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Female Authority during the Knights' Quest ? Recluses in the *Queste del Saint Graal*

Anastasija Ropa

- ¹ In the *Queste del Saint Graal*¹, the recluses voice messages of singular importance, considering such vital issues as the history and nature of true, « celestial » chivalry, the interaction between the individual knight and his family in the widest sense of the word, and characteristics that determine a knight's success in the Grail quest. The recluses' teachings border on sermons and prophecies, the former being problematic,

since medieval women could not preach, yet the genre of their discourse is hybrid, including elements of gloss and Biblical commentary, employed to reveal the true meaning, *senefiance*, of the knights' adventures. In the episodes, the recluses advise Perceval and Lancelot how to behave to avoid sin and damnation, as well as to achieve the goal of their quest, the Holy Grail itself. The essay comments on the way in which the recluses' status and gender affects the form, delivery, content and effect of their teachings, and the authority of religious women in the *Queste*. Hence, the essay provides a new perspective on the role of women in the Grail quest, contributing to the existing scholarly discussions of such exceptional characters as Perceval's sister and the notorious female demons in the *Queste*².

- ² The essay considers material on historical recluses up to the early thirteenth century, when the *Queste* and its early manuscript copies were produced³ and comparing this information with the depiction of recluses in the *Queste*. Next, the essay examines the recluses' speeches and discusses the visual representations of recluses in the *Queste*

manuscripts and comments on the relative positions of the recluses and the knights, Perceval and Lancelot, whom the recluses address. It appears that the knights, who are otherwise among the main characters in the quest, become passive, learning religious lessons from the recluses' words and lifestyles. Finally, the essay discusses the form in which the recluses' teachings on the *senefiance* of the knights' adventures are communicated.

- 3 While hermits often appear in chivalric romances, female recluses are rarer on the literary scene. Nonetheless, the two recluses the French author introduces into the Grail quest perform the same function as the more numerous hermits : like the hermits, they teach errant knights about chivalric ethics. Meanwhile, in scholarly studies of the *Queste*, hermits and, more generally, religious men, are mentioned more frequently than religious women, contributing to the invisibility of female recluses as literary figures in academic discourse⁴. Thus, Catherine Nicolas, referring to the practice of didactic commentary in the *Queste*, mentions only hermits as « un personnel spécialisé » used for instructing the audience of the romance⁵. However, the recluses' lessons are addressed to the audience as much as for the knights, highlighting the issues that were topical to their implied audiences. Moreover, the French author uses female recluses to raise such issues as spiritual and physical purity and the Christian foundation of chivalry.
- 4 With the emergence of « women studies » and « gender studies », the role of religious women in the life of medieval church and religious culture became a contested issue, with evidence arising to counter the supposed male-centred paradigm of medieval Christianity. Accordingly, Caroline Walker Bynum, in her monographs, brings to the light the discourses on maternity and nurture that came to the fore in the High Middle Ages. Discussing the increase in feminine imagery and the rise of « feminine language » in the twelfth century, Bynum refers, in particular, to the textual evidence produced in the Cistercian milieu⁶. Remarkably, the *Queste* author is thought to have had certain Cistercian affiliation, or at least to have been familiar with Cistercian liturgical practices and theological texts⁷. Bynum concludes that « maternal imagery is part of a broad concern with dependence/independence (or, to put it another way, with true and false dependence)⁸ ». The discourse of independence, or withdrawal from the world and its « false dependence » is particularly pertinent for the *Queste*, a romance that emphasises the illusory nature of the knights' chivalric adventures as opposed to their spiritual adventures, a binary opposition echoed by the rupture between the form, *semblance* and meaning, *senefiance* or *sens* of their adventures. The latter is explained by religious figures who are authorised through their withdrawal from the courtly world, and, in this sense, female recluses are endowed with just as much authority as male hermits.
- 5 Significantly, Bynum emphasises the significance of food, both physical and spiritual, in the twelfth- and thirteenth-century hagiographical accounts of female saints, claiming that « despite the pervasiveness of food as symbol, there is clear evidence that it was more important to women than to men⁹ ». Indeed, food is mentioned in both episodes featuring the recluses in the *Queste*, and the food is of both spiritual and physical kinds. Thus, Perceval and Lancelot both attend the liturgy and are treated by a meal at the anchorholds, though the circumstances are different. In the first case, Perceval receives what seems to be a little feast laid out in his honour, and he is especially enjoined by the recluse to attend the service on the day following his arrival¹⁰. In the second

episode, Lancelot arrives to the recluse's chapel when the mass is being celebrated, and is treated by the recluse humbly, with bread and water, food that is typically associated with anchorholds and hermitages. This humble meal is highly appropriate in the context of the recluse's warning to Lancelot against the sin of *luxuria* : as Mari Hughes-Edwards argues, the « [e]arlier medieval anchorotic guidance on asceticism is closely connected with guidance on chastity », a position embraced by both Aelred of Rievaulx and the *Ancrene Wisse* author¹¹. Remarkably, both recluses appear to benefit from regular and frequent reception of the Eucharist, again, highlighting the special role of food in the lives of medieval religious women. Indeed, the physical and spiritual experiences of the Eucharist in the lives of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century female saints who lived in the areas of the northern France and Flanders are well documented by their hagiographers¹², in contrast to the paucity of religious women, in particular recluses, in contemporary romances.

- 6 In the absence of an easily recognisable model for female recluses in chivalric literature, the *Queste* audiences could have drawn on their ideas or experiences of actual recluses when reading about recluses in the romances. In fact, Isabelle Vedrenne-Fajolles states that « La vie des deux recluses de la *Queste del Saint Graal* reflète au moins partiellement [des] témoignages historiques¹³ ». Much of the information about anchorites' expected behaviour comes from literature that was written for recluses, whether male or female, and not meant for a lay audience. Even when lay readers came in the possession of advice literature for recluses, they read it in a different way from the religious people for whom this literature was meant, and, moreover, there was an inevitable gap between the theory and the practice of the recluses' lived experience. In order to assess how the teachings of the *Queste* recluses would have been read by their initial and later medieval audiences and what kind of authority these recluses possessed, it is necessary to consider ideas about religious life current in French and English societies in the High Middle Ages.

- 7 The division of society into the clerics and the laity meant that religious people were expected, at least in theory, to lead contemplative rather than active lives. One of the manuscripts of the English translation of Aelred of Rievaulx's *De Institutione Inclusarum* highlights the difference between Martha's and Mary's « conditions » and indicates that the recluse should follow Mary :

Agnosce conditionem tuam, carissima. Duae sorores erant, Martha et Maria ; laborabat ilia, vacabat ista ; ilia erogabat, ista petebat ; ilia praestabat obsequium, ista nutrebat affectum. Denique non ambulans vel discurrens hue atque illuc, non de suscipiendis hospitibus sollicita, non cura rei familiaris distenta, non pauperum clamoribus intenta, sedebat ad pedes Jesu et audiebat verbum illius. Haec pars tua, carissima, quae saeculo mortua atque sepulta, surda debes esse ad omnia saeculi blandimenta audienda, ad loquendum muta, nee debes distendi, sed extendi ; impleri, non exauriri. Exsequatur partem suam Martha : quae licet non negatur bona, Mariae tamen melior praedicatur¹⁴.

