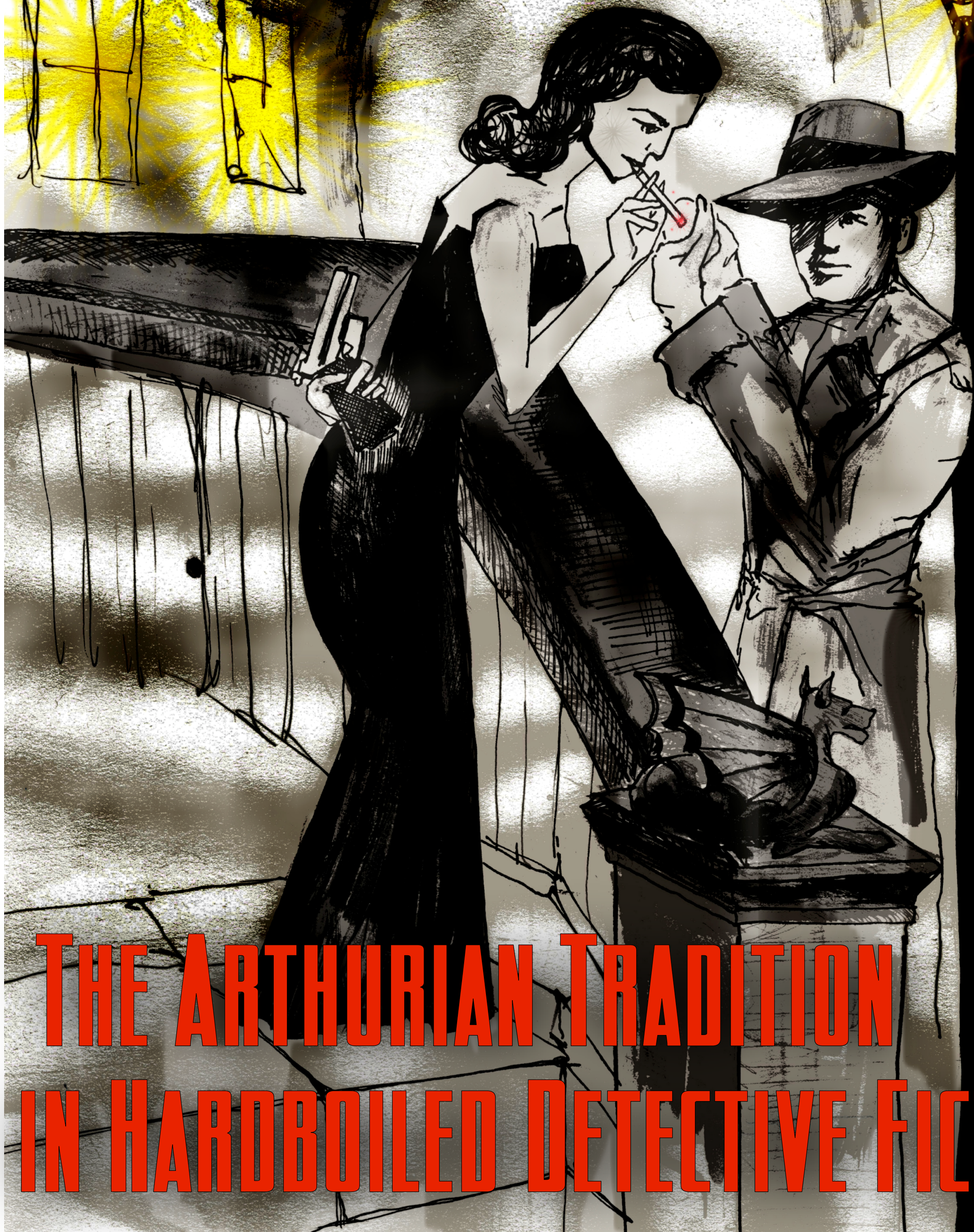
No Game For Knights!



The Arthurian Tradition in Hardboiled Detective Fiction

No Game For Knights:
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INTRODUCTION

> And Arthur and his knighthood for a space
> Were all one will, and thro' that strength the King
> Drew in the petty princedoms under him,
> Fought, and in twelve great battles overcame
> The heathen hordes, and made a realm and reign'd (Tennyson l. 514-5518)

As encapsulated in the above passage from *Idylls of the King*, the legend of Camelot presents a compelling archetypal framework. It is the story of a group of men, under the guidance of a strong and divinely anointed leader, coming together to forge justice and order out of chaos. The countless retellings and re-imaginings of the legend, from the Vulgate Cycle and Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* to T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* and John Boorman's 1981 film *Excalibur*, testify to the widespread resonance and sustained popularity of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table.

The Twentieth Century, a time of war and disorder, provided ample stimulus for a rebirth of the Arthurian mythos. Authors ranging from White to T.S. Eliot offered up the legend as a solution to the uncertainty that plagued the modern world. In particular, the chivalric code of Arthur's Round Table and the Grail Quest legend, in which a wasteland is healed by the miraculous acquisition of a divine treasure, seemed to carry particular heft during this era. However, the tradition's influence was not limited to explicit Arthuriana. In America, novels ranging from *The Great Gatsby* to John Steinbeck's *Cup of Gold* borrowed Arthurian conventions to discuss contemporary American life.

The most basic conventions are easily recognizable, regardless of in what literature they are found. Knights are men bound to strict code of honor, who engage in quests in pursuit of mystical and often unattainable goals. The Holy Grail is a highly treasured object, inaccessible to all but the purest of knights, Galahad, who pays with his

life in order to achieve the Grail. The idea of the wasteland is even more directly relatable to modern life. It depicts a land that is deprived of its treasure and its conduit to divinity, the Grail, and as a result, it is marked by barrenness and chaos, an easy analogue to postwar Depression-era America.

As powerful and tradition-based as these themes are, they also owe a great deal of their popularity to their malleable character. Their evolution over the years has not adhered to any singular canon. Rather, each retelling of the legend shifts the focus and alters details in order to achieve the desired thematic results. The Grail symbol acts a perfect example of this symbolic fluidity. "The very indeterminacy of the Grail symbol," writes Dhira B. Mahoney in her introduction to *The Grail: A Casebook*, "allows for multiple interpretations, for appropriation by orthodox Christianity or heterodox religious groups, even by New Age psycho-religion" (Mahoney 77). It, along with many others, is an Arthurian convention that is constantly reshaped by each piece of literature and each era in which it is found.

While such constructs manifest themselves in various forms throughout Twentieth Century American literature, few examples are more striking in their thematic power than those found in the hardboiled detective novels of men like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. In this study, I will examine the Arthurian underpinnings of these authors' works, in an attempt to analyze the effects achieved by their inclusion of Camelot's themes. In general, the conventions are used within the hardboiled tradition to contrast the disorder of modern America with the structure of Arthur's Camelot, and to illustrate the collapse of Arthur's idyllic yet illusory chivalric code. Hammett, in *The Maltese Falcon*, draws strong parallels to the Grail narrative of Malory's Launcelot in

order to demonstrate the way in which materialism has supplanted chivalry and traditional religion. In his work, Launcelot's mortal flaws of pride and selfishness become Sam Spade's armor against the onslaught of the material lust of contemporary American society. Raymond Chandler continues with these theme, incorporating more diverse aspects of the Arthurian legend, so as to eliminate the singular dimensionality of its narrative in favor of a more sophisticated and ambiguous portrayal of life. He also furthers Hammett's theme of the self-confident detective, indicating that in a world of failed value systems, selfhood is the only defense against the insanity and chaos of the surrounding wasteland. James Ellroy adds another layer to this theme by playing into the American myth of John F. Kennedy's Camelot, in attempt to dispel its illusions and further dissect the mutations of the chivalric code that permeate Twentieth Century American Culture. In each instance, the friction between traditional Arthurian notions and postwar disillusionment sends up sparks that brilliantly illuminate the gritty and aggressively de-romanticized hardboiled vision of America presented by these authors.

1
Pursuing the Unholy Grail: Arthurian Influence in *The Maltese Falcon*

Hammett's Grail and the American Dream

In his exploration of the chameleon nature of the Grail legend's thematic interpretation, John B. Marino writes the following:

> In this way, secular humanist writers who reject the sacred otherworld associated with the medieval Grail can make use of a myth that still interests them, while they avoid the embarrassment of seeming to promote religiosity (of any particular Christian denomination) generally out of fashion in their own century. But twentieth-century British and American writers who apply the Grail as metaphor are uneasy about the power of myth in its application to life. Many of them are pessimistic about the potency of the Grail myth as a vehicle for some type of spiritual renewal in a century that often rejects traditional spirituality, a century that rejects some notions of truth and at the same time hungers for truth (Marino 108).

This quote applies directly to Dashiell Hammett's use of the Grail legend as an ironic thematic frame for his 1930 novel, *The Maltese Falcon*. Hammett presents the reader with Sam Spade, a Launcelot figure and a tertiary searcher in the pursuit of a precious statue, which itself acts an unholy Grail. By framing his tale of greed and human corruption against a coded series of allusion to Malory's Grail legend, Hammett sharpens the thematic thrust of his novel, at once highlighting the futility of the capitalist American dream while repudiating the concept of exogenous values in favor of self-oriented integrity.

***The Dain Curse*: Seeds of Hammett's Grail Influence**

Prior to *The Maltese Falcon*, Dashiell Hammett published a series of stories in *Black Mask*, a pulp fiction magazine, featuring a detective known only as the Continental Op. Ultimately, these stories culminated in a novel, *The Dain Curse*, published in serial format over the course of the fall of 1928 and the early winter of 1929, with a hardback edition released the following July. The novel itself is unimpressive given Hammett's later achievement. It reads like a generic work of pulp fiction and consists of three distinct episodes centered on the character of Gabrielle Leggett, a young, morphine-addled *femme fatale* haunted by an alleged family curse that brings on insanity and death.

While the novel, with its disjointed structure and sensationalist theatrics, lacks the sophistication of *The Maltese Falcon* or other later works of Hammett, it presents strong evidence that Hammett possessed a certain fascination with the Grail legend. The second portion of the novel, titled "The Temple," concerns Gabrielle's involvement with a San Francisco-based cult, the Temple of the Holy Grail. The cult, founded by a couple of married actors and their stage technician accomplice, "pretend[s] to be the revival of an old Gaelic church, dating from King Arthur's time"(Hammett, *Dain* 97). Using special effects learned from their theatrical experience, the cult leaders create apparitions of "a pale bright thing like a body, but not like flesh," which they use to manipulate their wealthy followers (87). These encounters are portrayed by the cult as "confidential between the victim and his God"(99). The leaders draw heavily from religious and medieval imagery, with rituals, "as beautiful...as either Episcopalian or Catholic services."[1] Even the murders they perpetrate are committed with a large dagger described as a "broad, thick-bladed weapon, double-edged, with a bronze hilt like a

[1] Hammett, *Dain*, 36.

cross"(79). In short, the cult's operators defraud their victims of their money by creating the illusion of direct interface with God, while staking their claim to legitimacy upon imagined connections to the Arthurian legend.

This connection to the Grail legend is not significant in and of itself. It carries little thematic value and acts primarily as an exotic backdrop to the murder mystery. However, in light of *The Maltese Falcon*'s Grail undertones, the presence of Grail references in Hammett's earlier work serve a dual purpose. First, they demonstrate that Hammett possessed, if nothing else, an awareness of the Grail legend. His inclusion of Grail references as a central component of the novel's second episode could be interpreted to perhaps suggest an even stronger interest in the legend.

