist and *libraire*, the bookseller and coordinator of the manuscript's production, albeit not so much as to assure absolute textual precision of the miniatures' iconography⁵⁴.

⁵¹ Fanni Bogdanow, *The Romance of the Grail: The Study of the Structure and Genesis of a Thirteenth Century Arthurian Prose Romance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), 2; Alison Stones, "General Introduction", in *The Manuscripts of Chrétien de Troyes*, 1: 6.

⁵² Topsfield, *Chrétien de Troyes*..., 210.

⁵³ Stones, "Secular Manuscript Illumination...", 95-96.

⁵⁴ Martin Kauffman, "Satire, Pictorial Genre, and the Illustrations in BN fr. 146", in *Fauvel Studies: Allegory, Chronicle, Music, and Image in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France MS français 146*, eds. Margaret Bent and Andrew Wathey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 305; Lucy F. Sandler, "Worded and Wordless Images: Biblical Narratives in the Psalters of Humphrey de Bohun", in *The Social Life of Illumination: Manuscripts, Images, and Communities in the Late Middle Ages*, eds. Joyce Coleman, Mark Cruse and Kathryn A. Smith (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 109.

9. Christianity in MS fr. 12577 and OA 122

The next miniature to depict Perceval occurs on folio 23v (Fig. 10) and differs from MS fr. 12577's prior miniatures in its use of a well-defined separation between the left and right images. Whereas in the miniature on folio 18v (Fig. 9), the castle keep subtly mediates the distinction between the two scenes' chronology and locales, within 23v's miniature (Fig. 10), a geometric border definitively partitions the two scenes. At first glance, the illuminator's use of such a clear cut border seems out of place, as the two scenes are closely related; on the left, the reluctant maiden and her lover make their way to King Arthur's court after their second interaction with Perceval, who waves them on their way from the right-hand image. At their second encounter, Perceval comes across the maiden's lover treating her cruelly, punishing her for Perceval's kisses, which the lover believes the maiden enjoyed. Perceval vanquishes the knight, putting an end to the maiden's abuse, and orders the couple to proceed to King Arthur's court, where the knight must testify to his base treatment of the maiden⁵⁵. Further analysis suggests that the lack of transition between the left and right images increases the complexity of the miniature. The border separates the maiden and knight from Perceval, reinforcing the theme of Perceval's solitary state at this point in the legend. The border further



Figure 10. *Roman de Perceval le Gallois*, by Chrétien de Troyes. MS fr. 12577, f. 23v. (c.1310-1330). Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France. Source: gallica.bnf.fr

⁵⁵ De Troyes, *Perceval: The Story of the Grail*, 46-47.



Figure 11. *Roman de Perceval le Gallois*, by Chrétien de Troyes. MS fr. 12577, f. 27r. (c.1310-1330). Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France. Source: gallica.bnf.fr

illustrates the dichotomy between the figures by emphasizing their movement in opposing directions, an artistic choice that also speaks to the spiritual differences between the two groups; the maiden's lover, who, having sinned, is sent to King Arthur's court in disgrace, and Perceval, a virginal Arthurian knight in search of Christian spirituality. The miniature thus highlights Perceval's growth since his first encounter with the maiden: from rustic youth to polished courtier, progressing towards an understanding of Christianity, and becoming worthy of engaging with sacred objects.

The final two miniatures to illustrate the Perceval strand of *Le Conte du Graal* in MS fr. 12577 continue with the theme of Perceval's spiritual journey, as seen in the previous miniature on folio 23v. These two miniatures, on folios 27r and 36r respectively (Figs. 11-12), both take as their focus episodes that are catalysts in Perceval's journey towards spiritual truth and understanding. As on folio 23v, both miniatures are clearly divided into two distinct sections. Once again, the use of these architecturally stylistic borders clearly delineates the scenes, reinforcing the chronological visual progression from left to right, and possibly causing the reader to ponder the relationship between the two scenes, defining them as 'before and after,' or the right scene an effect of the left scene. On folio 27r, the connection between the left and right images is merely chronological, whereas within the final miniature, on folio 36r, the two scenes have a definitively causal relationship; the scene depicted on the left results in