- 8 Meanwhile, divisions between the laity and the clergy were becoming increasingly blurred in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries : as André Vauchez notes, « Aussi assiste-t-on, entre 1180 et 1230, au développement de nouvelles formes de vie religieuse adaptées aux besoins des laïques¹⁵. » Likewise, Bella Millet explains that « the twelfth-century Reformation [...] created a greater demand for the religious life than could be satisfied within traditional monastic structures », leading « increasing numbers of the laity to adopt extra-monastic forms of religious life, some newly developed in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century »¹⁶. Indeed, Roberta Gilchrist

suggests that in the later Middle Ages alternative religious vocations, such as hospitals and beguinages, would have been available to women who favoured the active life over contemplation :

- 9 [t]he enclosed, contemplative life of the nunnery is in contrast to the active charity of the beguinages and hospitals. The opportunity – or choice – of vocation in Leah over Rachel, or Martha over Mary, created an alternative religious role for women¹⁷.
- 10 Indeed, active life was a viable way to salvation, both for lay people and certain groups of religious men and women, such as the above-mentioned beguines. Vauchez lists examples of devoted women organising their life around service to God and fellow Christians outside the confines of the cloister in different parts of Europe – not only in the Lower Countries, but also in the Rhine area and Italy. Vauchez indicates the Cistercian and, later, the Dominican involvement in female spirituality of the period, particularly in the case of women from the Lower Countries¹⁸. Thus, the presentation of recluses in the *Queste* is far from surprising, given the presence of other Cistercian traces in the romance. Indeed, the first recluse, Perceval's aunt, is a former queen who has fled to the wilderness with her entire household and who may not be formally enclosed, but who follows the model of strict religious devotion. Despite their withdrawal from the world, both recluses remain in touch with news about the adventures and commitments of the Arthurian world. Moreover, by offering hospitality and advice to the questing knights, they have a direct impact on the outside world, just as actual medieval religious of both sexes would have had.
- 11 Meanwhile, the ways in which late medieval recluses and hermits could be involved in the active life differed. Unlike hermits, who were relatively free to move, recluses were supposed to stay within the physical space of their anchorholds, with very few exceptions. Therefore, they could not participate in 'public good works' in the same way that hermits did. Meanwhile, recluses were frequently engaged in the life of their community and could provide advice, instruction and even patronage to secular and religious people. Authors of anchoritic literature disapproved of recluses' active involvement in the communal life, which may indicate that anchorites indeed took too strong an interest in the life of their society. Indeed, the *Queste* recluses are well informed about the Round Table knights, their exploits and the Grail quest, and they address Perceval and Lancelot to explain for them the spiritual values of chivalry, speaking with authority. The recluses' actions highlight the fact that the outcome of the Grail quest is of universal significance, that it is important not only for the knights themselves, but also for their families, both living and dead, and for all Christians.
- 12 In the *Queste*, the significance of the knights' adventures is explained by religious people – monks, priests, hermits and recluses. The latter emphasise the distinction between the form (*semblance*) and the meaning (*senefiance*) of the knights' adventures, reminding the reader of such practices as the gloss, religious commentary and allegory, used by medieval authors to clarify the scriptures, saints' lives, natural phenomena and real-world events, a strategy that, as Nancy Freeman Regalado points out, transports the romance from the worldly to the spiritual domain¹⁹. Remarkably, in the romance, recluses are female and hermits are male, a distinction representative of the general tendency to associate women with more restrictive kinds of enclosure. It is noteworthy that, at least from the twelfth century onwards, historical recluses were more often women than men in both France and England. Paulette L'Hermite-Leclercq observes that, after the eleventh century, when information about recluses becomes more

detailed, there were « markedly more women than men » among anchorites²⁰. She cites an example of a female recluse who lived c. 1100 at the church of Saint-Père at Melun and whose life she regards as « typical »: the recluse was a former widow, who had extensive social connections and decided to become an anchorite after her husband's death²¹. In England, the gender ratio of anchorites indicates that there were more female than male recluses in the late Middle Ages, while hermits were almost exclusively male. According to data collected by Ann Warren, from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century most of the English anchorites were female²².

- 13 One of the reasons why eremitic life was almost exclusively a male prerogative while anchoritic life was predominantly associated with women may be found in the definitions of the words « hermit », « anchorite » and « recluse ». The word « hermit » is linked to *heremum*, the desert, and the word *heremum* reappears in the Anglo-Saxon texts about hermits²³. L'Hermite-Leclercq maintains that the fundamental difference between hermits and anchorites is that hermits withdraw from society, impersonating « *salutem in fuga* [salvation in flight] », while anchorites continue to live in symbiosis with society²⁴. Nonetheless, the concept of the « desert » or « wilderness » remained prominent in the anchoritic tradition, where it was often treated metaphorically, as many anchorites lived in an urban rather than rural environment. According to Kim Phillips, « [w]omen recluses rarely lived in the wilderness. Their “desert” was a state of mind and their cell was most probably attached to a church in a bustling suburb or a monastic house on the edge of a town²⁵ ». Warren documents the constant flux of anchorites from the rural area to towns, but, as Gilchrist and Jones warn, medieval towns are generally better documented than the countryside, so the number of rural recluses could have been underestimated²⁶. Moreover, Gilchrist suggests another interpretation for the symbolism of wilderness in the anchoritic life :
- 14 [a]nchorites chose to live on the margins of society – in emulation of the desert tradition. Thus, their cells were positioned in liminal places. Many chose cemeteries, or the north sides of churches²⁷.
- 15 Even in towns, recluses occupied the spaces that highlighted their alterity, but the recluses' life « on the margins of society » does not mean that their status was compromised or that they were viewed as « marginals »²⁸. In written French and English sources, anchorites of both genders often appear as advisors, providing, in L'Hermite-Leclercq's words, « advice, comfort and reproof for lay individuals²⁹ ». The same is true of the *Queste* recluses, who are well informed about the Grail quest and who address Lancelot and Perceval with authority, advising, admonishing and encouraging them in their quests, as the analysis of the episodes further in the essay will show.
- 16 Indeed, the situation in which lay people, often members of the nobility, would consult a recluse on practical or spiritual matters, seems to have been common in France and elsewhere in Europe from the twelfth to the fifteenth century, and lay people often turned to anchorites for advice. Anneke Mulder-Bakker cites the example of Guibert of Nogent's mother (d. after 1104) to illustrate « the role of recluses in the oral circuit of the Middle Ages and the contribution of wise old women to the transmission of knowledge and religious instruction in the community of believers³⁰ ». Guibert of Nogent's mother was probably never officially enclosed, but Mulder-Bakker discusses this woman alongside four other urban anchoresses, summarizing her career as follows :