Secondly, the use of the Grail legend as a means of deception for the purpose of monetary gain resonates strongly with the role of the Maltese Falcon as a Grail surrogate. In *The Maltese Falcon*, the Grail object's religious symbolism is supplanted with material value. This thematic development in Hammett's work is presaged by the role of the Holy Grail in the cult's scheme. After the novel's detective has solved the mystery, he shows evidence of the fraud to Mrs. Rodman, one of the cult's wealthy victims. She responds by "offer[ing] to take [him] to the cathedral and show [him] that the images there, including the one on the cross, were made out of even more solid and earthly materials than steam; and asked [him] if [he] would arrest the bishop on proof that no actual flesh and blood—whether divine or not—was in the monstrance"(99). This remark picks up on the same thread that runs throughout *The Maltese Falcon*'s Grail narrative. Religious symbols are shown to be nothing more than material, devoid of their alleged divinity. The Maltese Falcon, as a Grail surrogate, represents a continuation of this logic. These

minor connections establish a partial foundation for the analysis of Hammett's later work, *The Maltese Falcon*[2], as a reinterpretation of the Grail legend.

Sam Spade: Neo-Launcelot as Hammett's Grail Detective

Galahad, the hero of Malory's version of the Grail legend, is the holiest of King Arthur's court and the most successful in his quest for the Holy Grail. He is able to gain this favored status by means of his purity and freedom from sin. At the close of his tale, a holy apparition praises his virginity and conveys him to heaven. *The Maltese Falcon*'s Grail knight, on the other hand, is found in the character of Sam Spade. Spade, a cynical, hard-drinking private investigator, demonstrates little sense of loyalty and takes multiple women as lovers over the course of the novel. Overall, he bears little resemblance to Malory's Galahad. Upon closer examination, however, Spade's character corresponds strongly to another one of Arthur's Grail knights: Launcelot du Lac, the father of Galahad, the close companion of King Arthur, and the lover to Arthur's queen, Gwenyvere.

Malory's "The Sankgreal" opens at a Pentecost feast, where a distraught young noblewoman arrives and entreats Launcelot to follow her, without giving an explanation. Launcelot agrees, although Queen Gwenyvere warns that "sholde [he] nat be here with us tomorne, he sholde nat go with [the noblewoman]"(Malory 496). Additionally, Launcelot is shown early on to be a close and trusted companion of Gwenyvere's husband, King Arthur, as the king frequently asks for his counsel. However, his independence is shown

[2] In *The Maltese Falcon*, San Francisco private investigator Sam Spade takes on a case at the behest of Miss Wonderly, an attractive female, that results in the murder of his partner. As he pursues leads, he discovers that Wonderly, actually Brigid O'Shaugnessy, along with homosexual thief Joel Cairo, is in the employ of Caspar Gutman, an obese and ruthless rich man in the pursuit of a legendary bird statuette.

when he refuses to attempt to retrieve an enchanted sword from a stone, in contrast to Sir Gawain and Sir Percyvall, who attempt the deed at the risk of personal injury out of obedience to the king.

Similarly, *The Maltese Falcon* opens with the appearance of the prim Miss Wonderly at Sam Spade's office. Miss Wonderly asks for the help of Spade and his partner, Miles Archer, and even though they "[do not] exactly believe [her] little story," they agree to help (Hammett, *Maltese* 26). This soon becomes a pattern, with Spade following Wonderly, alias Brigid O'Shaughnessy, despite her refusal to grant him sufficient explanation for the circumstances of her peril. Drawing another parallel to Malory's Grail account, Hammett reveals that Spade has little loyalty to Archer, and that, in fact, Spade is engaged in an affair with Archer's wife, Iva. Mirroring Gwenyvere's jealousy, Iva consistently impedes Sam's quest for the Falcon by demanding his attention and bemoaning the lack of time he spends with her. The Arthurian undertones of their relationship are visually alluded to during a scene in which Spade "kiss[es] her left wrist between glove and sleeve," mimicking the devotion of a knight to his queen (88). However, the gesture is soon dispelled and the roles reversed when he orders her to "beat it"(88).

As the two narratives progress, the parallels continue to develop. Launcelot sets out on a journey across the wasteland, where he encounters and does battle with an assortment of characters. At one point, he encounters a chapel and observes a vision of the Grail. However, he cannot obtain it. A hermit explains to him that as he is "harder than the stone and bitter than the tre.... [and] more naked and barer than the fygge tree"(Malory 520). When the Grail does appear to him, it produces nothing but shame, as

God finds him "[possessing] nother good thought nother good wylle, and defouled with lechery"(520). Therefore, he is unworthy of the Grail. Despite several more visions of the Grail, Launcelot is barred from obtaining it, due to his sin with Gwenyvere and his arrogant independence from God.

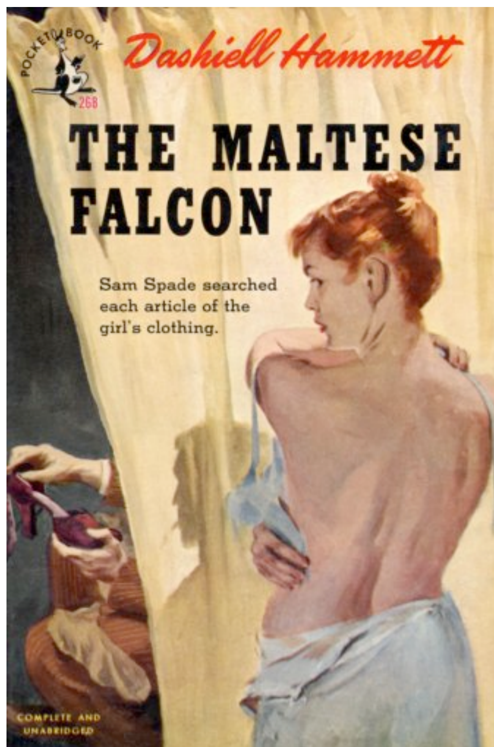
In Hammett's novel, it at first seems to be this same characteristic that enables Spade to find the Maltese Falcon. His "hardness" and his "bitterness" lend him a certain degree of astuteness. They separate him from the other questing parties and allow him to navigate complex scenarios with an objective detachment. However, ultimately, the statuette that he uncovers, or rather, has delivered to him, is false. Gutman, one of the leading conspirators in pursuit of the bird, ascertains its falsity and leaves the "*rara avis*...as a memento" for Spade (Hammett, *Maltese* 175). While a vision of the Grail brings about repentance in Malory's Launcelot, Hammett leaves ambiguous the effect that the replica of the bird has on Spade. Sam's decision to turn Brigid over to the police provokes a question from her: "Would you have done this to me if the falcon had been real and you had been paid your money?"(Hammett, *Maltese* 184). His reply—"What difference does that make now? Don't be too sure I'm as crooked as I'm supposed to be"—leaves the reader uncertain of whether the falsity of the falcon has forced him to reevaluate the morality of his supposedly profit-oriented actions, or if he had quietly planned to adhere to his own moral code all along (184).

Despite their respective repentances, supposed or ambiguous as each may be, both men conclude their Grail quests in the same way. Upon Launcelot's return to Camelot, he "[begins] to resorte unto Quene Qwenyvere agayne, and [forgets] the promyse and the perfeccion that he made in the Queste"(Malory 588). Similarly, Hammett's novel

concludes with Spade asking his secretary to send in Iva Archer, who has come to the office to see him. However, while Launcelot's passion for the queen reignites with "increased ardor," the last image presented of Spade is of him shivering, as he admits Iva into his office.

While Spade's affair with Iva closely parallels Launcelot's dalliance with Gwenyvere, Spade's other interactions with Brigid O'Shaughnessy, his other love interest, present an inversion of Malory's account of Launcelot and Eleyne. In *Le Morte Darthur*, Launcelot rescues Eleyne, "the fayryst lady...that ever he sawe" from a steam bath where she has been imprisoned, "as naked as a nedyll"(463). He leads her out of the chamber, where she is presented with clothes. Launcelot then receives his first vision of the Holy Grail, after which he rejects Eleyne's romantic overtures. By means of magic, she transforms herself into Gwenyvere's image and arranges a liaison with Launcelot, so that she may bear his son, Galahad, "the good knyght by whom all the forayne cuntrey shulde be brought oute of daunger; and by hym the Holy Grayle sholde be encheved"(464). Following their assignation, she reveals herself to be Eleyne, and entreats him to not despise her, as, for the sake of the Quest, she has "gyvyn [him] the grettyst ryches and the fayrst floure that ever [she] had, and this is [her] maydynhode that [she] shall never have agayne"(466). Out of respect for this appeal to virtue and innocence, he "[takes] hys leve myldely"(466). Sequentially, Spade's affair with O'Shaughnessy presents a mirror reversal of this tale. O'Shaughnessy, in order to retrieve the Grail-surrogate Maltese Falcon for herself, poses as a meek young lady from a conservative family. After dispelling her first two aliases, Spade confronts her for her use of illusion to elicit a desirable response from him. "You're very good," he tells her,

"It's chiefly in your eyes...and that throb you get into your voice when you say things like 'Be generous, Mr. Spade'"(Hammett, *Maltese* 29). By directly addressing her attempts to deceive him with false presentations, Spade indicates his invulnerability to the type of illusions to which Launcelot succumbs. When O'Shaughnessy does make it into Spade's bed, it directly follows her seeming abandonment of any sort of posturing or guises, as she admits that she is "so tired of it all, of [herself], of lying and thinking of lies, and of not knowing what is a lie and what is the truth"(75). It is after sleeping with her that Spade is presented with the replica of the Maltese Falcon, his own vision of the Holy Grail. Finally, Spade cuts off their affair in a direct reversal of Launcelot's initial rescue of Eleyne. Suspecting her of pocketing a thousand dollar bill from his payment, Spade leads O'Shaughnessy into his bathroom, where he forces her to strip.



Above: Spade's strip-search of Brigid, as depicted on the cover of one edition of the novel, strikes a severe contrast with the chivalric behavior displayed in Launcelot's rescue of Eleyne.

In stark contrast to Eleyne's damsel-in-distress attitude, Brigid "step[s] back from her clothing and [stands] looking at him.... in her mien [is] pride without defiance or embarrassment"(168). This moment, in which Hammett's new Launcelot places the warped, *femme fatale* incarnation of Eleyne naked back into the bath chamber serves as a prelude to his ultimate decision to turn her over to the police for either long-term imprisonment or execution.

While the narratives of these two characters correspond nicely and often seem to move in parallel trajectories, they are, of course, by no means perfect analogues. They share many of the same intrinsic flaws—arrogant independence and vulnerability to sexual temptation are foremost—but their attitudes toward their own behavior, as well as to the world around them diverge in a marked way. This can be attributed to the multiple paradigm shifts that occurred over the four hundred and eighty-five years separating the publications of the two works. The differences in the attitudes of the two men illustrate the nature of these shifts. Launcelot subscribes to an overarching and external moral code, and as such, his powers of introspection are limited. On the other hand, Spade's moral outlook is characterized by alienation and appears to be wholly endogenous. While this allows for a greater degree of self-awareness, it also inures him to feelings of remorse or self-doubt. Through this device, Hammett posits a potential alternative to the failed system of medieval chivalry. As we see in the case of Spade, in a world that has corrupted all traditional moral codes, the ego is the only thing upon which a man can rely to keep him above the fray of postwar material lust.

Their respective affairs nicely illustrate this point. As was previously mentioned, Launcelot returns from his Grail quest, in which he was driven to remorse over his affair

with the queen, and launches directly into a continuance of their affair. The episodes of his life are entirely compartmentalized. This is explicitly illustrated in the introduction of his affair in the text. The first detailed mention of it in *Le Morte Darthur* occurs in "The Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lac," in which the knight is asked about rumors that Queen Gwenyvere "hath ordeyned by enchauntemente that [he] shall never love none other than hir."(Malory 164). He responds by stating that he "may nat [forbid] peple to speke of me what hit pleasyth hem" but that "knyghtes...sholde not be advoutrers [adulterers] nothir lecherous"(164). While the mention of an enchantment mitigates Launcelot's agency in the affair, placing the full burden of the blame on Gwenyvere, Launcelot's denial is even more indicative of his weak character. The ideological appeal present in Launcelot's denial demonstrates the compartmentalization of his public and private lives. He is universally accepted as the greatest knight to ever have lived; ergo, he embodies all of the chivalric virtues of knighthood. Adultery is incompatible with his public fame, and therefore, is rendered impossible, when in reality, the knight in question is not only adulterous and lecherous, but also a liar and a hypocrite. Malory relates this facade to his Grail failure, explaining that "had nat Sir Launcelot bene in his prevy thoughtes and in hys myndis so sette inwardly to the Quene as he was in semynge [appearance] outward to God, there had no knyght passed him in the Queste of the Sankgreall"(588).

