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Edited and founded by Leslie J. Workman

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## Postmodern Medievalisms

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seventeenth and eighteenth century" (Kate Chedgoy, "For Virgin Buildings Oft Brought Forth": Fantasies of Convent Sexuality," in Rebecca D'Monte and Nicole Pohl, eds., *Female Communities 1600–1800* [London: MacMillan, 2000], 55). On this topic, see also Judith C. Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy*, Studies in the History of Sexuality (New York: Oxford UP, 1986), 4, 165 n.2; Ros Ballaster, "The Vices of Old Rome Revived: Representation of Same-Sex Desire in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century England," in Suzanne Raitt, ed., "*Volcanoes and Pearl Divers*": *Essays in Lesbian Feminist Studies* (London: OnlywomenPress, 1995), 30; Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*, Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 2002), 63–4. See also Bridget Hill, "A Refuge from Men: The Idea of a Protestant Nunnery," *Past & Present* 117 (1987): 107–32, for a discussion of the ways in which the convent as a positive ideal remains a vital one in this same period.

Although I disagree with the readings of *Upon Appleton House* offered by these critics, I acknowledge my indebtedness to their political commitments and approach.

24. Emma Donoghue, *Passions between Women: British Lesbian Culture* (London: Scarlet P, 1993), 226; my emphasis.

25. Marvell, 79, lines 641–8.

26. Marvell, 79, lines 649–56.

27. Stephens, 182.

28. Stephens, 180–1.

29. Marvell, 82, lines 741–2.

30. Mary Fairfax later married George Villiers, the second duke of Buckingham, in what turned out to be an intensely unhappy marriage (Patton, 832–6).

31. Marvell, 82, lines 745–8.

32. Marvell, 65, lines 205–8.

33. Marvell, 65, lines 209–12.

34. Marvell, 65, lines 213–16.

35. Marvell, 61, lines 81–7.

36. Traub, 259–65.

## Postmodernism and the Press in Naomi Mitchison's *To the Chapel Perilous*

Anita Obermeier

In 1955, British writer Naomi Mitchison added herself to the long list of authors rewriting the Arthurian legend, with her witty novel *To the Chapel Perilous*. Her most recent biographer, Jenni Calder, assesses the novel as "a clever, entertaining but curiously convoluted interpretation of the grail quest story . . . but here Naomi's attempt to fuse together different genres does not quite come off, although there are some splendidly comic vignettes . . . Not surprisingly, although the book was very widely and on the whole positively reviewed, some critics were puzzled."<sup>1</sup> Puzzled as the critics of her day may have been,<sup>2</sup> Mitchison constructs a refreshingly humorous and perceptive reading of the Arthurian legend that, I argue, exhibits numerous major tenets of postmodernism, tenets that capture both the medieval genesis of the Arthurian legend and its intertextual afterlife:<sup>3</sup> intertextuality, fragmentation, crises of knowledge, loss of authority, instability of point of view, Baudrillard's "loss of the real," Wittgenstein's "language games," and the struggle between establishing an overarching metanarrative and preserving Lyotard's "more real" mininarratives.

Before exemplifying these postmodern claims, I want both to introduce Naomi Mitchison more thoroughly, since she is hardly a household name, and to discuss Mark Twain, her predecessor in using the press in Arthurian fiction. Mitchison's life spanned the entire twentieth century, during which she produced seventy books and numerous articles.<sup>4</sup> Her work, however, "is not widely known outside feminist and academic circles."<sup>5</sup> Her most recent biography is tellingly titled *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, for she was an extensively engaged woman, an activist for "global, humanitarian, feminist, and environmental" causes.<sup>6</sup> As a woman born to privilege, she was part of the pre-World War II London intelligentsia and friends with W.H. Auden and Aldous Huxley. She wrote science fiction, travel narratives, ecological fiction, plays, and educational children's books. But most importantly, Mitchison is the grand dame of the twentieth-century historical novel, whose "carefully researched fiction acquired cult status among Oxbridge classicists between the

wars.<sup>7</sup> In these novels, she focuses on "issues of democracy, questions of power and powerlessness," dominant and subordinate groups, solidarity, and collective loyalty.<sup>8</sup>

*To the Chapel Perilous* somewhat fits into this historical fiction genre,<sup>9</sup> but it is Mitchison's only Arthurian adventure. Raymond H. Thompson has categorized twentieth-century Arthurian fiction into "retellings, realistic fiction, historical fiction, science fiction, and fantasy."<sup>10</sup> The fantasy category is furthermore subdivided into "low, heroic, ironic and mythopoeic."<sup>11</sup> Thompson views *To the Chapel Perilous* as an ironic fantasy which assesses achievements "against their high-minded aspirations to expose a comical gap."<sup>12</sup> While some critics see Mitchison's fiction paralleling Sir Walter Scott's, Thompson designates Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* as the precursor to the ironic fantasy<sup>13</sup> of *To the Chapel Perilous*, where journalism and newspapers, though not the main focus, present nevertheless a *leitmotif* throughout the novel. For instance, Twain's Yankee protagonist, Hank Morgan, relishes the fact that after four years of his benevolent despotism he had trained his right-hand man, Clarence, to be a journalist and an editor who was putting out a small newsletter.<sup>14</sup> But it is Hank's initial rumination on the institution of newspapers that proves most illuminating:

I not only watched this tournament from day to day, but detailed an intelligent priest from my Department of Public Morals and Agriculture and ordered him to report it; for it was my purpose by-and-by, when I should have gotten the people along far enough, to start a newspaper. The first thing you want in a new country is a patent office; then work up your school system; and after that, out with your paper. A newspaper has its faults and plenty of them; but no matter, it's hark from the tomb for a dead nation, and don't you forget it. You can't resurrect a dead nation without it; there isn't any way. So I wanted to sample things, and be finding out what sort of reporter-material I might be able to rake together out of the sixth century when I should come to need it.