- 17 [p]ortrayed by her son as an energetic and self-confident, even dominating woman, she withdrew as a widow into an anchorhold at what seems to have been a family monastery. She took half of her family and household with her : two sons, both of her chaplains, her resident tutor, and other household staff were urged to enter the contemplative life in the nearby abbey itself. Clearly, this was not an attempt to find total solitude. [...] In her cell she was visited by men and women from her previous circle, the higher nobility of northern France, who now came to speak with her about matters of faith³¹.
- 18 According to Mulder-Bakker, the woman is exemplary of noble widows who retained their influence and gained a degree of authority in spiritual matters on entering (relative) seclusion. Accordingly, Perceval's aunt fits into the category of a wealthy, influential woman who flees the physical dangers and temptations of this world, gaining a new kind of independence and authority in her new position.
- 19 In the thirteenth century, religious women – nuns, beguines and recluses, continued to be influential, as testified by hagiographical accounts compiled by male clerics. The famous beguine Mary d'Oignies died in 1213, the year when in a decree of the General Chapter the Cistercian Order finally addressed the issue of religious women³². Anne Mc Govern-Mouron declares that « [t]he women question, [...] whether in relation to enclosed nuns, anchoresses or beguines, was an old problem by 1213³³ ». The topicality of the « women question » could have suggested to the *Queste* author, who is thought to have had Cistercians affiliations or background, to include recluses as spiritual advisers to the questing knights.
- 20 Physical enclosure and, in some cases, distance from habitation, does not mean recluses were completely isolated from the community. Although the *Queste* recluses live away from Camelot and other castles, they are at the crossroads of the errant knights' itineraries. Perceval and Lancelot encounter Galahad without recognizing him in front of a recluse's cell at the edge of Forest Gaste, and Perceval finds his way back to the hermitage when he needs it. The French author treats « Forest Gaste » (56, 3) as a proper name, which does not mean the place is literally wild. The recluse Lancelot encounters lives next to a roadside chapel, close to a trackless forest. The recluse explains that the forest around the chapel is great and uninhabited : « ceste forest est mout grant et mout desvoiable ; si i puet bien aler uns chevaliers a jornee que ja n'i trovera ne meson ne recet » (145, 10-12). The recluse, though distant from Camelot, does not live in the complete wilderness, and she appears to take a strong interest in the knights' quest, which is a spiritual undertaking.
- 21 In turn, Perceval's aunt lives in a « hermitage » : the *Queste* author mentions « un hermitage ou une recluse manoit » (56, 15-16) (fig. 1).

Fig. 1 – PARIS, *BnF*, français 111, fol. 243r°, Galahad overturns Lancelot and Perceval (produced in Poitiers c. 1480).

- 22 The reference to a hermitage, usually associated with male hermits, has proved confusing to at least some of the text illuminators. In PARIS, *Bibliothèque nationale de France* (*BnF*), français 111, fol. 243r°, a codex completed c. 1480 at Poitiers, the illuminator depicts Perceval and Lancelot overthrown by Galahad near a white stone house ; in front of the hermitage stands its inhabitant – a bearded hermit (fig. 2).

Fig. 2 – PARIS, BnF, fr. 111, fol. 244v°, Perceval and the first recluse.

- 23 Later in the same codex, Perceval comes to what appears to be a different religious house, even though the text says that he « retourna a la recluse » ; the recluse, this time dressed as a nun, is at the window (PARIS, BnF, fr. 111, fol. 244v°). Likewise, PARIS, BnF, fr. 122, fol. 229v°, produced in 1344 in Hainault, shows Galahad departing from the hermitage and its resident hermit (fig. 3).

Fig. 3 – PARIS, BnF, fr. 122, fol. 229v°, Galaad leaves the anchorhold (produced in Hainault in 1344).

- 24 Moreover, the above is not the only occasion when recluses seem to merge with hermits as generic religious figures, at least for the manuscript illuminators. Although the « default » representation of a recluse is a woman in religious clothes looking out of the window³⁴, in one Italian manuscript, PARIS, *BnF*, fr. 343, produced c. 1380-1385 in Pavia or Milan, the only one to my knowledge to show the second recluse as well as Perceval's aunt, shows the woman in exactly this position (fig. 4).

Fig. 4 – PARIS, *BnF*, fr. 343, fol. 33v°, Lancelot and the second recluse (produced in Italy c. 1380-1385).

- 25 However, in an earlier episode, a hermit is depicted in much the same way as recluses are. Thus, in an episode where Gawain comes to a hermitage, fol. 17r° shows Gawain seated on a stool in front of a small tower or house, with a bearded hermit extending his hand to the knight from a window. While the hermit is speaking, Gawain is listening, his hands on his knees (fig. 5).

Fig. 5 – Paris, *BnF*, fr. 343, fol. 17r°, Gawain and a hermit (produced in Italy c. 1380-1385).

- 26 Lancelot appears seated in much the same attitude on fol. 33v°, when the second recluse delivers the exegesis of Lancelot's adventures ; the recluse's hands are depicted in gesture of instruction, showing her active, authoritative role in the episode. Likewise, earlier on, fol. 21v°, Perceval is conversing with his aunt, who, like the hermit on fol. 17r°, is looking down from an elevated window (fig. 6).

Fig. 6 – PARIS, *BnF*, fr. 343, fol. 21v°, Perceval in conversation with his aunt recluse.

- 27 In the meeting of Perceval and his aunt, both the knight and the recluse are speaking, which is appropriate to the somewhat less formal context of their family reunion. Remarkably, while both recluses are gesticulating with their hands, their bodies remain well within the boundaries of their towers, even when if the second recluse is in close physical proximity to Lancelot, in contrast to the hermit reaching out to the knight on fol. 17r°. Thus, even though recluses and hermits may be depicted in similar ways and sometimes even confused by illuminators, there are slight yet meaningful differences between the behaviours of female and male solitaires and their modes of instruction.
- 28 The recluses influence the knights' behaviour in two ways : by their teaching and by their personal example. In her monograph *Docere Verbo et Exemplo : An Aspect of Twelfth-Century Spirituality*, Bynum considers the new literary forms that emerged following the twelfth-century religious revival, the so-called « treatises of practical spiritual advice », which are informed by the principle of teaching by word and by example (*docere verbo et exemplo*)³⁵. These treatises, produced by canons and monks, emphasised the necessity of setting an example for one's « neighbours », a consideration which is relevant to the discussion of female recluses in the *Queste*. Perceval's and Lancelot's conversations with the recluses occur at crucial junctures ; the recluses help the knights both by their advice and by personal example, teaching the knights to rely on God's will and to be grateful for whatever God sends them. Indeed, Perceval and Lancelot encounter female recluses before undergoing their own trials in the wilderness ; thus, Perceval's meeting with his reclusive aunt takes place prior to his trial on a solitary island. Likewise, Lancelot meets the second recluse at a turning point in his quest, just before his trial in the wilderness, at the river Marcoise. After departing from the chapel, Lancelot spends the night in prayer on a rock and, the next day, before trying to cross the river, he puts his faith in God : « il met si s'esperance en Dieu et sa fiance qu'il s'en oste tout del