Spade also denies his affair with Iva, but under different circumstances. In his case, he responds to two police detectives, who are investigating his possible connection to the death of Miles Archer. With respect to the rumor, he explains to them that there is "not anything to it"(Hammett, *Maltese* 59). He makes no appeals to his virtue, his reputation, or his presupposed loyalty to his partner. Rather, he puts forth his denial in

the form of a boldfaced lie in order to avoid interaction with the police, and thereby distance himself from the exogenous moral establishment represented by the law. Unlike Launcelot, who denies his guilt both through and because of his public role as a knight, Spade admittedly lies for the sole purpose of self-preservation. He shows no compunction with respect to his dishonesty or any of his other allegedly immoral behavior. The most he can muster is a slight tinge of distaste, or self-scorn, for it, evident in the shiver that accompanies his reunion with Iva.

Spade readily acknowledges others' perceptions of his morality, himself stating that he is "no damned good"(99). He also repudiates the chivalric code, insisting that he will not be "held up by anybody's maidenly modesty"(167). In fact, his final confrontation with Brigid directly flouts two of the pillars on which the fellowship of the Knights of the Round Table is founded. Malory describes the oath of the Knights as such:

> [King Arthur] charged them never to do outerage nothir mourthir, and allwayes to fle treason, and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, uppon payne of forfiture of their worship and lordship of Kynge Arthure for evirmore; and allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes [socour], strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, uppon payne of dethe. Also, that no man take no batayles in a wrongefull quarell, for no love ne for no worldis goodis.(77)

As Spade calls the police to come apprehend Brigid, she begs for mercy. His response follows: "You angel! Well, if you get a good break you'll be out of San Quentin in twenty years and you can come back to me then.... I hope to Christ they don't hang you, precious, by that sweet neck"(Hammett, *Maltese* 180-181). Despite previous instances in which he has displayed traditionally chivalric behavior towards women, including when he explains to Cairo that in a fight between Cairo and O'Shaughnessy, Spade would be

required to "throw in with her," this scene makes clear that Spade's interest in the service of women has its limit (81). It does not triumph above all when his reputation or his survival is at stake. Furthermore, merciful behavior seems out of the question. And while his behavior is oriented toward justice, his justification—that he will not "play the sap" to Brigid's machinations—seems to indicate that fighting for just causes is not his primary concern. His entire quest, per Malory's "no worldis goodis" clause, can be deemed an un-knightly pursuit.

In fact, Spade delivers a litany of reasons behind his decision to turn Brigid over to the authorities. Two of the most salient explanations on this list draw interesting ambiguities when considered in light of Spade's role as a failed Grail knight. The first is the fact that Brigid killed Miles, his partner. Spade claims that while he knew Miles to be a "son of a bitch" and "meant to kick him out as soon as the year was up," but that "when a man's partner is killed he's supposed to do something about it"(183). This statement ultimately acts as a capitulation to the fraternal bonds of chivalric knighthood, despite Spade's toughly guarded self-reliance. By violating the chivalric code, Spade upholds his duty to a fellow knight supposedly bound by the same code. This contradiction brings to light the irony of an exclusively male fellowship dedicated to the service of women. It also serves as an interesting contrast to Malory's Launcelot, who advocates the separation of "the fayryst and the trewyst of knyghthode that ever was sene togydir in ony realme of the worlde" in favor of the Grail quest—an abandonment that undercuts his professions of loyalty to the chivalric order (Malory 503).

Secondly, Spade explains that above all, he "won't [abet Brigid] because all of [him] wants to—wants to say to hell with the consequences and do it"(Hammett, *Maltese*

184). This, once again, provides ironic contrast to Launcelot, who, even after being made aware of his sins through a divinely inspired vision and proclaiming remorse, is unable to escape them. In this statement, Spade admits to his desires, acknowledges them as morally wrong, and rejects them. He apparently is able to do so because of his gritty, often cynical, realist outlook, while Launcelot's subscription to chivalric idealism leaves him without the internal moral sensibility needed to resist temptation.

While the parallel or, in the instance of the Eleyne saga, counter parallel narratives of Malory's Launcelot and Hammett's Sam Spade give birth to many interesting similarities, their differences illustrate a shift from medieval idealism to post-war cynicism. While Launcelot champions a romanticized code of chivalric behavior, he is personally unable to accept or confront his weaknesses. Even when forced to beg repentance by divine intervention, he quickly reverts to the sin that ruled him ineligible to win the Grail. Spade, on the other hand, demonstrates all of Launcelot's flaws, along with others of his own invention, but seems aware of them and comfortable with them. As such, he is able to preserve, more or less, his own moral code. Through Hammett's cynical lens, his neo-Launcelot, in the form of Spade, has benefited from abandoning the idealized code of knightly chivalry, and as such, is able to confront true manifestations of evil in a more direct and successful manner.

Onomastic Coding of Hammett's Grail Legend

Spade, Gutman, Cairo—each character in Hammett's novel seems matched to his or her name. Apart from a certain aesthetic synchronicity, an onomastic analysis reveals

a meticulous naming process. Throughout the course of his novel, Hammett's uses his characters' names to reflect, reinforce, or color the narrative's ties to the Grail legend.

The significance of the names to the novel's Grail theme becomes evident upon analysis of the name of the protagonist. His surname, Spade, is derived from the Greek "*spathe*," meaning "broadsword." In giving his character a surname equivalent to sword, Hammett reinforces Spade's role as a knight. However, it could also refer to a blunted garden shovel, an instrument of manual labor. While Spade's behavior is often oddly reminiscent of a Grail knight, he ultimately is a laborer who cannot afford to buy into the same grandiose symbolism as Gutman.

Spade's first name, Samuel, means "name of God." This is equally fitting, as, in Hammett's post-Christian Grail legend, Spade's code of ethics is the only form of morality shown to be valid. The god-like meaning of Spade's name is reinforced by his loyal secretary, Effie Perrine. Effie can be understood to be a diminutive of Euphemia, meaning "worship of the gods," while her last name, Perrine, is derived from the name Peter, meaning rock and given by Jesus to Simon, who would become the rock his church. The name fits Effie well, as she tends to idolize Spade and follows him as his first and only true disciple. The agency is rounded out by Miles Archer, whose surname carries obvious medieval connotations. Together with Spade, the agency constitutes a veritable retinue of medieval weaponry. Archer is also an interesting choice of names for its phonetic resemblance to "Arthur," as his character loosely fills the Arthur role in the narrative of Spade-as-Launcelot. Iva, even, could be tenuously linked to Gwenyvere, as her name is a near-phonetic match for one of the syllables in the queen's name.

The antagonists' names are also telling. Caspar, for example, is derived from the name of one of the Three Magi who studied arcane prophecy and who sought the Infant Christ. Yet instead of Christ, this Caspar seeks wealth. His surname, Gutman, plays on his obesity, but also translates to "good man" or "God's man." Similarly, the name of Joel Cairo, Gutman's henchman, translates to "Yahweh is God." The nominal godliness of these two characters underscores the spiritual vacuity of Hammett's world. Not only are these men, both of whom are willing to kill in pursuit of their goals, the novel's primary seekers of the Grail surrogate, but they are also linked etymologically to Judeo-Christian notions of virtue. The double irony of this juxtaposition drives home Hammett's portrayal of the failure of spirituality in modern materialized America.

The name of Spade's female antagonist, however, is even more important to the novel's Grail theme. Her surname, O'Shaughnessy, can be traced to the Gaelic *seachnach*, meaning "elusive," which corresponds nicely to her ever-changing persona. Her first name, however, carries multiple layers of significance in terms of the de-Christianization of the Grail quest. Brigid is derived from the name of a pre-Christian Irish fertility goddess. During the evangelization of Ireland, this figure was either adopted or amalgamated with a Catholic abbess of the same name to create the figure of Saint Brigid, who developed her own cult of folk customs (Ó Cathasaigh 84-90). Similarly, the decade preceding the publication of *The Maltese Falcon* saw the rise of a theory, championed by James Frazer and Jessie Weston, that the Grail legend was in actuality the Christianized form of "the fragmentary record of the secret ritual of a [Celtic] Fertility cult"(Weston 63). This correlation is notable on two levels. First, the transformation of the mythic Brigid from pagan to Christian nicely complements Ms.

O'Shaughnessy, a virtual changeling whose consistently shifts her purported values, demeanor, and allegiances to maintain her position of power. Secondly, the allusion to the Christianized pagan goddess alludes to the influence of Weston and Frazer, whose theories strip the Grail legend of its Christian dimensions. Instead they root the tradition firmly in primitive Celtic fertility rituals designed to yield a fertile harvest, just as Hammett's de-Christianized Grail object is intended to bring about material wealth.

The Maltese Falcon as a Grail Surrogate

Like many versions the Grail, the Maltese Falcon originates from a long chivalric tradition. Caspar Gutman, the Falcon's most devoted pursuer, explains to Spade that the statuette was crafted by a group of Crusaders, the Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem, to express their loyalty to the king of Spain. Gutman then explains the complex process of its theft, loss, and possession over the years, citing obscure references found in a series of arcane history texts. Gutman's explanation mirrors the conspiracy theory view of the Grail discussed in, among other texts, John B. Marino's *The Grail Legend in Modern Literature*. Per this school of thought, "the relics are containers of power sought by clandestine organizations," dating back to the Middle Ages, the locations of which are enshrouded in esoteric knowledge (Marino 136). In fact, in *The Maltese Falcon*, Gutman explicitly compares the Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem to the Knights Templar, the group most popularly connected to conspiracy theories surrounding the Grail. However, religious rhetoric is dispelled in favor of earthly treasure, with Gutman stating, "the Holy Wars to [the knights responsible for the Falcon], as to the Templars, were largely a matter of loot"(Hammett, *Maltese* 104). Within a single sentence, Hammett connects the statuette to the occultist tradition of the

Grail quest, while positing a cynical perspective on the knights' motives that supplants the divine with the material. In the recurring style of the novel, symbols are dislocated from their traditional connotations. Crusaders are not religiously motivated warriors, but rather, they are plunderers. As will be the case time after time, Hammett reduces purportedly noble motives to an issue of profit.

In addition to its medieval legacy, the circumstances of the Maltese Falcon's arrival draw strong links to Malory's Grail saga. At the start of "The Noble Tale of the Sankgreal," the Holy Grail appears to Arthur's entire court on Pentecost, the Catholic feast of the Holy Spirit. The event is portrayed as an instance of divine apparition. Malory describes with the following imagery: "So in the myddys of the blast entyrde a sonnebeame, more clerer by seven tymys than ever they saw day, and all they were alyghted of the grace of the Holy Goste....Than entird the halle the Holy Grayle coverde with whyght samyte..."(Malory 503). The Maltese Falcon, in Hammett's novel, arrives on a ship named *La Paloma*. "Paloma," the Spanish term for "dove," recalls the traditional Christian symbol of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, when Effie, Sam's secretary, sees the ship, it is ablaze. Both the image of a dove and of fire are linked to Pentecost, per the second chapter of Acts of the Apostles, in which tongues of fire and the Holy Spirit descend upon a gathering of early Christians, inspiring the feast day. The burning of the ship transforms the traditional Christian imagery for the manifestation of the divine into a symbol of destruction that stains the passengers on Effie's ferryboat with soot. When the purported Maltese Falcon carried on board finally does arrive at Spade's office, it is not wrapped in samite, a medieval silken fabric, but in layers of paper and excelsior, a cheap packaging material. The divine apparition has been debased, with its

supposed treasure bundled into cheap modern materials. Through this series of images, Hammett strips the arrival of the Grail surrogate of all of its religious dimensions.