Figure 12. *Roman de Perceval le Gallois*, by Chrétien de Troyes. MS fr. 12577, f. 36r. (c.1310-1330). Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France. Source: gallica.bnf.fr

the scene illustrated on the right. The miniature on folio 27r (Fig. 11) first depicts Perceval being greeted by King Arthur and Queen Guinevere, the former of whom has been eager to meet him since hearing of the young knight's impressive deeds from the vanquished knights Perceval has sent to his court. In opposition to this joyous event, the right-hand scene illustrates Perceval's encounter with the *damoiselle hideuse*, who tells him of the havoc wreaked by his failure to question the meaning of the Grail and Bleeding Lance. This encounter marks a turning point in the story, as upon learning of his sins, Perceval vows to undertake a quest to discover the meaning of the Grail and Lance, signifying his initial transformation from young, naïve, purely secular knight (not unlike Gawain) to increasingly morally and spiritually focused knight. This transformation is concluded in the legend's final miniature (Fig. 12) on folio 36r, wherein Perceval, after coming across a group of pious maidens on Good Friday, is directed to a hermit to whom he confesses his sins. As a result, Perceval accepts the integral role Christianity must play in his life, becoming a true Christian knight. It is as a *milites Christi*, or 'soldier of Christ,' that Perceval is later portrayed in the penultimate legend of the thirteenth-century Vulgate Cycle, *La Queste del saint Graal*⁵⁶.

⁵⁶ Fox-Friedman, "King Arthur in Art", 387.

OA 122 differs from MS fr. 12577 in that it does not depict any scenes from *Le Conte du Graal* beyond the point at which Perceval vanquishes the Red Knight and seizes his armor. The complete visual dismissal of the Castle of the Fisher King and the procession of the Grail and Bleeding Lance would seem to suggest an overall secular connotation for the casket, were it not for the inclusion of the four saints on its lid. What factors contributed to the carver's selection of images? Is it possible that the saints take the place of the religiously connoted Fisher King, Grail, and Lance? The secular nature of the imagery on the casket's side panels is certainly tempered by the religious imagery that adorns its lid. Another issue to consider in relation to the casket's juxtaposition of the sacred and secular is the level of familiarity the owner of the casket would have had with Chrétien's tale. Would the owner/viewer of the casket have drawn a connection between the four saints and Perceval's quest for knowledge of the Grail and Lance, symbolic of his striving towards Christian knighthood? The popularity of the French Vulgate Cycle in the late Middle Ages suggests that the casket's owner would indeed have been able to make such connections between its secular and sacred imagery. If so, then it would follow that despite the lack of religious imagery taken directly from *Le Conte du Graal*, the four saints that adorn the lid of the casket serve to acknowledge the legend's religious underpinnings. Another possibility is that the decision not to include scenes of the Grail was an attempt by the carver to allow for a multiplicity of interpretations of the casket's imagery. By choosing to have the saints inhabit a panel and plane separate from those depicting scenes from *Le Conte du Graal*, the viewer is able to choose either for or against incorporating the sacred images into his or her reading of the casket's decoration, comprehending the casket as either a light-hearted, secular romance, or as a multi-layered commentary on the chivalry and Christian duties of contemporary knights. The difference in subject matter and position between the lid and side panels also suggests an inequality in regard to the panels' visual status. The prominent visual placement of OA 122's lid, paired with its Christian subject matter posits that this panel is the most significant, or at least that it can serve as a visual 'entry point' to the casket. Similarly, the lids of the eight composite caskets also act to mediate viewers' experiences of the caskets. For example, the composite caskets' lids illustrate the Siege of the Castle of Love, a scene that is at once more technically detailed than the imagery adorning the side panels, and which can also be viewed as a courtly and chivalric lens through which the caskets' remaining romance imagery can be viewed.