penser, et dist qu'il passera bien a l'aide de Dieu » (146, 1-3). Immediately afterwards, « une aventure merveilleuse » (146, 4-5) takes place : a black knight slays Lancelot's horse, and Lancelot is left enclosed on three sides on a cliff, but his trust in God is unwavering. Lancelot lies down « et dist qu'il atendra ilec tant que Nostre Sires li envoiera secors » (146, 16-17). The recluse's example seems to have inspired Lancelot's reliance on God rather than on his strength, at least in this episode. In fact, both Perceval's adventures on the island and Lancelot's trial on the bank of the Marcoise are characterised by confinement, so, for a short while, they live like recluses. The knights accept their involuntary confinement, trusting in God's help, a lesson they may learn by observing the patience and belief of recluses. In fact, the recluse's spiritual authority is such that she can influence the knights' actions both through their words and through their very presence and example.

- 29 The recluses' authority seems to be based on both their (semi-)religious status and their personal qualities. The first *Queste* recluse is identified in a number of ways both as an anchoress and as Perceval's aunt. Perceval's reception by the woman and their conversation are influenced by his relation to the recluse : the first recluse tells her nephew about the Round Table and gives him advice, while the second recluse mostly admonishes Lancelot for his sins. When Perceval knocks on her window and the recluse asks his name, he replies « qu'il est de la meson le roi Artus et a non Perceval le Galois » (72, 7-8). For Perceval, the feudal tie to Arthur's household is the primary identifying feature, but the recluse reacts to his name rather than to his public persona : « quant cele ot son non, si a mout grant joie, car molt l'amoit, et ele si devoit fere come celui qui ses niés estoit » (72, 7-10). Vedrenne-Fajolles concludes that the recluse is attached to her nephew because Perceval's progress in the Grail quest will advance the family's reputation : « [e]n tant que futur élu de la quête, Perceval assurera le véritable honneur de son lignage en devenant le chevalier "céleste" »³⁶. Hence, genealogical considerations underpin the episode, in which the recluse instructs her nephew on the best way to ensure the salvation and fame of their lineage³⁷.
- 30 Historical and genealogical context of the *Queste* episode is further emphasised when the recluse tells Perceval the history of the three tables – the Last Supper table, the table of Joseph of Arimathea and the Round Table – in response to Perceval's question why the knight in red armour could defeat him and Lancelot and who the knight is. Because Perceval does not fully understand the spiritual dimension of chivalry, she explains that the Round Table is a successor of the Last Supper table. In fact, Perceval needs to learn that the Grail quest, and chivalry in general, though they are material, worldly phenomena, must be seen as the means to salvation³⁸. In turn, the second recluse reminds Lancelot that his chivalric fame is perishable and worthless, unless based on spiritual virtue.
- 31 Significantly, Perceval spends with his aunt full two days, as compared to less than one day Lancelot spends with the other recluse. When he arrives at the hermitage, he is welcomed and entertained generously, but is allowed to see the recluse only the next morning. Perceval is eager to go after the knight who has unhorsed him, but the recluse bids him stay and explains why Perceval should not fight against the other knight :
- 32 [a]vez vos talent de morir ausi come vostre frere, qui sont mort et ocis par lor outrage ? Et certes, se vos morez en tel maniere, ce sera damages granz et vostre parenté en abessera mout » (72-73, 33-3).

- 33 In explaining why Perceval should take care lest he be killed « par [...] outrage », the recluse refers to the family's well-being. In this episode, the family appears as a primary value that a knight must take into consideration. However, later the recluse makes a claim that seems to undermine the importance of family ; she says that the Round Table companionship is worth abandoning one's closest relatives, namely parents, wife and children :
- 34 de toutes terres ou chevalerie repere, soit de crestienté ou de paiennie, viennent a la Table Reonde li chevalier. Et quant Diex lor en done tel grace qu'il en sont compaignon, il s'en tinent a plus boneuré que s'il avoient tout le monde gaangnié, et bien voit len que il en lessent lor peres et lor meres et lor fames et lor enfanz (76-77, 31-3).
- 35 For the thirteenth-century French nobility, the notion of abandoning one's family to take up a place at the king's court and thus promote the reputation of the lineage would have been natural. When the recluse speaks about « parenté », she implies not only Perceval's parents and close relatives, but also all members of his lineage, including his ancestors and successors. This broader understanding of family requires that the knight forego his attachment to individual family members in order to increase or preserve the honour of the lineage. Perceval must leave his mother to become a worshipful knight, and he is ready to accept the news of his mother's death : « [o]r ait Dieus merci de s'ame, fet il. Car certes ce poise moi mout ; mes puis einsint est avenu, a soffrir le me covient, car a ce repairerons nos tuit » (74, 12-14).
- 36 After explanations about Galahad's identity, the history of the Round Table and the place of family concerns in a knight's life, the recluse tells Perceval how to find Galahad. However, she makes her nephew stay yet another night, despite Perceval's eagerness to depart. Thus the recluse and Perceval « parlerent entr'ax deus dou Chevalier et de maintes choses » (79, 32-33), until she embarks on what appears to be reason for delaying his departure. The recluse prays her nephew to guard his virginity, both his physical innocence and his spiritual integrity. The audience learns that virginity is a precondition for achieving the Grail : « por ce vos pri je que vos gardez vostre cors si net come Nostre Sires vos mist en chevalerie, si que vos puissiez venir virges et nez devant le Saint Graal et sans tache de luxure » (80, 10-13). The first part of the sentence is reminiscent of 1 Corinthians 7, 20, where Paul advises that every man should « *unusquisque in qua vocatione vocatus est in ea permanea* » – **abide in the same calling in which he was called**. The recluse's admonition to guard virginity may be founded on the authority of St Paul, yet it is also practical, because an unmarried knight can serve his lord better than one tied up by family obligations.
- 37 The recluse not only reveals to Perceval her identity but also tells him about her past and her reasons for choosing to live in a hermitage. After telling Perceval that she is his aunt, she expresses her concern that Perceval would not believe her because she is in a poor place : « je sui vostre ante et vos mes niez. Ne nel doutez mie por ce se je sui ci en povre leu » (73, 23-25). The *Queste* author warns his audience that visible, material signs, such as poverty, can be misleading³⁹. The recluse's words illustrate the discrepancy between apparent or worldly, and true or spiritual, well-being. She explains that she was called Queen of the Waste Land and was among the richest ladies in the world, but decided to exchange material wealth for spiritual riches : « je estoie une des plus riches dames dou monde. Et neporquant onques cele richescce ne me plot tant ne embeli come fet ceste povretez ou je sui ore » (73, 27-30). The recluse's words demonstrate a contradiction between appearances and reality : despite her material

wealth, her spiritual kingdom is, literally, wasted. The woman's subsequent flight to « la Forest Gaste » implies another reversal, this time from spiritual desolation among her worldly wealth to spiritual plenitude. The choice may not have been a voluntary one, because Perceval's aunt explains that she fled to the wilderness due to her fear of an enemy king. After her husband's death, her position would have been similar to the position of many widows throughout the Middle Ages : those women who did not want to remarry would take the vows of chastity. Accordingly, Gilchrist outlines that, although most anchorites' social backgrounds are unknown, some may have been nuns, while others were « vowesses – widows who took vows of chastity upon their husband's death⁴⁰ ». Thus, it is likely that the audience would have recognized the recluse as a pious widow who decided to take the vows of reclusion upon her husband's death and under the pressure of circumstances.