Furthermore, in Arthurian tradition, the appearance of the Grail is usually accompanied by some variation of a heavenly retinue. In many versions, including Malory's, this entails a procession of angels, and is paired with the lance used to pierce the side of Jesus during his crucifixion. While a divine procession is not found in *The Maltese Falcon*, Hammett includes a scene in which Spade, having recovered the supposed Falcon, rushes to Gutman's hotel room, only to find his drug-addled daughter. Hammett describes the girl's appearance in quasi-angelic terms; she is "a fair-haired girl in a shimmering yellow dressing gown," whose coloring and glow recall traditional imagery of angels (Hammett, *Maltese* 137). Furthermore, she shows Sam "her body below her left breast" where she has repeatedly stabbed herself with a "three-inch jade-headed steel bouquet pin"(139). When Sam sends a hotel detective to look after her, she has disappeared. While her strange, ethereal looks, behavior, and disappearance give the girl an angelic tone, the wound and the steel pin act as an allusion to the lance. With a miniature version of the spear, this girl, in order to convey a message about Spade's Grail quest, has inflicted herself with wounds in the same location where Christ was pierced by the centurion. While within the narrative this scene serves only to illustrate the bizarre and sordid nature of the villains, in the context of the novel's Grail themes, it acts to reinforce the role of the Maltese Falcon as a Grail surrogate, as well as to continue the motif of bastardized symbols. In this case, the angel is abused, drugged up ingénue and the stigmata-like wound is self-inflicted so that she might betray her father to Spade. Once again, traditional imagery is paired with sordid reality.

The crux of this pattern of failed symbolism rests with the Grail surrogate. Both the history of the statue and the circumstances of its arrival imply a devaluation of the religious or the divine in favor of material wealth. However, the perceived value of the Maltese Falcon, and the effect of said value on those who quest for it, transforms this motif into an interesting commentary on modern American consumer culture. Hammett portrays the bird as the ultimate goal of human avarice. The greed in the air is tangible as the questing parties watch Spade unwrap the statuette:

> Gutman's fat fingers made short work of cord and paper and excelsior, and he had the black bird in his hands. 'Ah,' he said huskily, 'now after seventeen years!' His eyes were moist.... Cairo licked his red lips and worked his hands together. [Brigid's] lower lip was between her teeth. She and Cairo, like Gutman, and like Spade and the boy, were breathing heavily (172).

All members of the party stand transfixed, as if by some sort of transcendent power, at the prospect of the Falcon's unveiling. Even Spade, the novel's Grail knight, is visibly affected. Prior to this, the course of events of the novel has already demonstrated that those who pursue the statuette value it above all, above human life, even above the lives of their families. Just before the unveiling, Gutman offers Spade a fall guy in the form of Wilmer, his gunman, even though he professes to "feel towards Wilmer just exactly as if he were [his] own son."[3] The statuette represents the apex of material wealth, its value superceding any other considerations. The Grail surrogate has not only cast off its traditional Christian significance in terms of the Grail quest, but it also has taken on a new meaning, as a totem to the religion of consumerism and material greed.

Following the frenzied rapture that accompanies the unwrapping of the would-be idol, the statuette is discovered to be false. This impacts the various members of the

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[3] Hammett, *Maltese* 152.

party differently. Joel Cairo, the effeminate thief, goes into a rage, attacking Gutman and ranting about the value of the real statuette. Brigid appears to be dazed by the discovery. Gutman, however, issues a brief display of disappointment before regaining composure and vowing good-naturedly to continue on with his quest. Possibly, the distinct reactions of each character could be interpreted as a commentary on class. Brigid and Cairo, given their occupations, their demeanor, and their ethnicities, appear to be from a lower or middle class background. These two compete viciously throughout the novel for the supposed wealth the bird entails, and in the end, are destroyed by their loss. Gutman, on the other hand, is a glutton whose casual spending and expensive taste cast him in an aristocratic light. To him, the matter is trivial, and his quick recovery and enthusiasm at restarting the quest seem to indicate that while the others seek fortune, to him, the value of the Falcon lies mostly in the amusement he derives from the quest. The fact that this amusement entails murder and that others do the majority of the work for him does not seem to concern him in the least. As such, Gutman can be understood to represent the idle rich, and their role in the modern American quest for prosperity and wealth.

The quest value that Gutman evidently imposes upon the statuette also casts a moral shadow over the general idea of the Grail object as a symbol. *The Maltese Falcon* was published in an era when authors such as T. S. Eliot were using "the Grail myth as metaphor to imply that...humanity may hope for some kind of spiritual renewal"(Marino 109). Hammett has already deconstructed the symbolic worth of the Grail object and the other traditional components of the story, but here he transforms Eliot's notion of a symbolic aspiration to a quixotic and devastating diversion available only to those who can afford it. The Grail myth, here, is no hope-inspiring metaphor, but rather, an absurd

and destructive luxury. Through this construct, Hammett not only deprives symbols of their traditional meaning, but also calls into question the validity of symbols in an overwhelmingly material world.

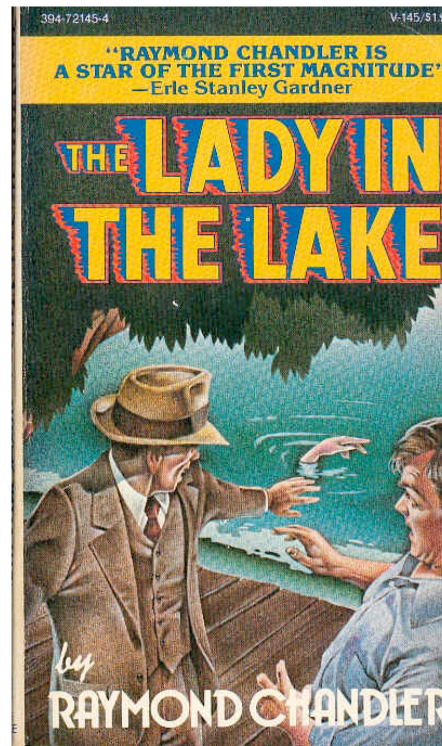
Over the course of the novel, Hammett effectively links the Maltese Falcon to the Holy Grail, but strips the Grail surrogate of the legend's traditional Christian connotations. He replaces them, instead, with a new order in which the statuette serves as a fetishistic representation of consumerism. Ultimately, the unwrapping of the Falcon and the discovery of its falsity give way to a climactic scene in which the novel's Grail quest becomes a metaphor for the American dream, with lower and middle class figures fighting for an illusion of wealth, while the upper class continue their leisurely pursuits at the expense of others. In creating this new Grail narrative, Hammett makes a powerfully ironic statement. In essence, he demonstrates the veracity of the claim made by The *Dain Curse*'s Mrs. Rodman. Symbols of the divine are reduced to solely material objects and the practice of symbolic interpretation becomes a noxious frivolity. In both *The Dain Curse* and *The Maltese Falcon*, only the wealthy are able to invest material objects with symbolic value. The world of Hammett's fiction, with its grim outlook on modern life, shows symbolism to be total falsity, and as such, only the impractical rich can afford it.

The theme of hollow symbolic value also explains Hammett's placement of Launcelot at the center of his Arthurian legend. Spade acts as a symbol, a signifier of Launcelot, but does not embody or signify the code of values for which Launcelot's name is celebrated. He is not particularly chivalrous, he does not pretend any form of loyalty to anyone or anything, and he is not a lover—even his amorous interactions are depicted as motions devoid of passion or love. Just as the Grail surrogate has lost its theological

dimensions, the knight surrogate has lost his traditional meaning. Spade's de-knighting acts as the capstone to an incredibly pervasive motif of symbolic collapse in favor of the blunt and the material. His repudiation of symbolic notions of loyalty and virtue in favor of economic survival represent a sort of moral victory over Bridget and Joel, who are damned because their investment in the fetishistic nature of the Falcon extends beyond their material means. Ultimately, self-awareness and self-reliance allow for self-preservation. Sam does not capture the Grail surrogate, but he survives with his endogenous moral code intact. As such, he is able to preserve his own integrity, which to him appears more valuable than any sort of earthly treasure.

2
"It Wasn't a Game For Knights": the Chivalric Tradition of Chandler's Philip Marlowe

So they rode tyll they com to a laake the which was a fayre watir and brode. And in the myddis Arthure was ware of an arme clothed in whyghy samite, that helde a fayre swerde in the honde. "Lo!" seyde Merlion, "yondir ys the swerde that I spoke off." [From *Le Morte Darthur*, Sir Thomas Malory (37).]



The depths cleared again. Something moved in them that was not a board. It rose slowly, with an infinitely careless languor, a long dark twisted something that rolled lazily in the water as it rose. It broke surface casually, lightly, without haste....The thing rolled over once more and an arm flapped up barely above the skin of the water and the arm ended in a bloated hand that was the hand of a freak. [From *The Lady in the Lake*, Raymond Chandler (226).]

Raymond Chandler, the immediate successor to Dashiell Hammett's hardboiled tradition, also included a strong Arthurian influence in his work. The above quote, from

his 1944 novel, *The Lady in the Lake*, encapsulates his approach to Arthurian legend. Gone are the ethereal breathlessness and the chivalric glamour, replaced instead with visceral decay and nihilistic misery. Even the title of the novel conveys the shift; the Lady is no longer *of* the Lake, but rather, displaced *in* the lake. A mystical figure becomes a human drowning victim.

Chandler's fascination with Arthurian legend dates back to the start of his writing career. His first detective story, "Blackmailers Don't Shoot," published in *Black Mask* in 1933, features a protagonist named Mallory, an evident reference to the author of *Le Morte Darthur* (Ferguson 6). Mallory, like both his namesake and his creator, acts, in his capacity as a private detective, as an investigator and collector of stories. In both of his outings—his second took place in the short story, "Smart Aleck Kill"—Mallory investigates and pieces together a narrative, much like Sir Thomas, who "built up something like a coherent history of Arthur," drawing from a diffuse collection of source material (Baines xi). However, instead of celebrating tales of chivalric virtue, Mallory acts as a conduit through which Chandler chronicles the moral wasteland of postwar Los Angeles.

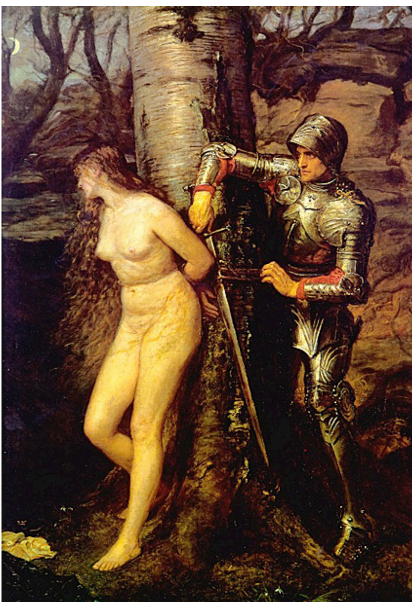
Although fragments of Arthurian inspiration appear throughout Chandler's entire *oeuvre*, his seminal work, *The Big Sleep*[4], represents a particularly salient example of the presence of Arthurian, and particularly, Grail legend in the author's works. *The Big Sleep*, structurally speaking, is incomparable to *The Maltese Falcon*. Famously, while adapting the novel into a screenplay, William Faulkner telephoned Chandler to determine

[4] *The Big Sleep* follows detective Philip Marlowe as he investigates a blackmail scheme being perpetrated against a rich old man and his two profligate daughters. The stakes escalate when the blackmailer, a pornographer, is shot dead, while rumors swirl about the disappearance of the elder daughter's husband and the wife of local kingpin Eddie Mars. In the end, the conspiracy is revealed to be a guise to protect the murderous psychosis of the nymphomaniac younger daughter.

the circumstances behind one of the murders, and Chandler himself admitted to not knowing. While the language, characterization, and thematic pull of *The Big Sleep* are on an equal plane as Hammett's work, the novel's plot is much more deeply convoluted. As such, the novel's parallels to Arthuriana are also more diffuse, both in significance and in source material. Chandler mixes characters and symbols, and draws heavily from Tennyson as well as from Malory for inspiration. However, ultimately, the Arthurian references serve a similar, if not identical, purpose in both works. Chandler uses the trappings of Arthurian legend to underscore the cultural denigration and devolution of value systems that plagues Twentieth Century America.