10. MS fr. 12577 and OA 122 in Fourteenth-Century France

From a twenty-first-century perspective, it is difficult to fully understand the multivalency inherent in such images. That medieval viewers of such objects were at once able to find within the juxtaposition of secular, comic images and somber, religious images, a coherent, and at

once entertaining and moralizing meaning, is evidence of the complexities inherent in both the creation and viewing of medieval material culture. It is also evidence of the continual fusing of the sacred and secular in late medieval France; a time characterized by political upheaval and marked changes in devotional practices. By the early fourteenth century, France was in the midst of a plethora of changes, religious, social, and political. A variety of factors, such as a growing literacy rate, had contributed to the rise of personal devotion, illustrated by the growing popularity of personal devotional books and other objects of Christian visual culture⁵⁷. France also underwent a major political shift, the transfer of the monarchy from Capetian to Valois rule when Philip the Fair's youngest son died childless, an event that resulted in the rule of Philip of Valois, crowned Philip VI⁵⁸. As a result, the role and status of the French nobility underwent significant changes, as the monarchy became increasingly centralized, and acted to limit the power of land-owning nobles. This was a time of great upheaval for the French aristocracy, as their hallowed positions of political and social influence were swept from under their feet⁵⁹. In addition, by the fourteenth century, the golden age of religiously connoted chivalry was long past. Although in the late fifteenth century the King of France encouraged a rebirth of chivalry, it was in the interest of the state rather than of Christianity, the higher power originally served by knightly deeds. As explained by Georges Duby, the political division of the Hundred Years War caused the loyalty and bravery inherent within a group of knights to appear as a panacea to revolt and treason; by creating an artificial need for knights, the King was essentially ensuring his own political safety and success, while also appearing to aid the disconsolate nobles⁶⁰.

In the early fourteenth century, the anonymously written Prose *Lancelot*, or Vulgate Cycle, usurped Chrétien's Arthurian legends in popularity⁶¹. It is therefore unusual to find extant fourteenth-century works, especially ones as luxurious as MS fr. 12577 and OA 122, that so faithfully depict Chrétien's final, and incomplete legend. What was the appeal of *Le Conte du Graal* that resulted in its visualization in two different artistic mediums, more than a century after its composition? One possible consideration is the extent to which contemporary audiences may have viewed the legend as relatable. Out of all the characters in Chrétien's legends specifically, and the *oeuvre* of French Arthurian legends more generally, Perceval is one of, if not the most, relatable of characters. From his humble beginnings as an ignorant youth, to his rise to both knightly and spiritual glory, Perceval consistently strives to live up to his identity as an Arthurian knight, although he often falls short, some-

⁵⁷ David Diringer, *The Illuminated Book: Its History and Production* (London: Faber & Faber, 1958), 260.

⁵⁸ Georges Duby, *France in the Middle Ages 987-1460: From Hugh Capet to Joan of Arc* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 274.

⁵⁹ Duby, *France in the Middle Ages*..., 273.

⁶⁰ Duby, *France in the Middle Ages*..., 272.

⁶¹ Sylvia Huot, "The Manuscript Context of Medieval Romance", in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 74.

times, as at the Castle of the Fisher King, with drastic consequences. It is Perceval's human nature, consistently prone to fault, yet always striving for the spiritually correct path, that may have engendered feelings of recognition and sympathy in contemporary audiences. Young men of the nobility may have seen something of themselves in Perceval, a youth who yearns to live a virtuous Christian life, while also enjoying secular pleasures such as female company, tournaments, and feasting. That Perceval does eventually obtain his religious goals, despite innumerable mistakes and setbacks, may have been comforting to readers who felt similarly torn between earthly pleasures and spiritual rewards. In addition, the fact that Perceval's path to the attainment of Christian virtues lies at the heart of *Le Conte du Graal* imbues the legend with a moralizing tone, which may also have increased its popularity.

It is further possible that Arthurian legends such as *Le Conte du Graal* appealed to early fourteenth-century members of the aristocracy and nobility because they were seen to harken back to the golden age of France: the thirteenth-century rule of Louis IX (1226-70), later consecrated as Saint Louis (1297), a time that although not without its own political and social troubles, was largely remembered in the next century for its great prosperity and piety⁶². Considering that by the early fourteenth century, the social and political role of the aristocracy was increasingly weakened due to the growing centralization of the French monarchy, it is not surprising that members of this exclusive social milieu would seek to escape their daily troubles by immersing themselves in the tales of a past and at least partially mythical age in which knights were highly regarded, and the spheres of secular and sacred life were well-balanced through dually romantic and Christian chivalric expeditions, such as the quest for the Holy Grail, an Arthurian concept first introduced by Chrétien in *Le Conte du Graal*.