- 38 It is not often that one finds extensive information about a recluse's life prior to her taking the vows, be it a historical or a romance recluse, so the amount of information given about Perceval's aunt is unusual. As a rule, little is known about the former life of historical anchorites : most of what is normally known about them is the name and place of enclosure. In this respect, the second recluse met by Lancelot is more typical ; neither her name nor her past are revealed, and her identity before entering an anchorhold is less important than her status as an anchoress : the *Queste* author describes her as 'une recluse, que len tenoit a une des meillors dames dou païs' (142, 15-16). Hence, this recluse speaks the same language of religious exegesis as do male religious representatives, such as hermits and monks. Indeed, this recluse speaks with authority, much like the twelfth- and thirteenth-century urban anchorites about whom Mulder-Bakker writes that « [w]ise old women above the age of forty who had opted for the setting of an anchorhold could be assured of attention and respect. Their words carried a prophetic charge⁴¹ ». Her status as a recluse seems to highlight her authority over those religious men whose form of devotional life is less intense.
- 39 People could ask an anchorite's guidance in practical matters, and, in the *Queste*, Perceval and Lancelot address recluses with different concerns : Perceval wants to know the identity and whereabouts of the knight in red armour, while Lancelot asks about the meaning of his adventures. Lancelot recounts his adventures at the tournament and his vision, asking the recluse for advice : « quant il li a conté tot son estre, si li prie qu'ele le conseut a son pooir » (143, 4-5). The woman's answer combines consolation with admonition. She begins by praising Lancelot as the most marvellous and adventurous man in the world, when compared with other worldly knights. She further explains that, because he is the best worldly knight, he has encountered wonderful adventures on this spiritual quest. The recluse goes on to outline the difference between earthly and spiritual chivalry and to provide an exegesis of Lancelot's adventures in much the same way as male hermits do elsewhere in the text⁴². She concludes her monologue with a warning against sin and the everlasting tortures of hell awaiting Lancelot if he fails his Creator : « [c]ar a ce que tu as tant erré vers ton Creator saches que se tu vers lui fes chose que tu ne doies, il te laira forvoier de pechié en pechié, si que tu charras en pardurable peine, ce est en enfer » (145, 1-4). Her warning is harsh, stating that, unless Lancelot mends his ways, God will abandon him, and she finishes her « sermon » on the resonant word « enfer ». Morse argues that from the twelfth to the fourteenth century and in certain countries up to the fifteenth century « writers great and small, preachers, and poets agreed that the justification for

their work lay in urging their audiences to repent⁴³ » ; the *Queste* recluse's teaching to Lancelot is part of the tradition that Morse describes.

- 40 In their speeches, the recluses rely on the dichotomous, yet mutually related phenomena of the *semblance* and *senefiance*, true meaning, or significance, of events and phenomena the knights encounter during their adventures. Emmanuèle Baumgartner provides a succinct definition of the two notions : « le terme de *semblance* [...] désigne tout élément discursif susceptible d'engendrer une interprétation de type paravolique, d'être perçu comme signe d'autre chose, d'être lesté et doublé d'une *senefiance*⁴⁴ ». Where no adventure is forthcoming, no exegesis can be offered : when Gawain murders his fellow, Yvain l'Avoutre, « par mesaventure », no commentary is made on the episode. Lancelot's participation in a tournament with black and white is another matter : a physical tournament, where Lancelot is taken prisoner, is a sign of Lancelot's deplorable spiritual condition. The episode is interpreted by the second recluse, who responds to Lancelot's request for an explanation.
- 41 Designating the recluses' speech acts, however, is problematic : their discourse straddles the genres of sermon and Biblical, gloss commentary, and exegesis, teaching and prophecy, without belonging to any of them. In particular, the term « sermon » or « sermon-commentary », used by scholars referring to the discourse of religious men in the *Queste*⁴⁵, is highly controversial when applied to female recluses. However, the application of Field's term to the recluses' speeches is problematic, because, even though their speeches do not differ substantially from those of male ecclesiastics, Christian doctrine did not allow women to preach. The delivery of « sermons » by women in otherwise religiously orthodox romances invites commentary on the distinction between preaching and teaching in medieval discourse and on the place of the recluses' « sermons » within the narrative. The prohibition on women preaching originates from the writings of St Paul, « *mulieres in ecclesiis taceant non enim permittitur eis loqui sed subditas esse sicut et lex dicit* » – women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says (I Cor. 14, 34). Medieval theologians argued that women, neither religious nor lay, should preach in public, but they could prophesy or teach. Indeed, there is evidence that theologians accepted women providing religious instruction on a private basis, and setting in this case was crucial. Accordingly, Thomas Aquinas introduced the distinction between private and public speech, emphasizing that only the former was appropriate for women :
- 42 *Dicendum quod sermone potest aliquis uti dupliciter. Uno modo privatim ad unum vel paucos, familiariter colloquendo, et quantum ad hoc gratia sermonis potest competere mulieribus. Alio modo publice alloquendo totam Ecclesiam, et hoc mulieri non conceditur*⁴⁶.
- 43 The words of urban anchorites or « wise old women », as Mulder-Bakker calls them, were often regarded as « prophetic »⁴⁷. Hence, it is reasonable to suggest that the recluses could be used to transmit some of the most important messages in the *Queste*, because they were regarded by the romances' authors and their projected audiences as wise teachers and prophets rather than preachers.
- 44 The speeches of both recluses straddle the border between teaching, preaching and prophesying, just as historical recluses often held a shadowy, « unofficial » position between belonging to a religious order and being devout lay people⁴⁸. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that they demonstrate learning and understanding of Biblical exegesis that elsewhere is the prerogative of the clergy, monks and hermits. Perceval's

aunt reveals her knowledge of the early history of the Round Table, including details from the Gospels and the Apocrypha about the last supper, and she cites the prophet David describing the table in his book :