Marlowe's Knightly Inheritance and the State of the Chivalric Tradition

Before we even learn the name of our protagonist, we are presented with an image that grafts his narrative onto the history of chivalric tradition. In the second paragraph of the novel, our narrator, "the well-dressed private detective....calling on four million dollars," stands admiring the foyer of his client (Chandler 589).



> The main hallway of the Sternwood place was two stories high. Over the entrance doors, which would have let in a troop of Indian elephants, there was a broad stained-glass panel showing a knight in dark armor rescuing a lady who was tied to a tree and didn't have any clothes on but some very long and convenient hair. The knight had pushed the vizor of his helmet back to be sociable, and he was fiddling with the knots on the ropes that tied the lady to the tree and not getting anywhere. I stood there and thought that if I lived in the house, I would sooner or later have to climb up there and help him. He didn't seem to be really trying (589).

Left: Chandler's description seems drawn from Millais' "The Knight-Errant" (1870)

Without any other sort of introduction, Chandler has already framed his hero in the context of medieval knighthood. While the detective shares the same end goal of the stained glass knight, he is a man of action—a pragmatist who seeks results over form, evident in his discontent with the romantic knight's lack of progress. The wry tone of his reflection on the image leaves open to speculation the exact nature of his motives in wanting to assist the knight. Perhaps he shares the knight's supposed noble intentions, or, perhaps, he is simply anxious to gain access to the unclothed maiden. Regardless, his cavalier attitude toward the romantic sensibilities of the image, coupled with his derision of the knight's effete sociability, establishes the detective as both a colleague of and a superior to the knight.

The continued survey of the foyer yields more information about the state of the chivalric tradition.

> On the east side of the hall a free staircase, tile-paved, rose to a gallery with a wrought-iron railing and another piece of stained-glass romance. Large hard chairs with rounded red plush seats were backed into the vacant spaces of the wall round about. They didn't look as if anybody had ever sat in them. In the middle of the west wall there was a big empty fireplace with a brass screen in four hinged panels, and over the fireplace a marble mantel with cupids at the corners. Above the mantel there was a large oil portrait, and above the portrait two bullet-torn or moth-eaten cavalry pennants crossed in a glass frame. The portrait was a stiffly posed job of an officer in full regiments of about the time of the Mexican war. The officer had a neat black imperial, black mustachios, hot hard coal-black eyes, and the general look of a man it would pay to get along with (590).

In the context of the stained-glass panel, the pennants, and the portrait, there seems to be a sort of historical progression. The panel depicts medieval glory, while the subject of the portrait, with his regalia and his Old World hairstyle, conveys a sense of more recent, but still not modern, military nobility. The pennants, non-descript objects that could just

as easily belong to either one of the aforementioned epochs, serve as a bridge between the two, and yet the detective cannot discern whether or not they are bullet-torn or moth-eaten; that is to say, their potential glory is dubious at best.

In the context of the overall room, however, the presence of these objects becomes a commentary on the devaluation of chivalric tradition in modern American cultures. They are wildly out of place amidst the trappings of the *nouveau riche* California mansion, and their grouping with marble cupids casts them into a haphazard flurry of classical images. The unused chairs complete the picture of a room void of any utility. The value of all of these items, then, is solely ornamental. Whatever meaning the medieval images or the military decor might have once held has been abandoned in favor of surface aesthetics.

It is only after these preliminary survey of his environs, followed by a brief episode with his host's daughter, that our narrator and protagonist is given a name. He is only addressed by his surname, Mr. Marlowe. His given name, Phillip, is introduced much later in the novel, almost as an afterthought. As in *The Maltese Falcon*, the anthroponomy of the characters' names in *The Big Sleep* sheds significant light on their often-multilayered Arthurian underpinnings. Marlowe is a prime example of this. On one hand, it acts as a reference to the protagonist of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, itself often cited as a contemporary update on the Grail legend (Ferguson 6). On the other hand, "Marlowe" means "lake leavings." Chandler grants his detective an immediate connection to Malory's flawed Grail knight, Launcelot du Lac. However, he is not "of the Lake," but rather, is representative of driftwood washed ashore. Whereas Launcelot originates from the ethereal domain of the Lady of the Lake, Marlowe is earthy

detritus that grazes the edge of the lake but remains firmly rooted on solid ground. Philip, Marlowe's first name, means "horse lover," thereby solidifying the hero's ties to chivalric tradition and the trappings of knighthood (6).

Launcelot, as seen in the case of *The Maltese Falcon*'s Sam Spade, makes a likely patron saint for the hardboiled detective. His arrogance and confidence in his own prowess, portrayed by Malory as his damning flaws, are hallmarks of the genre's antihero. Marlowe's aloof and assertive nature places him squarely within this tradition. Marlowe, however, is not nearly as clean cut of a Launcelot analogue as Hammett's Spade. While in name and in personality, he is a clear descendant of the Launcelot tradition, his narrative trajectory sets him up as a sort of amalgam of the various Grail knights.

Marlowe begins his quest with a visit to General Sternwood, who acts as a surrogate for King Pelles, the Grail narrative's Maimed King. Pelles, the ruler of a seaside kingdom, is paralyzed by incurable wounds in both legs as the result of mystical retribution for laying claim to a sword of which he was not spiritually worthy. His kingdom subsequently disintegrates into a wasteland. Similarly, Sternwood spends his old age languishing in a sweltering greenhouse at the back of his mansion, after "being rolled on by a jumper [horse] and crippled for life" (Chandler 632). Sternwood's paralysis results directly from the chivalric pursuit of horsemanship; with respect to his purity of character, he comments that neither he, nor his daughters, nor any other Sternwood "has any more moral sense than a cat" (596). His matter-of-fact dismissal of his own moral faculties, coupled with his claim that "[his] hold on life is too slight to include any Victorian hypocrisy," stand in stark contrast to Pelles' lofty appeals to

chivalric virtue and call into question the existence of morality in general (596). After all, if this rich old man, whose home is adorned with chivalric ornamentation, can only refer to moral discretion as hypocrisy, then whom else, throughout the course of the novel, can the reader expect to stand forth as the virtuous patriarch necessitated by chivalric tradition?

Additionally, just downhill from the mansion is Sternwood's own personal wasteland, a cluster of depleted oil wells, a pit of "stale sump water" and the source of Sternwood's wealth (603). The wasteland acting as a source of prosperity rather than famine furthers the novel's inversion of Arthurian values but also acts as a class commentary. In Malory's tale, Pelles laments the wasted countryside, but does not appear to suffer from lack of kingly refinement. In Chandler's work, Sternwood continues to prosper and does not care about the damaging source of his wealth.

Pelles, in the Grail tradition, is also the father of Eleyne, and it is he who conspires to achieve her seduction of Launcelot, so that Galahad might be conceived, the Grail be obtained, and he and his kingdom be cured. In *The Big Sleep*, Sternwood has not one, but two daughters who attempt to bed Marlowe in an effort to direct the outcome of his quest. Sternwood, however, is apathetic to their concupiscent overtures. In fact, he hires Marlowe in order to spare himself the shock brought on by their scandalous behavior.

Carmen Sternwood: Synthesized Reiteration of the Grail Legend's Succubi

Neither Vivian Regan nor Carmen Sternwood, the two aforementioned progeny of the General, can be considered true Eleyne figures. While Vivian, the older and more

shrewd of the two, practices deception in her physically-successful seduction of Marlowe, she appears to be inspired less by Eleyne than by her Arthurian namesake, Vivien, Merlin's seductress. Carmen, on the other hand, an aggressively hedonistic ingénue, seems to act solely on lusty impulse. Her explicit overtures toward Marlowe mirror a series of characters in the Grail Quest—demons in the guise of women who constantly appear and attempt to tempt the Grail knights into abandoning their requisite chastity.

In her introduction, she falls toward Marlowe, forcing him to "catch her or let her crack her head on the tessellated floor"(591). Sir Bors, on his quest, is met with a similar dilemma when a beautiful maiden he encounters leads twelve of her gentlewomen to the edge of her battlements, promising that they will all jump if he does not take her to bed. Bors refuses; the women commit suicide and are revealed to be demons. Marlowe, on the other hand, catches the girl begrudgingly, but still spurns her advances. Carmen, after all, is not a demonic presence, but rather a flesh-in-blood human being who inhabits the same flesh-and-blood world as Marlowe. The knight, in this setting, must act realistically as opposed to on the basis on any sort of theological posturing. He does not compromise himself, however. He merely acts of his own free will, in accordance with the conventions of the physical world around him, stopping the fall then promptly dismissing the girl.

Her "little sharp predatory teeth," green wardrobe, and frequent hissing recall another demonic apparition, that of a woman riding a serpent who plagues Perceval (590). Later in his quest, Perceval comes upon a beautiful maiden who disrobes and draws him into her bed. Perceval nearly succumbs to the seduction, but remembers his

faith, and, making the sign of the cross, dispels the she-demon's enchantment. The noblewoman is revealed to have been the same as the serpent lady he had encountered earlier. In a similar episode, Marlowe comes home to his apartment to find Carmen in his bed, "as naked and glistening as a pearl" (706). His first attempt to dismiss her is an appeal to "professional pride," his variation on the chivalric code (707). He is in the employ of her father, "a sick man, very frail, very helpless...[who] sort of trusts [Marlowe] not to pull any stunts"(707). Immediately after making this statement, Marlowe observes a chessboard upon which he has a game in progress: "I looked down at the chessboard. The move with the knight was wrong. I put it back where I had moved it from. Knights had no meaning in this game. It wasn't a game for knights"(707). This juxtaposition of chivalric professions and explicit postmodern disillusionment strikes out from the novel's thematic core. Chivalry, in the traditional sense, is dead, along with all of its trappings and systemically prescribed values. However, instead of succumbing to Carmen in light of this potentially defeating realization, Marlowe draws from a deeper, more endogenous source to reject her advances:

> She called me a filthy name.
>
> I didn't mind that. I didn't mind what she called me, what anybody called me. But this was the room I had to live in. It was all I had in the way of a home. In it was everything that was mine, that had any association for me, any past, anything that took the place of a family. Not much; a few books, pictures, radio, chessmen, old letters, stuff like that. Nothing. Such as they were they had all my memories.
>
> I couldn't stand her in that room any longer. What she called me only reminded me of that. (708)

Marlowe's internal soliloquy in this scene acts as a total repudiation of Malory's value system, in which Launcelot is punished for choosing self over the code of chivalry. In

Chandler's postmodern Californian wasteland, a moral vacuum populated by persons who seem to flow along a diverse yet singularly-directed tide of hedonism and self-destruction, Marlowe's egoism, his ability to cling to personal willpower and more importantly, personal integrity, acts as the source of his power to withstand Carmen. For all of Launcelot's selfishness and pride, he lacks, in Malory's characterization, any sort of sense of self. This disconnect between his natural impulses and his imposed value system is what opens the floodgates to his weaknesses, and prevents him from resisting temptation. Marlowe, on the other hand, is able to respond with integrity not through subscription to chivalric code, but because Carmen, in invading his apartment, has violated his inner sanctum of self, an intrusion that fortifies his resolve to spurn her succubine attempts to corrupt him.