Well, the priest did very well, considering. He got in all the details, and that is a good thing in a local item: you see he had kept the books for the undertaker-department of his church when he was younger, and there, you know, the money's in the details; the more details, the more swag: . . . And he had a good knack at getting in the complimentary thing here and there about a knight that was likely to advertise - no, I mean a knight that had influence; and he also had a neat gift of exaggeration, for in his time he had kept door for a pious hermit who lived in a sty and worked miracles.

Of course, this novice's report lacked whoop and crash and lurid description, and therefore wanted the true ring . . .

[And] there was an unpleasant little episode that day, which for reasons of state I struck out of my priest's report.<sup>15</sup>

Censorship, control of the media, influence of advertisers, catering to public opinion, distortion and embellishment of truth are all present in both Twain's and our own day.<sup>16</sup> When two newspapers finally exist in Hank's world they occupy the opposite spectrum: Hank describes the *Weekly Hosannah and Literary Volcano* as "good Arkansas journalism" that is now too irreverent for him. He much prefers the more boring but respectable *Court Circular*.<sup>17</sup> Mitchison uses a similar newspaper dichotomy in *To the Chapel Perilous* with the *Northern Pict* and the *Camelot Chronicle*.

While Twain experiments with newspapers in his *Connecticut Yankee*, Mitchison makes journalism the central focus of her novel. She accomplishes what Umberto Eco posits postmodern writers do: she revisits the past "with irony," using "'parody and pastiche."<sup>18</sup> Mitchison frames her novel with two main characters - Dalyn and Lienors - working for rival papers to cover the events of the Arthurian world, most specifically the Grail quest. What ensues counts as a major case of postmodern fragmentation, as the reporters watch knight after knight emerge from the Chapel Perilous with a Grail. Their dilemma about which Grail to report as the "real" one aligns them with Jean Baudrillard's assessment of postmodernism as a "loss of the distinction between real and imagined, reality and illusion, surface and depth."<sup>19</sup> Thus, questions of vision and perception are at the center of postmodernism. While Mitchison artfully satirizes the journalistic establishment of her time, she also keenly touches upon the literary issues of the medieval Arthurian legend: narrative point of view, competing versions of the truth, and elemental expandability, as well as official sanction and censorship.

Demonstrating her intertextual knack for combining the past and the present and drawing on her own experience as a newspaper correspondent, Mitchison writes her novel with characters based upon the people working for *The Guardian* in the 1950s. In an interview, she divulges that the book is dedicated to her youngest daughter and her husband to be.<sup>20</sup> Val was on the staff of *The Daily Mirror*, and Mark Arnold Forster wrote for *The Guardian*.<sup>21</sup> Quite often they would be working on the same story, and Mitchison would talk to them about it. In *To the Chapel Perilous*, modern journalistic methods are anachronistically superimposed on the Arthurian world. The two main characters, Lienors and Dalyn, work for the *Camelot Chronicle* and the *Northern Pict*, respectively, rival newspapers owned by Merlin and Lord Horny (Horny is a Scottish term for the devil; that Horny's paper is located in the north combines with Teutonic notions that hell was situated there).<sup>22</sup>

In a postmodern vein, epistemological uncertainty permeates the first chapter of the novel, which finds the two reporters camped out in the wasteland surrounding the Chapel Perilous, the final testing ground for the Grail questers. The Grail quest had been going on for a while, and things had settled into a routine for and between Dalyn and Lienors. The story opens with one of the ubiquitous and guiding hermits of Arthurian legend living next to the Chapel Perilous. But they are not "certain who [this] hermit could be" - maybe Joseph of Arimathea, but unlikely.<sup>23</sup> Nor can they always tell "with any

degree of accuracy by the shield" who the knights entering the chapel are.<sup>24</sup> The central issues of searching for and concealing identity in most medieval Arthurian pieces are encapsulated in this reference to the shields. It becomes interesting when a succession of knights emerges from the chapel, all bearing a Grail. The first one to come out is Sir Bors; he is carrying something, but Dalyn and Lienors lament, "if only it were a bit clearer if it was" indeed the Grail.<sup>25</sup> Since they are after the story and the pictures, they are keen on an interview but all of a sudden find it "difficult to know just what question to ask," maybe a bit in parallel to Grail questers who also have to pose the correct questions to be successful. The reporters are equally unsure whether "it's going to work out like [they] want."<sup>26</sup>