- 45 [a] cele table sistrent li frere qui estoient une meisme chose en cuer et en ame ; dont David li prophetes dist en son livre une mout merueilleuse parole : « Mout est, fist il, bonne chose quant frere habitent ensemble en une volenté et en une huevre » (74, 24-28).
- 46 This knowledge would hardly have been available to most medieval women, even though, as Alcuin Blamires notes, aristocratic women probably had wider access to knowledge than women from the lower social strata⁴⁹. Thus, the female recipient of *Liber de modo bene vivendi ad sororem*, composed between 1150 and 1220 and thus predating or being roughly contemporary with the *Queste*, is a *litterata*, a nun of noble origin who can understand a simple Latin text and who was obviously familiar with the Scripture⁵⁰. Furthermore, the second recluse explains the significance of Lancelot's adventures and visions as a learned exegete, alluding to their significance as opposed to their outward appearance. Her case, therefore, is unusual, because, as Rosalynn Voaden highlights, medieval women generally had visions that necessitated discernment, yet the practice of discerning spirits was the male prerogative⁵¹. At the same time, the visions of religious women, after undergoing the « censure » of their male spiritual advisors or at least the mediation of writings clerics, became, so to say, « authorised » : the visions of religious women were often written down by men, which could have served to prove their orthodoxy. Likewise, the exegesis of the *Queste* recluses is mediated by the author, who most likely was a man, and both recluses have male priests to render the liturgical services. Furthermore, female recluses often had male « mentors » or spiritual advisors, such as the authors of the surviving « rules » for recluses⁵². The *Queste* recluses are, thus, under double male supervision : that of their confessors and of the *Queste* author himself.
- 47 Meanwhile, if the recluses' teachings are regarded as prophecies, their close involvement in the knights' affairs at the crucial points of the knights' careers and the seriousness of issues about which the recluses speak becomes understandable. The recluses warn knights about their weaknesses and the virtues they should cultivate, and, indeed, the knights are soon put to the test that requires them to show the very qualities the recluses mentioned. Thus, Perceval is warned that he should remain a virgin, and, when he stays on a deserted island, he is nearly seduced by the devil disguised as a pretty damsel. The second recluse tells Lancelot that true knights rely on God rather than on chivalric prowess, and, on the bank of the River Marcoise, Lancelot's horse is killed and he has to wait for God's help. Moreover, the recluses reinforce their moral lessons by personal example : as enclosed women, they have to be patient, rely on divine providence and constantly fight against temptations of flesh. Indeed, these recluses seem to be able to act as spiritual guides to the knights precisely because they are enclosed, symbolically dead to the world and its temptations.
- 48 At the same time, the recluses appear to be personally interested in the knights' quest and in their spiritual well-being : for example, the second recluse tells Lancelot she sympathizes with him more than with any of the other non-elect knights. The first recluse also tells Perceval that his achievement is important for their family in this and the next worlds. Indeed, the idea that the achievement of the Grail quest will benefit the quester's family in the past and future, and, indeed, all humanity, is developed

throughout the *Queste*, which makes the episodes instrumental in developing the overall message of the quest.

- 49 Female recluses in the *Queste* play a number of roles, playing as personal instructors to the questing knights, teachers, prophets and exegetes, explaining the spiritual significance of the knights' experience. They address individual knights, and, indirectly, the audience, yet they never appear in the highly suspect role of preachers, which was prohibited to medieval women, anyway. The fact that the *Queste* scholars have made few attempts at comparing the speeches of male and female exegetes in the texts testifies to the extent to which modern academic research is indebted to certain medieval, or medievalist, stereotypes that women could not preach. However, the very introduction of restrictions on women preaching and teaching in certain circumstances demonstrates the versatile and fluid nature of medieval sermon, which could be delivered in a variety of contexts, private and public, in oral as well as written form, by both men and women. The terms used to designate speech acts by which monks, hermits, abbots, priests, male saints and angels expound knights' adventure in the *Queste* often circumscribe the involvement of women, creating the impression of a narrative dominated by male authority figures, from which women are excluded. The present essay addresses this imbalance, showing that medieval authors and their audience did not always perceive religious instruction offered by women as problematic, even though confusion between male hermits and (female) recluses may have existed, as glimpsed from illuminations in certain of the *Queste* manuscripts.

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NOTES

1. All references are to *La Queste del Saint Graal, roman du XIII^e siècle*, ed. A. PAUPHILET, Paris, 1923, cited parenthetically in the text.
2. For the discussion on sexuality and its demonization in the *Queste*, see, in particular, J. HOROWITZ, « La diabolisation de la sexualité dans la littérature du Graal au XIII^e siècle : le cas de *La Queste del Saint Graal* », in F. WOLFZETTEL (ed.) *Arthurian Romance and Gender*, Amsterdam, 1995, p. 238-50 and J. BURNS, « Devilish Ways : Sexing the Subject in the *Queste del Saint Graal* », *Arthuriana*, 8/2 (1998), p. 11-32. On women in the *Queste*, see J. RIBARD, « Figures de la femme dans la *Queste du saint Graal* », in J. BESSIERE (ed.), *Figures féminines et roman*, Paris, 1982, p. 33-48. On Perceval's sister see, among other studies, J. P. TRAXLER, « Dying to get to Sarras : Perceval's sister and the Grail Quest », in N. J. LACY (ed.), *The Grail, a Case Book*, New York, 1999, p. 261-278 ; S. ARENSTEIN, « Rewriting Perceval's Sister : Eucharistic Vision and Typological Destiny in the *Queste del Saint Graal* », in *Women's Studies, an interdisciplinary Journal*, 21/2 (1992), p. 211-230 ; and M. UNZEIT-HERZOG, « Parzival's Schwester in der *Queste*. Die Konzeption der Figur aus intertextueller Perspektive », in *Artusroman und Intertextualität. Beiträge der deutschen Sektion*, Giessen, 1990, p. 181-193.