Carmen's literary associations with the infernal seductresses of the Grail legend join together with Chandler's vivid depictions of her explicitly inhuman behavior to cast her in a demonic light. At the end of the novel, Marlowe tests her to confirm his suspicion that she murdered Rusty Regan, Vivian's missing husband, in a jealous nymphomaniac fit. Amidst the wasteland of sump water in the Sternwood's back acres, Carmen undergoes a transformation that is later explained as an epileptic fit, but is portrayed more in terms of a possession. As she attacks Marlowe, "[t]he hissing sound gr[ows] louder and her face [takes on a] scraped bone look. Aged, deteriorated, become animal, and not a nice animal"(775). Her transformation recalls Malory's image of the old woman and her serpent, representatives of a pre-Christian demonic paganism. In Carmen's final scene, hag and serpent are merged into one. Her fit continues even after Marlowe thwarts her:

> Her hand holding the empty gun began to shake violently. The gun fell out of it. Her mouth began to shake. Her whole face went to pieces. Then her head screwed up towards her left ear and froth showed on her lips. Her breath made a whining sound. She swayed. (756)

Vivian and Marlowe discuss the episode, attributing her actions to nymphomania and epilepsy. Science and psychoanalysis have supplanted the old religious order. Yet, this explanation is not satisfying given the intensity of the eerie mood that Chandler paints in Carmen's final scenes, and in many of her interactions. The hollowness of this diagnosis creates room for ambiguity. At very least, it shows that the new belief systems, rooted in science though they might be, still fail to achieve an understanding of the realities of human nature and human evil.

Arthur Gwynn Geiger's Cult of Perversion

Carmen also acts as a pseudo deity for the cult of sexual perversion that has taken hold in the wake of the collapse of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Marlowe is initially called in to protect Sternwood's wild-child daughter from blackmailers. While he addresses the discoveries he makes as perverse, he does not appear to remark them very much. However, to the reader, the deliberately lurid details not only shock and sensationalize, in the tradition of pulp fiction, but also establish a strange and infernal inversion of Arthurian Christianity into a pagan festishization of abnormal sexual behavior.

Once again, character names draw in the Arthurian connection. Carmen's blackmailer is Arthur Gwynn Geiger. He is a pornographer who runs his racket from behind the facade of a legitimate bookstore. He is also engaged in a homosexual relationship with a teenage boy. In ascribing both Arthur and Guinevere's names to this

character, Chandler emphasizes the cross-gender fluidity of his sexuality (Ferguson 3). More importantly, however, the name underscores the inversion of Arthurian values. Arthur and Guinevere, who as king and queen act as paragons of heterosexual marriage, are now implicated in varying degrees of illicit sexuality.

Geiger, however, does not only represent a departure from sexual norms. Every facet of his private life repudiates the traditions of Western civilization—excluding, of course, the ruthless criminal capitalism that drives his whole operation. His apartment is an exercise in Orientalism, with "brown plaster walls decked out with strips of Chinese embroidery and Chinese and Japanese prints in grained wood frames....a thick pinkish Chinese rug...[and] floor cushions, bits of odd silk tossed around, as if whoever lived there had to have a piece he could reach out and thumb"(Chandler 613). It is amid this scenery, immediately following Geiger's murder, that Marlowe finds Carmen Sternwood, "her body stiffly erect in the pose of an Egyptian goddess," high on laudanum and ether, and wearing jade earrings and nothing else (613). Her position in the room suggests that of an idol in a temple, with the worshippers having fled following the shooting. Pictures have been taken of her from a camera hidden within a totem pole, which adds a touch of irony, as one fetishistic object is used to exploit another.

Whereas Carmen-as-idol and the Oriental decor suggest a total rejection of Western religious and cultural values, Geiger's teenage lover, Carol Lundegren, represents a sort of celebrated perversion of Arthurian values. He wears a jerkin, a garment common to pages in medieval times, and essentially acts as a manservant to Geiger. However, the knight-page nature of their relationship is perverted by Geiger's sexual exploitation of the boy. Following Geiger's death, the extent of Carol's

desecration of traditional chivalric values is rendered explicit in the funeral wake that he sets up in his bedroom, having absconded with Geiger's body:

> There was a dim flickering light in the room and a smell of sandalwood. Two cones of incense ash stood side by side on a small brass tray on the bureau. The light came from the two tall black candles in the foot-high candlesticks. There were standing on straight-backed chairs, one on either side of the bed.
>
> Geiger lay on the bed. The two missing strips of Chinese tapestry made a St. Andrew's Cross over the middle of his body, hiding the blood-smeared front of his Chinese coat. Below the cross his black-pajama'd legs lay stiff and straight. His feet were in the slippers with thick white felt soles. Above the cross his arms were crossed at the wrists and his hands lay flat against his shoulders, palms down, fingers close together and stretched out evenly. (665)

The scene contains the trappings of the Catholic Mass, but Chandler renders them in a tainted light. The black candles, with "drops of black wax crawl[ing] down their sides," immediately conjure notions of Black Sabbaths and satanic rites. The incense, used in Mass as an offering, most likely functions here to mask the smell of Geiger's body, which has been decomposing for at least twenty four hours at this point. Even the cross is made out of material of a distinctly non-Western, non-Christian origin. The warped funereal rite arranged by Carol acts as a *piece de resistance* in Chandler's development of the quasi-demonic Carmen's associates as participants in a sex-based fetishistic repudiation of Western Judeo-Christian values. While not literally demons, these individuals represent the definite presence of perversion and evil that Marlowe must avoid and combat, even if cultural value systems have lapsed to the point where he has no support.

"Merlin and Vivien," and Vivian and Marlowe: Seduction and Knowledge

As noted earlier, Vivian Regan, Sternwood's older daughter, is linked by nomenclature to her own distinct character in Arthurian lore. Vivien, alternately known as Nyneve or Nimue, is an ambiguous character, whose motivations and allegiances vary in different translations and retellings. Her fundamental import to Arthuriana, however, is that she is responsible for trapping Merlin, Arthur's wizard and advisor, in a tree (sometimes, a cave is substituted) for all eternity. In *The Big Sleep*, Vivian's relationship with Marlowe closely mirrors the Vivien-Merlin dynamic presented by Tennyson in *Idylls of the King*. In "Merlin and Vivien," Tennyson recounts her initial seduction:

> Merlin, who knew the range of all their arts,
> Had built the King his havens, ships, and halls,
> Was also a Bard, and knew the starry heavens;
> That people call'd him Wizard; whom at first
> She play'd about with slight and sprightly talk,
> And vivid smiles, and faintly-venom'd points
> Of slander, glancing here and grazing there;
> And yielding to his kindlier moods, the Seer
> Would watch her at her petulance, and play,
> Ev'n when they seem'd unloveable, and laugh
> As those that watch a kitten; thus he grew
> Tolerant of what he half disdain'd, and she
> Perceiving that she was but half disdain'd
> Began to break her sports with graver fits. (l.165-178)

Vivien's seduction spring from her desire to gain knowledge from Merlin—knowledge of a spell that she plans to use against him. Now, consider Marlowe's initial interaction with Vivian:

> I grinned at her with my head on one side. She flushed. Her hot black eyes looked mad. 'I don't see what there is to be cagey about,' she snapped. 'And I don't like your manners.'
>
> 'I'm not crazy about yours,' said. 'I didn't ask to see you. You sent for me. I don't mind your ritzing me or drinking your lunch out of a Scotch bottle. I don't mind your showing me your legs. They're very swell legs and it's a pleasure to make their acquaintance. I don't mind if you don't like my manners. They're pretty bad. I grieve over them during

> the long winter evenings. But don't waste your time trying to cross-examine me.'
> She slammed her glass down so hard that is slopped over on an ivory cushion. She swung her legs to the floor and stood up with her eyes sparking fire and her nostrils wide. Her mouth was open and her bright teeth glared at me. Her knuckles were white.
> 'People don't talk like that to me,' she said thickly.
> I sat there and grinned at her. Very slowly she closed her mouth and looked down at the spilled liquor. She sat down on the edge of the chaise-lounge and cupped her chin in one hand.
> 'My God, you big dark handsome brute! I ought to throw a Buick at you.' (Chandler 601)

The parallel is unmistakable. In both cases, Vivien, or Vivian, alternates coquettish with aggressive behavior in an attempt to coerce knowledge from its possessor. The difference in Marlowe's situation is that he is not only a man of knowledge, like Merlin, but also a man of action. This renders him capable of turning Vivian's coy assault into a mutually combative series of parries.

Later in the novel, he proves that seduction for knowledge is not her exclusive domain:

> I kissed her tightly and quickly. Then a long slow clinging kiss. Her lips opened under mine. Her body began to shake in my arms.
> 'Killer,' she said softly, her breath going into my mouth.
> I strained her against me until the shivering of her body was almost shaking mine. I kept on kissing her. After a long time she pulled her head away enough to say: 'Where do you live?'
> 'Hobart Arms. Franklin near Kenmore.'
> 'I've never seen it.'
> 'Want to?'
> 'Yes,' she breathed.
> 'What has Eddie Mars got on you?'
> Her body stiffened in my arms and her breath made a harsh sound. Her head pulled back until her eyes, wide open, ringed with white, were staring at me.
> 'So that's the way it is,' she said in a soft dull voice.
> 'That's the way it is. Kissing is nice, but your father didn't hire me to sleep with you.'
> 'You son of a bitch,' she said calmly, without moving.

> I laughed in her face. 'Don't think I'm an icicle,' I said. 'I'm not blind or without senses. I have warm blood like the next guy. You're easy to take—too damned easy. What has Eddie Mars got on you?'
> 'If you say that again, I'll scream.'
> 'Go ahead and scream.'
> She jerked away and pulled herself upright, far back in the corner of the car.
> 'Men have been shot for little things like that, Marlowe.'
> 'Men have been shot for practically nothing. The first time we met I told you I was a detective. Get it through your lovely head. I work at it, lady. I don't play at it.' (702-703)

Marlowe becomes a hybrid character. He possesses Merlin's knowledge and wisdom, but with Launcelot's virility and questing drive, he is not nearly so susceptible to Vivian's carnal manipulations. Additionally, the strength of his endogenous will power grants him the fortitude to keep both aspects of himself in equilibrium, for the sake of self-preservation and out of concern for his quest. Because of this self-conscious discipline, when he does reveal his knowledge to Vivian in the ultimate moments of the novel, it is not so that she might trap him, but rather, so that he might trap her in her own tangled web and coerce her to take her fiend sister away to a sanitarium.

In employing this particular dynamic, Chandler effects a watershed moment in the construction of the modern detective as an Arthurian figure. Marlowe now not only stands in for Launcelot, but also for Merlin. He is not only a knight, but also a seer. The false dichotomy between action and knowledge is abolished. This is only natural in terms of the development of the archetype. Detectives, by nature, engage in knightly quests, but their usual quarry is knowledge. In this sense, Marlowe, along with Spade and his other fictional colleagues, is equal parts Merlin and Launcelot. In fact, returning to briefly to onomastics, his name confirms such a duality. While the origin of 'Marlowe' points to Launcelot, the euphonic composition of the name is strikingly

similar to Merlin, with its two-syllable M-L emphasis. Even his weapon of choice represents the synthesis of these two forces. The lances and swords of old are replaced with guns—weaponry developed by modern science for use in action. The Twentieth Century detective represents a point of convergent evolution between these two literary traditions. In placing Marlowe concurrently in the roles of a Grail knight, in his interactions with Sternwood and Carmen, among others, and of Merlin, in his relationship with Vivian, Chandler acknowledges the merging of these two archetypal elements. The character of the detective-knight is thus imbued with not only a more rounded, but also a more realistic set of conventions. This maturation of character is in keeping with Chandler's attempts to ground the Arthurian tradition in a more genuine and contemporary conception of the world.