Strewn into this epistemological crisis are bits and pieces of information illuminating the newsmaking business. Lienors and Dalyn observe the events, write the stories, and submit them to the papers where the subs – which is the British newspapers slang of the 1950s for the sub-editors who might be called spin doctors today – decide on the final shape of the story, often taking out vital details, much like Twain does with his priest. Although Dalyn and Lienors yearn for the "real story,"<sup>27</sup> they wonder about the final shape of the Grail story, and Dalyn concludes that "It's no good deciding beforehand . . . Leave that to the subs."<sup>28</sup> Then there is, of course, the larger editorial slant of each paper. The party line of the *Northern Pict* seems to be clearer, as Lord Horny is more into yellow press journalism and subversive civil war mongering, but Lienors is unsure of just who runs the show back at the *Camelot Chronicle* – "What with the Court. And never knowing quite how Merlin stands with the Archbishops."<sup>29</sup>

The procession of knights – Bors aside, it contains the usual suspects: Lancelot, Gawain, and Percival, as well as Palomides and unnamed French, Danish, and Irish knights – focuses the discussion of the two reporters on the suitability of the Grail winner for the audience of their respective papers, showing their nationalistic and ideological concerns. Mitchison pinpoints each knight's undesirable qualities that might not make him a good choice for Grail winner. As Sir Palomides, the Saracen, emerges, Lienors predicts that he is "going back East" and that "they'll splash it there. But it won't do for us." Dalyn agrees that "it certainly wouldn't suit [his] readers. And it can be kept out."<sup>30</sup> Both of them were determined not to have foreigners: "After all, if the Grail had come to Britain, then British it was going to stay, part of the Arthurian way of life."<sup>31</sup> Lancelot appears, but despite Lienors' obvious attraction to him, he also gets disqualified for his affair with Guinevere. Dalyn exclaims that they "can't have him" and Lienors concurs that "[a]t any rate the *Camelot Chronicle* can't. Not now. We've got to be a bit careful, got to look after public morality,"<sup>32</sup> but the French might pick up the story.

When Gawain surfaces, the two journalists get into a small spat. Lienors identifies Gawain as "one of your boys" to Dalyn. Just as Dalyn gets a proud note and a Pictish burr in his voice about his "feeling the Orkneys would pull it off," Lienors blurts out that merely the day before he had asserted that he

had "no use for Chiefs and tartans and all that nonsense."<sup>33</sup> She furthermore reminds him that Lord Horny is a "'jealous old devil'" and most likely would have problems with Gawain as a Grail winner. Perceval also gets eliminated from consideration, mostly because he once made a pass at Lienors in the Forêt Sauvage, and she warded him off with her typewriter, a humorous allusion to the fateful and consequence-laden assault of the untutored Perceval on the innocent maiden in the tent in Chrétien de Troyes' eponymous romance. Generally in this novel, Mitchison amusingly mentions and pillories weaknesses of the knights transmitted through the medieval versions.

The multiplicity of Grails presents postmodern fragmentation that has been defined as "an exhilarating, liberating phenomenon, symptomatic of our escape from the claustrophobic embrace of fixed systems of belief."<sup>34</sup> At this point in the novel, the reporters are dealing with a soft system that exists in theory, through the germinating seed of the Grail that had appeared in Camelot and prompted the Knights of the Round Table to search for it. They can influence the establishment of a fixed system and support the shaping of a prevailing idea. When the hermit confirms that "each knight won" the Grail, Dalyn incredulously responds: "we always supposed – there was only one Grail . . . at any rate one never hears anything else in Camelot."<sup>35</sup> Their beliefs are so entrenched that they are convinced "[i]t wouldn't be a story if there was more than one" Grail. The hermit then puts the onus to decide the Grail winner on them, reminding them that they "have a certain responsibility" with this decision.<sup>36</sup>

But what they are most interested in is what the Grail looks like. Vision and perspective – how to see and not just what is seen – are also principles of postmodernism. While they are still talking to the hermit, they ask him if all the Grails look alike. The hermit answers them with some Jean Baudrillard: if they all looked alike, "it might have been said that one was the true Grail and the others only copies."<sup>37</sup> The hermit is exactly right in that the reporters want to designate one Grail as true and the others as fakes. They are bothered by the postmodern "loss of the distinction between real and imagined, reality and illusion, surface and depth,"<sup>38</sup> maybe even afraid of the multiple realities these Grails can spawn. Peter Barry further paraphrases Baudrillard: "within postmodernism, the distinction between what is real and what is simulated collapses: everything is a model or an image, all is surface without depth."<sup>39</sup> Rex Butler, however, argues that through simulations (as in having more than one Grail) one can provoke not only "the loss of reality, but also its very possibility. The aim of simulation is not to do away with reality, but on the contrary to realize it, make it real."<sup>40</sup> This realization of multiple Grails is the point the hermit is trying to make. Furthermore, it is fitting to apply Baudrillard's notion from his 1981 book, *Simulations*, to this novel whose main characters are reporters, since Baudrillard's ideas stem from his study of the ubiquitous influence of the media on contemporary life, an influence Mitchison seems already to have sensed in 1955.

As they continue discussing the pros and cons of which Grail to back in the now flowering and sweet-smelling wasteland, they happen upon a young and daft Galahad, whom they actually do not recognize: "he looked very young and a little startled, as though his sword was too big for him."<sup>41</sup> Initially, they were going to ignore "the laddie" because they had already "seen enough. More than enough."<sup>42</sup> But then, he is the only one they can interview because he appears in fact impressed by and eager to meet the press. The reporters are excited to find out that he is the son of Lancelot, of whom much had been rumored although no one had seen him before.