3. The *Queste* was popular from the early thirteenth century, when it was written, to the sixteenth century, as confirmed by the number of surviving manuscripts produced across Europe, not only in France and England but also in the territory of present-day Belgium and Italy. The *Lancelot-Graal* cycle (consisting of *L'Estoire del Saint Graal*, *L'Estoire de Merlin*, *Lancelot*, *La Queste del Saint Graal*, *La Mort le roi Artu*) is preserved in its entirety in nine manuscripts (M. GRIFFIN, *The Object and the Cause in the Vulgate Cycle*, London, 2005, p. 2-3), as compared to the total of approximately 200 copies of parts of the cycle and fifty-six manuscripts presenting the complete *Queste* or its fragments, see A. STONES, « Seeing the Grail, Prolegomena to a Study of Grail Imagery in Arthurian Manuscripts », in D. MAHONEY (ed.), *The Grail: A Casebook*, London, 2000, p. 301-366 (p. 302) and F. BOGDANOW, « A Little Known Codex, Bancroft ms. 73, and its Place in the Manuscript Tradition of the Vulgate *Queste del Saint Graal* », *Arthuriana*, 6/1 (1996), p. 1-21 (p. 2).
4. See P. Jonin's detailed study of hermits in « Des premiers ermites à ceux de *La Queste del Saint Graal* », *Annales de la Faculté des lettres et sciences humaines d'Aix*, 44 (1968), p. 293-350, particularly p. 326-350.
5. C. NICOLAS, « Nature et sens des *exempla* dans *l'Estoire del Saint Graal* », *Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes*, 23 (2012), p. 74 [on line : <http://crm.revues.org/12809> ; accessed 26 February 2016].
6. C. W. BYNUM, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, Berkeley/Los Angeles, 1984, especially the section on « Maternal Imagery and the Cistercian Concept of Authority », p. 154-159.
7. For the Cistercian attribution and possible reservations in this respect, see K. PRATT, « The Cistercians and the *Queste del Saint Graal* », *Reading Medieval Studies*, 21 (1995), p. 69-96.
8. C. W. BYNUM, *Jesus as Mother...*, *op. cit.*, p. 163.
9. C. W. BYNUM, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, Berkeley/Los Angeles, 1987, p. 74.
10. I. Vedrenne-Fajolle analyses the feast in « À propos des recluses de la *Queste del Saint Graal* (ca 1225-1230) », *Loxias*, 7 (2004) [on line : <http://revel.unice.fr/loxias/document.html?id=95> ; accessed 10 February 2016].
11. M. HUGHES-EDWARDS, *Reading Medieval Anchoritism: Ideology and Spiritual Practices* Cardiff, 2012, p. 63.
12. Bynum lists certain female religious whose Eucharistic piety was particularly noteworthy, including the Flemish saint Lutgard of Aywières, the nuns of Hefta, Ida of Neville and several Flemish saints described by James of Vitry (C. W. BYNUM, *Holy Feast...*, *op. cit.*, p. 77).
13. I. VEDRENNE-FAJOLLE, « À propos des recluses... », *op. cit.*
14. AELRED OF RIEVAULX, *La vie de recluse: la prière pastorale*, ed. C. DUMONT, Paris, 1961, p. 108. For the Middle English translation, see AELRED OF RIEVAULX, *De Institutione Inclusarum*, ed. J. AYTO and A. BARRATT, London/New York/Toronto, 1984, p. 36.
15. A. VAUCHEZ, *La sainteté en Occident aux derniers siècles du Moyen Âge, d'après les procès de canonisation et les documents hagiographiques*, 2nd revised ed., Rome, 1988, p. 430.
16. B. MILLET, « *Ancrene Wisse* and the Book of Hours », in D. RENEVEY and C. WHITEHEAD (ed.), *Writing Religious Women. Female Spirituality and Textual Practices in Late Medieval*

England, Cardiff, 2000, p. 21-40 (p. 28) ; on the emergence semi-religious forms of life, see also K. ELM, « Die Stellung der Frau in Ordenswesen, Semireligiosentum und Häresie zur Zeit der heiligen Elisabeth », in *Sankt Elisabeth, Fürstin, Dienerin, Heilige*, Sigmaringen, 1981, p. 14-17.

17. R. GILCHRIST, *Gender and Material Culture : The Archaeology of Medieval Woman* London, 1994, p. 186-187.

18. VAUCHEZ, *La sainteté en Occident...*, *op. cit.*, p. 430.

19. N. F. REGALADO, « La Chevalerie celestie. Métamorphoses spirituelles du roman profane dans la Queste », in *Romance. Generic transformation from Chrétien de Troyes to Cervantes*, London, 1985, p. 91-113. For the dichotomy *semblance-senefiance*, see, for instance, A. STRUBEL, *La rose, renard et le Graal. La littérature allégorique en France au XIII^e siècle*, Paris, 1989, p. 269-290 ; D. POIRON, « Semblance du Graal dans la Queste », in *Écriture poétique et composition romanesque*, Orléans, 1994, p. 201-215 and J.-R. VALETTE, *La pensée du Graal. Fiction littéraire et théologie (XII^e-XIII^e siècle)*, Paris, 2008.

20. P. L'HERMITE-LECLERCQ, « Anchorites in Medieval France », in L. H. MCAVOY (ed.), *Anchoritic Traditions of Medieval Europe*, Woodbridge, 2010, p. 112-130 (p. 122).

21. P. L'HERMITE-LECLERCQ, « Anchorites... », *ibid.*, p. 122. The example is from *Récit des miracles* of St Liesne (PARIS, BnF, latin 12690, fol. 224r^o-v^o), an unedited manuscript dated 1136, written by a Benedictine monk from Saint-Père de Melun.

22. A. WARREN, *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England*, Berkeley, 1985, p. 20. Warren's data is based on R. CLAY, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England*, London, 1914. B. Millett addresses the role of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century female recluses on the development of English vernacular literature in « Women in No Man's Land : English Recluse and the Development of Vernacular Literature in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries », in C. M. MEALE (ed.), *Women and Literature in Britain 1150-1500*, Cambridge, 1993, p. 86-103.

23. E. A. JONES, « Hermits and Anchorites in Historical Context », in D. DYAS, V. EDDEN and R. ELLIS (ed.), *Approaching Medieval English Anchoritic and Mystical Texts*, Cambridge, 2005, p. 3-18, p. 5-6. See also M. CLAYTON, « Hermits and the Contemplative Life in Anglo-Saxon England », in P. SZARMACH (ed.), *Holy Men and Holy Women : Old English Prose Saints' Lives and Their Contexts*, Albany, 1996, p. 147-175.

24. P. L'HERMITE-LECLERCQ, « Anchorites... », *op. cit.*, p. 126.

25. K. PHILLIPS, « Femininities and the Gentry in Late Medieval East Anglia : Ways of Being », in L. H. MCAVOY (ed.) *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, Cambridge, 2008, p. 19-31 (p. 29). Likewise, see D. DYAS, « "Wilderness in Anlich lif of Ancre Wunung" : The Wilderness and Medieval Anchoritic Spirituality », in L. H. MCAVOY (ed.), *A Companion...*, *ibid.*, p. 19-33 (p. 20).

26. A. WARREN, *Anchorites...*, *op. cit.*, p. 37 ; R. GILCHRIST, *Gender and Material...*, *op. cit.*, p. 178 ; E. A. JONES, « Hermits and Anchorites... », *op. cit.*, p. 10.

27. R. GILCHRIST, *Gender and Material...*, *ibid.*, p. 178.

28. Millett, however, indicates that recluses' status « as religious » could have been viewed as « too marginal for comfort » both by religious men and by the women themselves (p. 26).