The allusion to Tennyson's poem carries additional weight, as portions of the text presage the eventual degradation of Arthurian ideals. At the start of the poem, Vivien establishes herself as a firm cynic, opposed to Camelot's heraldic tradition of virtue. She tells King Mark of Cornwall that she has been

> "shown the truth betimes,
> That old true filth, and bottom of the well,
> Where Truth is hidden. Gracious lessons thine
> And maxims of the mud! 'This Arthur pure!
> Great Nature thro' the flesh herself hath made
> Gives him the lie! There is no being pure. (l.46-49)

In an attempt to incense Merlin, Vivien goes on a long tirade, consisting of accusations of impure behavior on the part of the various Knights of the Round Table, "[d]efaming and defacing til she left/ Not even Launcelot brave, nor Galahad clean"(l.802-803). Merlin defends each accusation, concluding that he "know[s] the Table Round, [his] friends of old;/ All brave, and many generous, and some chaste"(l. 814-815). While he

acknowledges that they are not completely pure, his claim supports the general idea of a virtuous chivalric brotherhood. Chandler condenses this exchange into a brief dialogue between Marlowe and Vivian. Vivian, attacking the criminal justice system, states, "'[the family's ex-convict chauffer] didn't know the right people. That's all a police record means in this rotten crime-ridden country," to which Marlowe responds, "I wouldn't go that far"(Chandler 630). Even though he functions outside of the system, Marlowe defends his time's closest relation to a chivalric brotherhood against the ungrounded feminine attack. However, Vivian makes her accusation "negligently," indicating that such an attitude toward chivalric institutions is not an impassioned attack, but rather, a commonplace attitude. There is no hypocritical value system against which Vivian needs to rage in debauched postwar Los Angeles. In a way, the casual cynicism of Chandler's Vivian marks the victory of Tennyson's Vivien, as if she had sealed the false notions of human purity and chivalry within the tree with Merlin, leaving cynicism as a given for her modern successor. Moreover, the absence of the need for his Vivian to rage against false value systems further solidifies the absence of such beliefs in Chandler's modern wasteland.

"All they did was to make me think of Silver-Wig, and I never saw her again."

The only individual in *The Big Sleep* who stands as a counterpart to the Sternwood sisters and their sin-obsessed milieu comes in the unlikely form of Mona Mars, nee Grant, wife of Los Angeles kingpin Eddie Mars. Rumored to have run off with Vivian Regan's husband, Mona is one of the loose ends that Marlowe pursues throughout the novel. In a sense, she is as close to a Grail surrogate—an elusive, immaterial

quarry—as Marlowe has in the narrative framework of the novel. However, he only encounters her after being captured by Eddie Mars' gangsters. When he awakes, he describes the apparition before him:

It seemed there was a woman and she was sitting near a lamp, which was where she belonged, in a good light. Another light shone hard on my face, so I closed my eyes again and tried to look at her through the lashes. She was so platinumed that her hair shone like a silver fruit bowl. (733)

This first image of Mona casts her in an explicitly angelic light, replete with a silver halo surrounding her head and cloaked in blinding light. Marlowe's comment that "she belonged...in a good light," establishes her position within the narrative of the story as the one individual upon whom Marlowe reflects positively. The following images also set her apart from the wasteland of the city with strong pastoral imagery: "The woman withdrew her gaze from some distant mountain peak. Her small firm chin turned slowly. Her eyes were the blue of mountain lakes"(733). This is the first instance in the narrative in which any character has been visually linked with the beauty of nature, as opposed to animal savagery. Furthermore, the lake-blue quality of her eyes, mentioned several other times, connects her to the benevolent figure of the Lady of the Lake, who raises Launcelot and provides Arthur with Excalibur

Marlowe's ensuing conversation with Mona concerns what he perceives as his imminent death. "What did you expect, Mr. Marlowe—orchids?" she asks, to which he responds, "Just a plain pine box...Don't bother with bronze or silver handles. And don't scatter my ashes over the blue Pacific. I like the worms better. Did you know that worms are of both sexes and that any worm can love any other worm?"(733). The reference to androgyny seems a direct nod to king/queen figure Arthur Gwynn Geiger and his sexually ambiguous entourage, who feast upon the decaying corpse of Western

civilization just as worms feed off of decomposing bodies. The worm discussion also recalls Tennyson's description of Merlin's dejection at the start of "Merlin and Vivien":

> Then fell on Merlin a great melancholy;
> He walk'd with dreams and darkness, and he found
> A doom that ever poised itself to fall,
> An ever-moaning battle in the mist,
> World-war of dying flesh against the life,
> Death in all life and lying in love,
> The meanest having power upon the highest,
> And the high purpose broken by the worm. (l.186-194)

The parallel suggests resignation on the part of Marlowe, given that he faces many of the same concerns as his predecessor. Over the course of the novel, Marlowe has encountered, in particular, "death in all life and lying in love," and now, he acquiesces to having his "high purpose broken by the worm." However, Mona, an unlikely hero, provides him with succor, feeding him an unnamed libation that is described with the mysterious reverence of a medieval elixir. When he informs her of her husband's murderous ways, she first exhibits denial, but then reacts in a normative, emotional way, evincing guilt and sorrow. She then reveals that her platinum halo is actually a wig that she wears as part of Eddie's blackmailing scheme against the Sternwoods, and professes that her actions were motivated by love for Eddie. This moment is crucial to her role as a foil to the rest of her associates. Even though her initial divine appearance is the product of a disguise, she is honest and open about it and about her role in the scheme—yet another first in the novel's trajectory.

Following this revelation, she sets Marlowe free. For an instant, there seems to be a genuine human relationship materializing between the two.

> "I guess you mean me to go," I said.
> She nodded without lifting her head.
> "Don't waste time. He'll be back any minute."

> "Light a cigarette for me."
> I stood beside her, touching her knees. She came to her feet with a sudden lurch. Our eyes were only inches apart.
> "Hello, Silver-Wig," I said softly. (737)

From this point on in the text, Mona becomes Silver-Wig, perhaps a reference to Guinevere, whose name alludes to her fair looks. Indeed, in the next segment, her role draws a sort of inverse parallel to Guinevere's story. She, the virtuous queen, pledges her loyalty to her husband, the duplicitous king. Marlowe, the dispossessed Launcelot, who owes no loyalty to Eddie, begs her to come with him, but she refuses, even though staying behind after freeing him means her almost-certain death. Before Marlowe makes his escape, however, the two share a strangely cold, yet passionate, kiss. "Her face under my mouth was like ice," Marlowe explains. "She put her hands up and took hold of my head and kissed me hard on the lips. Her lips were like ice, too"(739). Marlowe then leaves, walking out into the wind and the rain.

The encounter between the two is brief, both in the real-time of the novel and in the length of pages devoted to it. Indeed, Mona appears only in two brief chapters, during which all their interactions transpire. However, the encounter is one of the most striking passages of the book. Mona, nothing more than a rumor for the large majority of the book, plays, in her brief episode, a wide variety of roles. Simultaneously, she is a Grail surrogate, an angelic savior, a Lady of the Lake, and an uncorrupted Guinevere. She is also a tragic figure, in her doomed love for Eddie, a protector and a martyr for Marlowe, and the only person in the novel besides Marlowe who demonstrates mature emotional facility and a strong adherence to a moral code. In the Arthurian context of the novel, she, a gangster's wife and accomplice, transforms into the last beacon of virtue, drawing specifically from female characters. In saving the hero, she becomes a necessary

component of his quest, yet her fulfillment of this role necessitates her demise. Trapped in her moral code, she cannot survive, nor can she achieve justice. When Marlowe kisses her goodbye, her lips are already cold. She is a dead woman trapped in a dead chivalric code. While both necessary and virtuous, the code she represents is not sufficient to combat or even survive in Marlowe's world. As he walks out the door, he appears to kiss the last beacon of that tradition goodbye.

It is as if, following his egoistic revelation with Carmen, Silver-Wig's virtue tempts him with the possibility that it can be, after all, a game for knights. However, in his attempt to pursue a chivalric code, he is forced to confront reality. Refusing to let Mona die, he kills Mars' henchman is a brutal shootout, casting chivalric convention aside to save the transfigured Silver-Wig. In the firefight, Marlowe explicitly embraces his role as a non-knight:

> He whirled at me. Perhaps it would have been nice to allow him another shot or two, just like a gentleman of the old school. But his gun was still up and I couldn't wait any longer. Not long enough to be a gentleman of the old school. I shot him four times, the Colt straining against my ribs. (742)

When the smoke has cleared, Silver-Wig asks him, "Did you have to kill him?" The question sobers him, but before he can speak, she answers for him: "Yes," she said softly. "I suppose you did"(742). Here marks Marlowe's final abandonment of chivalric code. Silver-Wig, who becomes a living tableau of Arthurian virtue, acknowledges herself that Marlowe's abandonment of outmoded chivalry is necessitated by the conditions of the modern world.

This final loss, however, brings about a sea change for Marlowe. Previously hardboiled and cynical, following this episode Marlowe emerges wholly disillusioned.

To compound the matter, Vivian proves Silver-Wig's confident and optimistic assertion that Regan is still alive wrong; Carmen has killed Regan, and his body is rotting in the sump behind the house. As the novel comes to a close in the immediate wake of these developments, a deep sense of disillusionment is reflected in his closing monologue.

> What did it matter where you lay once you were dead? In a dirty sump or in a marble tower on top of a high hill? You were dead, you were sleeping the big sleep, you were not bothered by things like that. Oil and water were the same as wind and air to you. You just slept the big sleep, not caring about the nastiness now. Far more a part of it than Rusty Regan was. But the old man didn't have to be. He could lie quiet in his canopied bed, with his bloodless hands folded on the sheet, waiting. His heart was a brief, uncertain murmur. His thoughts were as gray as ashes. And in a little while he too, like Rusty Regan, would be sleeping the big sleep. (764)

This soliloquy returns to the tone of Merlin's melancholy, with its morose fatalism. Any hope of a return to the grand Christian tradition of Arthur and his court that was brought on by the virtue, the selflessness, and the emotional accessibility of Silver-Wig has been dispelled. Marlowe remains the same old dispossessed knight, with only his ego as foundation for his personal chivalric code. The status quo is restored. And yet, Marlowe senses, in a way he did not before, his loss. Tacked on to the end of his fatalistic monologue are three sentences that evoke both the power of this loss and the stoic resignation of Marlowe to the reality of his world. "On the way downtown," he writes, "I stopped at a bar and had a couple of double Scotches. They didn't do me any good. All they did was make me think of Silver-Wig, and I never saw her again"(764). Did he have to kill Canino? Did he have to cast off gentlemanly tradition? Chandler leaves no room for doubt: Yes, he did. But in saving Silver-Wig, he assumed himself the mantle of martyr. Sticking to his code, just as was the case with her, necessitated loss. In this case, loss not of life, but of the vague, glimmering hope of knightly purity. The vision—the

Grail—is gone, and Marlowe is left to continue on with his earthly pursuits amongst the feasting worms.

3
"One Brief, Shining Moment": James Ellroy's deconstruction of Kennedy's Camelot

In James Ellroy's *American Tabloid*, Ellroy picks up the mantle of Hammett and Chandler and further evolves their hardboiled Arthurian tradition by deconstructing it against the backdrop of another American Arthurian ideal: Kennedy's Camelot. *Tabloid* is a necessarily fractured novel. In Ellroy's customary style, the narration is polyphonic, shifting between the perspectives of three deeply flawed antiheros. This narrative is also peppered with excerpts, both real and fictional, from newspapers, tabloid magazines, and confidential transcripts and memos. The novel's fragmented structure illustrates the further breakdown of traditional codes. Each protagonist, atomized in a world of material excess, moral depravity, and Cold War anxiety, compartmentalizes his loyalties as he and the men around him attempt to construct their own chivalric codes, grounded in an array of motivations ranging from sex to politics to money to religion. Ward Littell, a half-hearted and meek member of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's anti-Communist taskforce, finds kinship with Bobby Kennedy in the latter's ardent pursuit of organized crime. By the end of the novel, his idealistic crusade has backfired on him, and he finds himself working for mob boss Carlos Marcello. His friend and colleague, Kemper Boyd, is a man of innumerable and protean allegiances; he is a master of dissemblance who ingratiates himself with Jack Kennedy, first as a spy for J. Edgar Hoover, and later, as a worshipper. He throws everything away, including the woman he loves, in order to

become a member of the Kennedy enclave, but the illusion fails him. Ultimately, he ends up discarded and addicted to heroin, fruitlessly pursuing Civil Rights in Alabama and Mississippi before being unceremoniously dumped by the FBI. The third member of Ellroy's unholy trinity is Pete Bondurant, who is introduced as a pimp to Howard Hughes, a hitman to Jimmy Hoffa, and an all-around mercenary and shakedown artist. His association with the Kennedys primarily entails heavy involvement in the training of Cuban exiles for the Bay of Pigs invasion, a mission which he believes failed due to the wavering support of the President. By the end of the novel, these three men, inflamed by their disillusionment, develop a plot that will ultimately culminate with the death of an American king on a November day in Dallas.