Without much prompting, Galahad shows Dalyn and Lienors his Grail, telling them that it was full of blood that does not spill.<sup>43</sup> They take pictures but neither one looks really at it or in it. The Grail throws a curious illumination through Galahad's fingers, but Dalyn does not even try to figure out the significance of it, as one needs a "theologian and a physicist" and "he was neither."<sup>44</sup> Dalyn recognizes that he can only know the surface of things and not see deeper – seeing deeper would switch his role from an observer to a participant, a Grail quester himself. (More on that later.) Both reporters decide to back Galahad's Grail because he gave them an interview when all the others had rebuffed them, their readership "wouldn't stand for more than one Grail," and their bosses and advertisers would be pleased, but "[s]uddenly they were both overwhelmed with [the same] uncertainty"<sup>45</sup> that started the chapter. Additionally, Galahad's *tabula rasa* quality makes him a desirable choice: a text yet to be written, a figure to be constructed, a Grail quester without a history to disqualify him.

What ensues in the novel can be identified as conflict between the metanarrative that Dalyn and Lienors are reluctantly helping to construct and the fragmented mininarratives they actually observe developing. Therefore, the novel fits Jean-François Lyotard's famous definition of postmodernism: "I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives."<sup>46</sup> While Lyotard mainly refers to the grand narratives of Christianity, Marxism, and the myth of scientific progress, which "purport to explain and reassure [but] are really illusions" themselves,<sup>47</sup> I argue that, in a literary sense, the medieval Grail legend has become a metanarrative. To the *Chapel Perilous* dramatizes the path to this metanarrative, complete with the political concerns of many powerful parties: the Court, the Church, and the rival newspapers at least.

Mitchison conveys the political influence of the Church in its attempt to stack the deck in favor of Galahad in his initial interview with Dalyn and Lienors. Galahad happily tells the correspondents that he went to mass in the chapel at Castle Carbonek, a chapel he claims was the Perilous Chapel, and "[i]t was put into my hands. There didn't seem to be anything difficult I had to do . . . I had no trouble asking the questions, though usually I am stupid about things I don't quite understand."<sup>48</sup> This makes it doubtful that Galahad actually endured the Quest and its dangers. The journalists have to make a decision at that point about the metanarrative they want to push: "Is this to be our story?" she said. "We've got to agree." "We'll give the readers what they

like," responds Dalyn, "After all, they couldn't take the real story . . . Goes against too many interests."<sup>49</sup>

Dalyn and Lienors exemplify what Gary Browning theorizes about Lyotard's notion of metanarratives: "A grand narrative, for Lyotard, serves as a metaphor for the theoretical *other* to which he is resolutely opposed throughout his writings. A grand narrative insofar as it purports to subsume a multiplicity of events and perspectives into the orbit of its own theory is to be resisted so as to register the unassimilability of processes and heterogeneous standpoints."<sup>50</sup> The multifaceted events surrounding the Chapel Perilous get shunted aside in favor of the Galahad story; the heterogeneous viewpoints are now being suppressed. Of course, journalism is the perfect vehicle to make this point for Mitchison. Competing newspapers can print different stories, but somehow the populace might be looking for a consensus on certain issues. Objective reporting of the truth goes blithely out the window. But the mininarratives die harder than expected. During the next five chapters, Dalyn and Lienors get sent to the various castles of the victorious Grail questers to cover their stories, all the while being exhorted by their editors to stick to the preferred story about Galahad. Dalyn and Lienors have the experience of these fragmented, contradictory, and competing truths but have to suppress them in favor of the officially sanctioned metanarrative.

Baudrillard speculates that in past ages, the sign pointed to a reality, but what if in postmodern times, the sign does not point to a reality but to another sign?<sup>51</sup> In a way, this plurality of Grails points to either multiple signs or multiple realities of the Grail concept. At Gawain's castle, the Grail "was not a cup. It was a deep bowl. From where he was Dalyn could not see into it. But the metal appeared to be bronze with inlay of gold and coral and pearls. Old-fashioned: a cauldron, thought Dalyn, in which you boil an enemy."<sup>52</sup> Gareth identifies it as the Celtic "Cauldron of Plenty that was once Ceridwen's,"<sup>53</sup> out of which all kinds of things emerge; Lienors considered it to be a genuine Grail, but not one she and Dalyn saw themselves backing.<sup>54</sup> As Lord Horny, the proprietor of the *Northern Pict*, summarizes it from an economic angle: "if people had got it into their heads there was such a thing as a Grail you could get anything out of, well what would happen to the Laws of Supply and Demand that I've taken so much trouble over?"<sup>55</sup> Even Lord Horny has something to gain from a non-material Grail. Gareth furthermore confronts the Galahad metanarrative by saying, "[w]hy was it not said that [Gawain] achieved the Grail? Will you do him justice now that you have seen it with your own eyes?"<sup>56</sup> Of course, Dalyn had seen it with his own eyes and "decided" against Gawain, whose idea it is in the medieval versions of the Grail legend to search for it, and who is soundly rebuffed for his lack of spirituality.

