

Modeling Christian rulership in the medieval Grail romance

How and why do religious narratives multiply and diversify? One specific systematic of their spreading I would like to elaborate is based on the principle of “apocryphity” – a theoretical concept originating from theological research on apocrypha.

According to studies on apocryphity, apocryphal narratives are the products of a creative biblical exegesis reaching all the way into the present. Unlike the biblical canon, they are understood as delimited in time, scope, or literalness. They can transcend the canon by retelling and updating it. Therefore, apocryphity challenges the assumption of conventional research on apocrypha claiming that the production of apocryphal writings came to an end in the 4th century, and with the formation of the canon was replaced by the age of hagiographic writings.

As a scholar of literary studies, my research objective is to introduce apocryphity into literary theory, develop its literary history, structure and functionality. While apocrypha conventionally represent a waste product of the biblical canon, at a closer look they involve literary processes of allegorization, substitution and inversion, filling gaps and resolving contradictions of the biblical canon, in relation to which apocrypha represent resonant narratives, independently networking and updating religious truth claims.

The subject matter of my dissertation, the medieval Grail legend, is based on the apocryphal life story of Joseph of Arimathea in the Gospel of Nicodemus. It reemerges in the 12th century and is traditionalized with Chrétien de Troyes’ *Le Conte du Graal*. My hypothesis implies that the highly popular medieval Grail romance was designed to claim a political and religious truth of its own, differing from clerical authorities. Its display of the *translatio reliquiarium* (the translation of the Grail and the Lance) and the *translatio imperii* (the transfer of rule in terms of political theology) represents methods of salvation maintenance, which compensate for the lack of messianic presence on Earth. For the aftermath of the Passion faces a latency of revelation, balanced by the means of continuous re-telling. Hence, the Grail romance continues in the tradition of salvation maintenance, albeit establishing its own distinct approach. In Wolfram’s *Parzivâl*, the Grail community represents the heirs of the so-called neutral angels, caught between heaven and hell to guard Christ’s legacy on Earth. As guardians of the Holy Grail on Earth, their function is to defend and pass on this concentrate of divine power according to strict and constantly endangered liturgical practices.

The medieval Grail romance stands for an independent and individual reenactment of the passion, written by lay authors and displaying a lay hero, who, in his adventures, is looking for a new kind of religiosity: While the secular poet Wolfram von Eschenbach is modelling lay views on religion, his hero Parzivâl is religiously uneducated and must seek an individual path to God and rulership.

The medieval period is central to understanding and illustrating the concept of apocryphity, because the bible was far from being a homogenous collection of books as we know it today. The utilization of canonical and apocryphal writings was largely equivalent: apocryphal narratives were included into legends, Bible translations, glosses and commentaries, religious poetry and – medieval romance.