The ease with which readers and viewers would have been able to understand and follow the images must also be taken into account. For example, someone unfamiliar with the story may, solely utilizing the images, assume that Perceval fights the Red Knight directly upon departing from his mother's home, when in reality, Perceval's battle is preceded by his visit to King Arthur's court, where he requests to be dubbed a knight, and is mocked by the seneschal Kay, a seemingly trivial event that has import throughout the entirety of the legend. There was more than one way in which contemporary audiences could have interacted with both the manuscript and the casket. In regard to manuscripts, both the tradition and immense cost of illumination suggests the possibility of readers who may have chosen to engage exclusively with the images⁶³. The act of reading within the Middle Ages was much more open to interpretation than it is in today's society, encompassing a variety of sub-activities, such as the use of miniatures and marginal illustrations, memorization, performance, and even display, all of which contributed to the reader's successful comprehension and utilization of the text, the ultimate goal

of 'reading' in the late medieval period⁶⁴. The viewing of the ivory casket can even be categorized as a form of 'reading,' for like the manuscript, the ultimate goal of viewing and pondering such an object was to come to terms with the images inscribed upon it. The casket can therefore be seen as an alternative, non-textual re-telling of Chrétien's *Le Conte du Graal*. Just as the illuminator of MS fr. 12577 made decisions as to which scenes to visually emphasize, essentially altering the meaning of the legend, so did the carver of OA 122. For example, the inclusion of Saints Christopher, Martin, George, and Eustace on the lid of the casket, perhaps in lieu of the Grail scene, while preserving the legend's Christian connotation, change the manner in which the legend is presented, and in so doing, emphasize Perceval's, rather than the Grail's, Christian nature, as is seen within the miniature on folio 18v of MS fr. 12577 (Figs. 4 and 9).

11. Conclusions

The varying interpretations of *Le Conte du Graal* as visualized in the miniatures of MS fr. 12577 and the carvings of OA 122 are exemplary of the wide-ranging role and definition of reading in the late Middle Ages, illuminating both the possibilities and problems inherent to the process of textual to visual translation, such as the emphasis of certain scenes or aspects of the story, and the visual form that objects, such as the Grail, variously take. Artistic decisions such as these ultimately shaped the way in which the objects' fourteenth-century audiences both reacted to and envisioned the story being told, ostensibly to fit within their own distinct world-views. According to Busby, the common lack of correspondence between text and image as seen in both MS fr. 12577 and OA 122 suggests that medieval audiences strove for a general, rather than specific, understanding of stories, and so did not rely upon the close comparison of text and image in their 'reading' processes⁶⁵. Chrétien's *Le Conte du Graal* recounts Perceval's transformation from naïve youth to enlightened Christian knight. Departing his childhood home a purely secular being, as a result of his chivalric and spiritual adventures, Perceval undergoes a religious awakening, developing into a model Christian knight, personifying the union of the sacred and secular. Whereas MS fr. 12577's miniatures closely follow the textual narrative, focusing on Perceval's intrinsic humanity and Christian conversion, encouraging a religious reading of the legend, OA 122's imagery is characterized by its departure from the legend's moralizing themes, engendering a more humorous, and seemingly secular, visual adaptation. However, the juxtaposition of such light-hearted scenes with the Christian saints on the casket's lid is proof of the inherent multivalency of late medieval visual culture, wherein the sacred and the secular intermingled, transcending boundaries of Christianity, iconography, and artistic medium.

⁶² Hindman, *Sealed in Parchment...*, 198.

⁶³ Hinton, *The Conte du Graal Cycle...*, 72.

⁶⁴ Frank H. Bäuml, "Varieties and Consequences of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy", *Speculum* 55, no. 2 (1980): 239.

⁶⁵ Busby, "The Illustrated Manuscripts...", 362.

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