At Joyous Garde, the Grail makes Lancelot a healer. He plunges an old-looking spear into a "great and deep silver cup" seven times until it bleeds, healing people with the blood. At the third thrust of the spear, Elayne of Corbyn, Galahad's mother, screams. This is an allusion to the fact that when

Lancelot slept with the virginal Elayne thinking she was his long-time lover Guinevere, it was a rough and painful sexual act for her. This healing attribution to Lancelot most likely comes from Malory's story of Lancelot's healing of Sir Urry, but could also illustrate the sexual connection to the Fisher King myth. After the public healing, Guinevere, who had accompanied Lienors to Joyous Garde incognito, exclaims, "'Oh yes. It is certainly the true Grail. The one that was seen at Camelot. Whatever *she* and that boy say about another. You have seen what it does. You will have to put it in your paper.'"<sup>57</sup> Just as Dalyn and Lienors are getting more incredulous toward their own support of Galahad, the metanarrative starts to spread. Dalyn definitely knows that Lancelot's Grail is not Galahad's Grail, "'whatever the subs say.'"<sup>58</sup> Dalyn is certain that the conflation of these two Grails will happen, as some people in the crowd at Joyous Garde are already suggesting. Not surprisingly then, the *Camelot Chronicle* later demotes Lancelot to "acting as a kind of priest for his son."<sup>59</sup>

Lord Horny demonstrates further how the metanarrative prevails against the mininarratives; he postulates that people "'think it's the same Grail. Just appearing here and there.'"<sup>60</sup> Demonstrating regional pride, however, the *Cymric People* only covers Sir Peredur's, or Perceval's, Grail. Mitchison has been accused by critics for being extra harsh on the Welsh because Perceval is not treated with much respect.<sup>61</sup> His Grail is a stone that yields up coins to people, in a bizarre and antiquated descent into the underworld ceremony involving a serpent of whose reality Dalyn was highly suspicious.<sup>62</sup> When the reporter from the *Cymric People* asks Dalyn what he thinks of the Grail, Dalyn responds that this is "'not quite [his] idea of a Grail'" because he had seen "'other Grails.'"<sup>63</sup> To this the other reporter, Cynlas, retorts: "'Bloody English Grails. This is our own true Grail come up out of the earth and born again to make us glad.'"<sup>64</sup>

At Bors' castle, the Grail is identified as the "Dish of the Last Supper," containing the bread; therefore, it is used at castle Bran de Gore in a harvest and thanksgiving ritual. Dalyn wonders whether they could identify this as the "'Dish of the Last Supper and a kind of adjunct to the Grail. The same story but not the same thing'"<sup>65</sup> – the same reality but not the same sign. The visit at Bors' castle brings into focus two other questions. How does the individual Grail knight know what his Grail effects? And why is the Grail not able to stem the destruction of the Arthurian fabric? None of the Grails that are won goes to the center of the Arthurian world, Camelot. As in the medieval texts, Arthur does not achieve the Grail, is not even in the hunt for it. In the metanarrative of the Middle Ages and the one that the power structures in this novel are forcing, the Grail is whisked away to an exotic and far-off place and then taken back to heaven. The Grail becomes an elitist and monolithic symbol that cannot save a doomed earthly society. Sir Bors sums this up best: "'I hear always of jealousy and anger between one knight and another. Of stories raked up from the past that should have been long forgotten, used now for making quarrels . . . And all this, my lady, in spite of the achievement of the Grail.'"<sup>66</sup>

Lady Julia, his wife, continues: "'A thing had to come, although it seemed to be of God. But do we even know that?'"<sup>67</sup> To this Sir Bors responds, "'I do know. But there is no proof.'"<sup>68</sup> Maybe Mitchison is arguing that a proliferation of mininarratives more real than the metanarrative may have been enough to keep the individual factions happy so they would not attack each other, especially since all the other Grails provide material things to people.

Even before the visit to Castle Corbyn, the special treatment that Galahad received is as evident as it is elitist. First, as Lienors is familiarizing herself with the location, she suspects that she got the wrong file because Castle Corbyn looks just like the Chapel Perilous,<sup>69</sup> a suspicion that corresponds with Galahad's own account outside the Chapel Perilous. Later, Lienors is chastised by Elayne for writing about the other Grails "'as though the Grail won by [her] son Galahad were not the one, true, and only Grail.'"<sup>70</sup> She and Dalyn are then treated to a Grail Mass combined with a Halloween-like resurrection scene where the Grail, elevated by the priestly Galahad, is full of comforting light. But, as Dalyn points out, this service is perceived as elitist and is boycotted by the simpler farmer folk who are more interested in cauldrons of plenty, gold coins, healing blood, and bountiful harvests. These are the tangibles to help alleviate suffering and poverty in this life, not merely elitist pie in the sky. The reporters think that their seeing Galahad should dispel the myth that he is in Sarras, but then Dalyn adds another mininarrative by suggesting "'there probably is someone in Sarras, with a Grail.'"<sup>71</sup> They wistfully agree that they have to keep "splashing" this Grail, since every other Grail jeopardizes some existing power structure.