29. P. L'HERMITE-LECLERCQ, « Anchorites... », *op. cit.*, p. 125.

30. A. MULDER-BAKKER, *Lives of the anchoresses : The Rise of the Urban Recluse in Medieval Europe*, trans. M. SCHOLZ, Pennsylvania, 2005, p. 23.
31. A. MULDER-BAKKER, *Lives of the Anchoresses...*, *ibid.*, p. 8.
32. See J. DE VITRY, *The Life of Marie d'Oignies*, trans. M. H. KING, Toronto, 1987.
33. A. MC GOVERN-MOURON, « "Listen to me, daughter, listen to a faithful counsel" : The *Liber de modo bene vivendi ad sororem* », in D. RENEVEY and C. WHITEHEAD, *Writing Religious Women : Female Spiritual and Textual Practices in late Medieval England*, Cardiff, 2000, p. 81-106 (p. 95).
34. The recluse looking out of the window appears in seven of the *Queste* manuscripts I have examined (PARIS, BnF, fr. 111, fol. 244v° ; PARIS, BnF, fr. 112 (3), fol. 18v° ; PARIS, BnF, fr. 116, fol. 623v° ; PARIS, BnF, fr. 342, fol. 81 ; PARIS, BnF, fr. 343, fol. 21v° and fol. 33v° ; PARIS, BnF, fr. 344, fol. 487v° ; PARIS, BnF, fr. 1424, fol. 3), and in one manuscript of the *Tristan en prose*, DIJON, *Bibliothèque municipale*, 0527, fol. 084.
35. C. W. BYNUM, *Docere Verbo et Exemplo : An Aspect of Twelfth-Century Spirituality*, Missoula, 1979.
36. I. VEDRENNE-FAJOLLE, « À propos des recluses... », *op. cit.*
37. On female agency and genealogical concerns in the *Queste*, see J. LOOPER, « Gender, Genealogy, and the "Story of the Three Spindles" in the *Queste del Saint Graal* », *Arthuriana*, 8/1 (1998), p. 49-66.
38. The second *Queste* recluse makes the same point when she explains to Lancelot the meaning of the tournament between the black and the white knights : « sanz faille quan que vos veistes ne fu fors autresi come senefiance de Jhesucrist. Et neporquant sanz faillance nule et sanz point de decevement estoit li tornoiemenz de chevaliers terriens » (143, 13-15).
39. The poverty of Perceval's aunt may be relative, anyway, because the *Queste* author specifies that she has fled into the wilderness taking many of her possessions : « [s]i pris maintenant grant partie de mon avoir et m'en afoi en si sauvage leu » (80 : 30-31).
40. R. GILCHRIST, *Gender and Material...*, *op. cit.*, p. 177. Similar examples are discussed by Mulder-Bakker (*Lives of the Anchoresses...*, *op. cit.*) ; see also her « The Age of Discretion : Women at Forty and Beyond », in S. NYEBRZYDOWSKI (ed.), *Middle-Aged Women in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge, 2011, p. 15-24.
41. A. MULDER-BAKKER, *Lives of the Anchoresses...*, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
42. L. de Looze analyses the layers of interpretation, or exegesis, in the romance, without commenting in detail on the gender of the interpreter or exegete in « A Story of Interpretations : The *Queste del Saint Graal* as Metaliterature », *Romanic Review*, 76 (1985), p. 129-147.
43. C. MORSE, *The Pattern of Judgement in the Queste and Cleanness*, Columbia, 1978, p. 4.
44. E. BAUMGARTNER, *L'arbre et le pain. Essai sur la Queste del Saint Graal*, Paris, 1981, p. 76.
45. P. J. C. Field describes as « sermon-commentaries » the exegesis with which monks and hermits explain the knights' adventures in the *Queste* and its fifteenth-century retelling or translation by Thomas Malory in his part of the *Morte Darthur*, « The Book of the Sankgreal » [« Malory and the Grail », in N. J. LACY (ed.), *The Grail, the Quest and the World of Arthur*, Cambridge, 2008, p. 141-155 (p. 149)].

46. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, t. 45 (*Prophecy and Other Charisms*), trans. and ed. R. POTTER, Cambridge, 2006, p. 132-133. See also R. VOADEN, « God's Almighty Hand : Women Co-Writing the Book », in L. SMITH and J. H. M. TAYLOR, *Women, the Book and the Godly*, Cambridge, 1995, p. 55-65 (p. 55).
47. A. MULDER-BAKKER, *Lives of the Anchoresses...*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
48. On the sense of exclusion experienced by certain recluses and the attempts to mitigate their uncertainties concerning their institutional belonging, see B. MILLET, « *Ancrene Wisse* and... », *op. cit.*, p. 26.
49. A. Blamires asserts that « even among a laity whose access to scripture was restricted, women were peculiarly “disenscriptured” », but concedes that « [r]oyal and aristocratic women were the most persistent exceptions to the rule » [«The Limits of Bible Study for Medieval Women », in L. SMITH *et alii*, *Women...*, *op. cit.*, p. 1-12 (p. 3)]. Perceval's aunt is a former queen, so her scriptural education would have been more extensive than the education of other women, both lay and religious, in the late Middle Ages.
50. A. MC GOVERN-MOURON, « “Listen to me...” », *op. cit.*, p. 83. See also D. N. BELL, *What Nuns Read*, Kalamazoo, 1995.
51. R. VOADEN, *God's Words, Women's Voices : The Discernment of Spirits in the Writings of Late-Medieval Women*, Woodbridge, 1999, p. 48.
52. On the relationship between female recluses and their spiritual « coaches », see S. ERKOC, « “To one shut in from one shut out” : An evaluation of the Spiritual Friendship between Anchoresses and Their Spiritual Directors », *Studies in Spirituality*, 20 (2010), p. 161-189.

ABSTRACTS

Female recluses were prominent in the medieval spiritual landscapes, but, unlike hermits, these vigorously enclosed women are almost non-existent in medieval romance. The thirteenth-century French *Lancelot-Graal* cycle is no exception, as hermits frequently instruct knights in these texts, but recluses appear only in one of the cycle romances, the *Queste del Saint Graal*, and even there in two episodes. However, these two episodes are highly important in the dynamic of the quest, with two of the most prominent questers, Perceval and Lancelot, engaging in conversations with the recluses. The recluses are female, yet they instruct knights on matters of chivalric and Christian virtue in an assured, authoritative manner.

Des femmes recluses étaient au premier plan dans les paysages spirituels médiévaux, mais, à la différence des ermites, ces femmes pratiquant un genre d'ascèse extrême, étaient presque inexistantes dans la romance médiévale. Le cycle français *Lancelot/Graal* du XIII^e siècle ne fait pas exception : dans les textes du cycle, des ermites instruisent souvent les chevaliers, mais les recluses apparaissent uniquement dans deux épisodes de l'un des romans, la *Queste del Saint Graal*. Cependant, ces deux épisodes sont très importants dans la dynamique de la quête : dans les épisodes, deux quêteurs éminents, Perceval et Lancelot, bénéficient de conversations avec les

recluses. Les recluses sont des femmes, mais elles instruisent les chevaliers sur les questions de la vertu chevaleresque et chrétienne, d'une manière autoritaire assurée.

INDEX

Keywords: Arthurian literature, recluses, gender history, Queste del Saint Graal, Lancelot, Perceval

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