Mitchison clearly invents this plurality of Grail winners, but the indeterminacy of the Grail shape and meaning is not an original postmodern element. In the Middle Ages, a similar confusion about the Grail questers and the Grails existed. In Chrétien's *Perceval* – where the Grail is first mentioned – it is a serving dish holding a mass wafer. But Chrétien uses only the indefinite article, calling it "un graal" ("a Grail").<sup>72</sup> Of course, the fact that Chrétien's piece was unfinished encouraged all kinds of continuators and new versions that brought with them the dethroning of Perceval as the original Grail quester and the narrowing of a Grail to "the Grail." Robert de Boron's Old French *Joseph* has no Grail quester, but a vessel from the Last Supper holding Christ's blood. The anonymous continuation *Perlesvaus* also features a vessel with Christ's blood and extends the number of questers to four: Perlesvaus, Gauvain, Lancelot, and Artus. In the Middle High German *Parzival*, the eponymous hero searches for the Grail that turns out to be a precious stone. In the Middle Welsh *Peredur*, Peredur finds a severed head on a platter. The Vulgate *Estoire* sports no questers at all but a vessel from the Last Supper with Christ's blood, while the Vulgate *Queste* identifies the Grail as a dish holding the Paschal Lamb at the Last Supper, now sought after by Galaad, Bohort, Perceval, and Lancelot. The Post-Vulgate *Queste* fails to identify the vessel that Galaad, Bohort, and Perceval seek. Finally, in Malory it is a "dysse" holding the Paschal Lamb at the Last Supper. The main questers

are Lancelot, Perceval, Bors, and Galahad. These medieval versions reflect the authors' political and religious notions.<sup>73</sup> Scholars doubt, for instance, that Chrétien intended for such heavy-handed Christianizing of the original Welsh Grail with its fertility and sterility notions. Cistercian influence privileged chastity and virginity as virtues of the successful Grail quester, effectively disqualifying Lancelot, and giving the Arthurian Grail story its main trajectory in the virginal Galahad.

However, this idyllic mininarrative fragmentation will also fall prey to the metanarrative in Mitchison's work, since she is interested in power structures and their influences on people's lives. Under the media's one-sided reporting even some of the Grail winners doubt the reality of their own Grails. Gawain seems disappointed in the effects of the Grail, "staring at his Grail as though he thought there was something else it should have given him."<sup>74</sup> Before his return to Camelot, Perceval makes a confession to the hermit Nacien, but "he could not be sure in his mind of what was real and what seeming."<sup>75</sup> In an interview Lancelot grants to Lienors at Camelot, he questions whether it was truly the Grail; maybe it was only "an appearance. Something reflected from the truth and given to me in spite of my many and grievous sins."<sup>76</sup> He forbids Lienors to call his Grail "the Grail"<sup>77</sup> and then steps up in full support of the metanarrative that "[t]he true Grail is the Grail achieved by my son Galahad . . . So it is said."<sup>78</sup> The final nails in the coffin of the mininarratives are driven in by the Church's extortion over the release of the captured Lienors. Merlin has to print a report by Lienors in the *Camelot Chronicle* giving the Church's final official version of Galahad's trip to Sarras and the one and only true Grail's return to heaven. In order to co-opt the existing mininarratives of the Grail, even the victorious Grail questers are written into the metanarrative as heroic but finally unsuccessful Grail questers. Everyone at the paper agrees that the accompanying pictures are fakes. The freed Lienors suspects she "only saw what they wanted [her] to see"<sup>79</sup> in Sarras but definitely not the Grail. The Italian representative of the Church exercises pre-emptive censorship by warning that if any of the other Grails should reappear, he would "count on the good sense of the press"<sup>80</sup> not to report them.

This kind of censorship exposes a major crux of the novel, the search for the truth and the reporters' objectivity in that search. As the correspondents agonize about reporting the truth, Dalyn consoles himself with the idea that there is "no time or space for the whole truth . . . We gave one bit of the truth."<sup>81</sup> Newsmaking is a highly selective and fragmented business with many power factors being taken into consideration. This malleable truth is also evident in the statement that "the Corbyn story was over; it now only remained to decide what to say."<sup>82</sup> The readers of the newspapers are supposed to trust their reporters, but how are readers "going to find out what the truth really is?"<sup>83</sup> At the end of the novel, the hermit sets Lienors straight on the Grail story. He reminds her to trust her own "truthful eyes"<sup>84</sup> and confirms that the Church lied to her in Sarras and that she knew it even as she recorded it. Lienors admits that she delights in the fragmentation and mininarratives of the

Grail. She had been afraid the Galahad/Sarras story "might be true. I'm glad it was a lie."<sup>85</sup>

Furthermore, the journalists struggle with what is reportable and, in essence, play Wittgensteinian "language games." Barry explains language games: "when we claim that something is true we are not measuring it against some external absolute standard, but by internal rules and criteria which operate only within that designated sphere and have no 'transcendent' status beyond that."<sup>86</sup> This exactly matches the newspaper business. The wheeling and dealing about the truth and what are reportable focuses on those internal rules of the individual papers and their political slants. For instance, in the beginning, Lienors refers to the hermit as "[h]e's a story now,"<sup>87</sup> something to be shaped by the reporter and the subs. No matter what the transcendent reality of a story or person might be, the words of the correspondent and subs will change that to whatever suits their ends.

In this pursuit and distortion of the truth, Dalyn and Lienors cannot avoid being pulled into their stories. The enthusiastic Galahad glowingly admires them as objective journalists, but Dalyn knows that he would be in danger of becoming a Grail quester if he looked a little deeper into what he was reporting. While the press's main mission is to watch, it cannot completely extract itself from the power of the Grail. Heaven forbid, one could even turn into a person like the hermit.<sup>88</sup> Lienors is equally touchable. At Bors' castle, she laments that she just wished to live in the idyllic environment and not have to report about it.<sup>89</sup> At Castle Corbyn, she cries uncontrollably at the resurrection ceremony, even though she has her complaints about Christianity.<sup>90</sup> She gets personally involved as the go-between for Lancelot to Guinevere, no longer a "news-girl" but "one of the actors tangled in the action, in history."<sup>91</sup>

The novel ends in a circular pattern, as both Dalyn and Lienors, who are also falling in love throughout, meet the hermit at the Chapel Perilous in the post-bellum Arthurian world. The hermit might be considered the arch-journalist, as he is described in the beginning as observing them watching the Chapel Perilous. After the collapse of the Arthurian world and the postmodern high-art and low-art merger of the two newspapers, Dalyn and Lienors yearn for a purity of news reporting, "If one could get into the hermit's racket. Just reporting things as they are. The straight story. All of it."<sup>92</sup> The hermit recognizes that they, too, are on a quest. The quest has changed now that the Grail is safely removed from the earthly realm and its story "dead."<sup>93</sup> The uncertainty about and quest for the Grail that permeated the novel in the beginning has now been replaced with the uncertainty about Arthur's death and the search for Avalon. Actually, Arthur's reputation improves after his "death"; beforehand he was considered more of a flawed human being, often ridiculed by medieval romances. The hermit's argument and advice seem to be that people need quests. Encouraged by the hermit, the two reporters venture on their own quest, switching sides from reporting to experiencing life's events. Dalyn and Lienors are finally leaving the "society of spectacle," in

which "individuals consume a world fabricated by others rather than producing one of their own."<sup>94</sup> They, the fabricators of stories, are finally living their own life, uncertain as it may be.

This Arthurian world of reporters, photographers, and editors is strangely devoid of poets. It is mentioned several times that Taliesin is not interested in the Grail story. One wonders if Mitchison thought that journalists had taken the place of the medieval poets. Even though the Middle Ages could not boast the fourth estate, several of its poets wore the garments of mere reporters pretending not to be the actual authors of their stories. Both Giovanni Boccaccio, in *The Decameron*, and Geoffrey Chaucer, in *The Canterbury Tales*, create the fiction that they are faithfully reporting and repeating what the characters in their storytelling contests say. Both authors utilize this reporter strategy to be able to produce an encyclopedic range of stories, while avoiding censorship.<sup>95</sup> Dalyn and Lienors operate in reverse by trying to reduce the multiple voices of their stories into one sanctioned version. By incorporating multiple versions and endings to the Grail quest in this one novel, Mitchison seems to imply that "grand narratives" fraught with monolithic dangers are "no longer tenable, and the best we can hope for is a series of 'mininarratives,' which are provisional, contingent, temporary, and relative and which provide a basis for the actions of specific groups in particular local circumstances,"<sup>96</sup> just as these individual Grails do for their particular recipients. Mitchison crystallizes this idea of tolerance and heterogeneity in Lienors' reflection: "There had been a time when she had not bothered much about keeping things to herself. It had seemed then as though there were room in the same Europe for two ways of looking at things"<sup>97</sup> – a lesson still to be heeded.

## NOTES

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1. Jenni Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison* (London: Virago, 1997), 217.

2. Marilyn K. Nellis, "Anachronistic Humor in Two Arthurian Romances of Education: *To the Chapel Perilous* and *The Sword in the Stone*," in Veronica M.S. Kennedy, ed., *Modern Arthurian Literature, Studies in Medievalism 2.4* (1983): 57–77; Raymond H. Thompson, *The Return from Avalon: A Study of the Arthurian Legend in Modern Fiction* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1985), 152–5; and "The Grail in Modern Fiction: Sacred Symbol in a Secular Age," in Dhira Mahoney, ed., *The Grail: A Casebook* (New York: Garland, 2000), 555–8.

3. The term postmodernism was first used in the 1930s, but Jean-François Lyotard is often credited with popularizing the term in the 1980s.

4. For a list of Naomi Mitchison's works, see Jill Benton, *Naomi Mitchison: A Century of Experiment in Life and Letters* (London: Pandora, 1990), 177–86.

5. Maroula Joannou, "Naomi Mitchison at One Hundred," *Women: A Cultural Review* 9.3 (1998): 292–304; quote from 293.

6. Joannou, "One Hundred," 293. For further biographical information, see Leoni Caldecott, "Naomi Mitchison," *Women of Our Century* (London: Aerial Books, 1984), 11–34;

Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*; George M. Johnson, ed., *British Novelists Between the Wars* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1998), 222–7; and Naomi Mitchison, *You May Well Ask: A Memoir 1920–1940* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1979).

7. Joannou, "One Hundred," 296.

8. Joannou, "One Hundred," 296.

9. For definitions of the historical novels, see George Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1962), and Alessandro Manzoni, *On the Historical Novel*, trans. Sandra Bermann (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1984).

10. Thompson, *The Return from Avalon*, 4.

11. Thompson, *The Return from Avalon*, 5.

12. Thompson, *The Return from Avalon*, 152, 6.

13. Joannou, "One Hundred," 296, and Thompson, *The Return from Avalon*, 152. Thompson also sees Twain combining the "three major strands of the ironic fantasies that deal with Arthurian legend: satire of mankind's self-destructive impulses, comedy at the expense of his foolish pretensions, and a poignant affection for the aspirations of high romance" (142).

14. Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (London: Penguin Classics, 1986), 103–4.

15. Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee*, 93–4, 95.

16. For a view of Twain's own relationship to the journalism of his day, see Louis J. Budd, "Color Him Curious about Yellow Journalism: Mark Twain and the New York City Press," *Journal of Popular Culture* 15.2 (1981): 25–33.

17. Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee*, 245–51.

18. Quoted in Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1985), 91, 83.

19. Barry, *Beginning Theory*, 87.

20. The interview can be located on the internet by accessing <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/Camelot/intrvws/mitchisn.htm>.

21. For a view of the British press in the 1950s, see H.A. Taylor, *The British Press: A Critical Survey* (London: Arthur Baker, 1961) and Francis Williams, *Dangerous Estate: The Anatomy of Newspapers* (London: Longmans, Green, 1957).

22. In an interview, Naomi Mitchison explains that the "North Pict is based much more on one of the English nasty papers, whereas most of the Scots papers are very respectable. The Scottish connection came about partly because I wanted to use the name Lord Horny for the owner, and Horny is what the Scots call the Devil. He always impales people with his horns" (Raymond H. Thompson, for access on the internet, see <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/Camelot/intrvws/mitchisn.htm>).

23. Mitchison, 13. All Mitchison quotations are taken from *To the Chapel Perilous* (Oakland, CA: Green Knight Publishing, 1999). Italics in quotations show Mitchison's own emphasis.

24. Mitchison, 17.

25. Mitchison, 18.

26. Mitchison, 19.

27. Mitchison, 15.

28. Mitchison, 20.

29. Mitchison, 16.

30. Mitchison, 20.

31. Mitchison, 22.

32. Mitchison, 21.

33. Mitchison, 21.

34. Barry, *Beginning Theory*, 84.

35. Mitchison, 23.

36. Mitchison, 24.

37. Mitchison, 23.

38. Barry, *Beginning Theory*, 87.

39. Barry, *Beginning Theory*, 89.

40. Rex Butler, *Jean Baudrillard: The Defence of the Real* (London: Sage, 1999), 23. For further discussions of Baudrillard's theories, see Douglas Kellner, ed., *Baudrillard: A Critical*



*Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); and Mark Poster, ed., *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1988).

41. Mitchison, 25.
42. Mitchison, 25.
43. Mitchison, 27.
44. Mitchison, 28.
45. Mitchison, 30–2.
46. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984), xxiv. For more criticism on Lyotard, see James Williams, *Lyotard: Toward a Postmodern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998); Robert Harvey and Lawrence R. Schehr, *Jean-François Lyotard: Time and Judgement* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2001).
47. Barry, *Beginning Theory*, 86.
48. Mitchison, 27.
49. Mitchison, 29, 30.
50. Gary K. Browning, *Lyotard and the End of Grand Narratives* (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 2000), 3.
51. Barry, *Beginning Theory*, 87.
52. Mitchison, 37.
53. Mitchison, 39.
54. Mitchison, 74.
55. Mitchison, 74.
56. Mitchison, 40.
57. Mitchison, 64–7.
58. Mitchison, 69.
59. Mitchison, 69–70, 76.
60. Mitchison, 72.
61. Thompson, <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/intvws/mitchisn.htm>.
62. Mitchison, 84.
63. Mitchison, 84.
64. Mitchison, 84.
65. Mitchison, 100.
66. Mitchison, 94.
67. Mitchison, 94.
68. Mitchison, 94.
69. Mitchison, 113.
70. Mitchison, 118.
71. Mitchison, 124.
72. Dhira Mahoney, Introduction, *The Grail: A Casebook*, 5.
73. My overview here is indebted to Mahoney's comparative table in *The Grail: A Casebook*, 101.
74. Mitchison, 39.
75. Mitchison, 131.
76. Mitchison, 133.
77. Mitchison, 134.
78. Mitchison, 134.
79. Mitchison, 181.
80. Mitchison, 174.
81. Mitchison, 47.
82. Mitchison, 126.
83. Mitchison, 142.
84. Mitchison, 217.
85. Mitchison, 217.
86. Barry, *Beginning Theory*, 92.
87. Mitchison, 16.
88. Mitchison, 76.
89. Mitchison, 100.

90. Mitchison, 123.

91. Mitchison, 142.

92. Mitchison, 202.

93. Mitchison, 216.

94. Stephen Best, "The Commodification of Reality and the Reality of Commodification: Baudrillard, Debord, and Postmodern Theory," in Douglas Kellner, ed., *Baudrillard: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 47.

95. Anita Obermeier, *The History and Anatomy of Auctorial Self-Criticism in the European Middle Ages* (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1999), 158–67, 203–20.

96. Barry, *Beginning Theory*, 87.

97. Mitchison, 119–20.