Kemper Boyd: Lost in Kennedy's Camelot

Per historian Theodore H. White, it was the late president's wife, Jacqueline Kennedy, who, in the aftermath of the assassination, urged him and others to cast her husband's legacy in terms of Arthurian legend. In their discussions, Jacqueline insisted on White's "using the word 'Camelot' to describe it all. And her message was his message—that one man, by trying, may change it all"(White 538). Jackie engaged in a "constant struggle to shape history as she wanted it to be remembered: not something classical, ordered, or logical, but idealistic, romantic and chivalric"(Knight 28). The deliberate fictive construction of such a

concept is hugely important to the trajectory of disillusionment established by Hammett and Chandler. In their novels, these authors used references to Arthurian legend to highlight, via negative space, the decomposition of traditional chivalric codes. Here, Jackie Kennedy and others who perpetuate the Camelot myth are forcibly imposing this system of values, shown by Hammett and Chandler to be dead, upon the narrative of recent history. And only after Kennedy's death did this notion come into being. This fact demonstrates that such a fiction could not exist in real life, but only in the romanticized reconstruction of the already-dead past.

Ellroy, on the other hand, re-reconstructs Kennedy's presidency, portraying it in terms that greatly differ from the wholesome Arthurian portrait propagated by Jackie. The hallmarks of Arthuriana are present, but are rendered seedy and corrupted by Ellroy. Jack Kennedy's role as king seems intrinsically linked to his insatiable sexual appetite. J. Edgar Hoover frequently refers to him as the "Dark King" or "King Jack," criticizing his inept and profligate behavior, while Jack refers to Hoover as a "closet queen"(Ellroy 458, 468). This parallel illustrates the necessary aspect of virile masculine sexuality to Jack's ability to act as king, a direct repudiation of Arthuriana's chaste warriors and a blatant reproach to the cuckquean Jackie's forcible whitewashing of her notoriously philandering husband's legacy. The relationship between his profligate behavior and his ascent to power is further cemented when Kemper Boyd, at this point, an advisor to his campaign, describes the nature of Jack's political clout: "It's seduction, Pete. He'll back the country into a corner with his charm, like it's a woman. When America sees that it's a choice between Jack and twitchy old Dick Nixon, who do you think they'll get between the sheets with?"(277).

From the beginning of their relationship, when Kemper leverages a shared assignation as the basis for a sense of mutual respect, Kemper develops a strange homosocial fixation with Jack Kennedy. Boyd sees himself as something of a Launcelot figure to Kennedy's Arthur. However, the dimensions of this knight-to-king relationship take on whole new dimensions. Sharing sex partners is a foregone conclusion; it is not Kennedy's queen after whom Kemper lusts. Rather, Kemper wishes to be Kennedy. He is driven by the conviction that he, as a scion of a rich Southern family fallen into ruin, could have just as easily been Jack Kennedy, had his father not declared bankruptcy before committing suicide. This proves a fruitless quest. Kennedy's Camelot is a creative unreality, and as such, Kemper cannot force his way into legend. Kennedy himself acknowledges Boyd's pathetic delusion, telling a mistress that "Kemper sold his [soul] at a pretty steep price," in order to "[live] out some unsavory fantasy [with Jack]" which makes him "hard to take"(471). When confronted with these statements, Kemper still refuses to abandon his commitment to the Kennedy mythos, but his Arthurian idealization of the man removes him from the real world. His attempts to warn Kennedy of the conspiracy against him are rebuffed, and he ultimately is killed by a colleague and "die[s] thinking of Jack," lost forever to Kennedy's illusion of Camelot (581).

Bobby Kennedy, Ward Littell, and Ellroy's Demythification of Galahad

Set against Kemper and Jack's priaptic pretense of kinghood is another pair. Bobby Kennedy and FBI agent-lawyer Ward Littell represent the Galahads of this Camelot narrative, in as much as they act as chaste and religious crusaders in the chivalric tradition. Though the two men do not meet until the very end of the novel, they develop a relationship early on, through communications transmitted via Kemper Boyd.

Initially united by their Catholicism and their fervent hatred of organized crime, their paths ultimately diverge. Bobby, trapped in the artificial construct of the Kennedy White House's Camelot myth, remains detached from the grim realities of the quest, while Ward's work in the field ultimately forces him to abandon his idealism.

Ward, an ex-Jesuit seminarian, is introduced as a coward who hates his work in the anti-Communist division of the FBI. He resents FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover's denial of organized crime and obsessive pursuit of American Communists, claiming "Hoover hates Left-Wingers because their philosophy is based on human frailty, while his own is based on an excruciating rectitude that denies such things"(37). However, despite the recriminations he aims at the falseness of Hoover's established value system, Ward himself is shown as an out-of-touch idealist, rooted in the old traditions of his religion and unable to assert himself in the manner needed to actually combat organized crime. Kemper Boyd, acting as a sort of big brother figure, perceives this quality of Ward's, declaring that "idealists disdained appearances. Ward had no flair for nice things"(93).

Inspired by Kennedy's belief that "heroes are truly passionate and generous," Ward eventually musters the courage to take on the role of rogue crusader against the Mob (80). As he enters the realm of organized crime, he comes face to face with gross perversions of his Catholic faith. Particularly, these come from loan shark Mad Sal, his informant, who "tabulate[s] transactions in a prayer book" and describes a vicious rape and murder he committed in a church, after which he "took care of the stink with altar wine"(100, 157). Even the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic men's group based that incorporates the trappings of medieval chivalry, are shown to be "drunks and wife

beaters"(132). While "church help[s] a little," the increasing violence of his crusade forces him to turn to drink. Like Launcelot, he becomes "harder than ony stone, and woldyst never be made neyssh nother by watir nother by fyre," and as such "the hete of the Holy Goste may nat entir in [him]"(Malory 520).

Littell is also the only character in the book with a distinctive Grail narrative. The object of his quest is a collection of Pension Fund Books detailing collusion between the mafia and Jimmy Hoffa's teamsters. However, in an inversion of the Arthurian legend, Ward must abandon his Galahad-esque purity and become more of a hardened, selfish Launcelot type before he can achieve the Grail. He quits the FBI, abandoning its chivalric institutional framework, and through bribery, coercion, and violence ultimately discovers the Pension Fund Books. After making his discovery, he acknowledges his transformation, visiting a church and praying for "forgiveness for his hubris. He tells God that he has gained selfhood at great cost to other people"(Ellroy 183). This transformation not only reinforces Hammett and Chandler's reversal of Malory's portrayal of Launcelot—with pride transformed from a downfall to a virtue. It also drives home the corruptibility of human nature. Spade and Marlowe were never Galahad figures. Instead, they, from the start, are relatively static in their arrogant strength. Ward Littell, however, begins as an idealistic Galahad and is forced by the circumstances of the world around him to abandon his pure ideals in favor of brutal egoism in order to achieve his quest.

Even his religious values fall victim to this transformation. Bobby Kennedy, unable to violate the political standards required by his brother's election campaign, refuses to recognize Littell's contributions and so Littell maintains the Pension Fund

Books. Ultimately, excommunicated from legitimate pursuit of justice, Littell grows to hate Bobby and joins forces with Carlos Marcello, leader of the New Orleans mafia. His relationship to Marcello is in part based upon the same religious kinship that he once shared with Bobby. Trapped in Guatemala, he and Marcello go on a pilgrimage of sorts, "walk[ing] hundreds of miles together"(420). They attend "mass in jungle villages and contribute extravagant church tithes"(420-421). But this religious devotion is no longer the pure, justice-oriented faith he shared with Bobby. The tithes that they contribute stem from Marcello's illicit business interests, and the Catholic Church becomes more of an institutional practice than a source of relief for Littell. Having developed a sense of self, Littell no longer needs God, but like Launcelot, there is no active rejection. Instead, he passively pays his dues while blatantly straying from the moral trappings of his religion. In this sense, his evolution from the chaste and unpractical Galahad to a worldly, egoist Launcelot is made complete in his alliance with Marcello and Marcello's own male-dominated chivalric order: the Mob.

"Renaissance Man Pete"

While Kemper and Ward cleave closely to different aspects of the Kennedy mythos, Pete Bondurant, the third member of Ellroy's trio of protagonists, jumps from value system to value system, exploring pseudo-chivalric orders ranging from the Teamsters to the Central Intelligence Agency. At the start of the novel, Bondurant, Ellroy's knight-errant, is introduced as the vassal of Fisher King Howard Hughes. Hughes has become a recluse, wasting away amidst the wasteland of postwar Los Angeles in a suite at the Beverly Hills Hotel. However, instead of pursuing a grail to heal the Maimed King, Bondurant's job is to procure opiates for Hughes. He is referred to a

"Renaissance Man Pete: pimp, dope procurer, licensed PI goon," a description that succinctly separates Pete from the traditional moral code of chivalry. He professes loyalty to Hughes, but also affirms his independence, explaining that Hughes' "crowds [him]"(11). He leaves Hughes and pays a visit to another king-figure to whom he owes loyalty: Jimmy Hoffa, for whom he acts as an assassin. As Bondurant ventures from one fraternal organization to the next, Ellroy depicts a society full of individuals attempting to create their own post-chivalric codes in order to assert their own kingships. At a Teamster rally, for example, the men literally chant, "Teamsters are kings"(101). Yet Pete remains truly loyal only to himself, sidestepping the hollow pretensions of Kennedy's Camelot, Hughes' Waste Land, J. Edgar Hoover's sanctimony, and Hoffa's materialism. He, more than either of the other two protagonists, carries on the lone wolf tradition of Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe.

However, while Ward and Kemper grow disillusioned with their constructed value systems, Bondurant, over the course of the novel, ends up establishing his own order. Recruited by the Central Intelligence Agency to train Cuban exiles as an anti-Castro invasion force, Pete recruits from two pools: Tiger Kab, a Hoffa-owned taxi company staffed by loyalty driven Cubans, and the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacy group noted for its bastardization of medieval chivalric institutions. Pete reserves extra contempt for the knights of the Klan, whom he refers to as "Ku Klux Klan klowns and neo-Nazis"(240). In each case, Bondurant smashes the preexisting codes that bind the groups together to institute his own feudal system. At Tiger Kab, he uses violence to "deal with left and right-wing ideologue thugs who [need] to be toilet-trained and broken in to the White Man's Rule of Order"(125). He dismisses the Ku Klux Klan Moral Code

as an outright joke. In their stead, he imposes his new set of rules, which he bills as the "Declaration of Cadre Non-Independence and the New KKK Bill of Non-Rights"(272). In his new system, he outlaws many of his own former activities: "No pimping. No robbery. No flim-flam"(273). Out of this new code is born the Cadre, which evolves into the Cause, and Pete buys into it wholesale, abandoning his previous independence for loyalty to a movement that is driven by politics and economics. Eventually, a Cuban traitor remarks on Pete's transformation, asserting that "the man [Pete] used to be would not consider [selling out the Cadre to be betrayal] either"(477). Pete kills the man.

At the close of the book, and in its sequel, *The Cold Six Thousand*, Pete remains loyal to this cause. The fever pitch of his loyalty reaches its climax with the assassination of John Kennedy, which he has helped to plan. Earlier, Pete describes his assimilation into the movement as "a big fucking whoooosh...like a hydrogen bomb inside his head"(285). This image is mirrored at the novel's end, where Pete, watching his new wife sing in the moments leading up to the shooting, "brace[s] himself for this big fucking scream"(585). As his devotion to the Cadre leads him into conspiracy of massive historical proportions, he maintains his loyalty. The whirlwind fervor breaks out into a full-blown scream, and all he can do is brace himself and continue along with the ride.

In this moment, Ellroy has achieved the frenetic climax of the tradition begun by his predecessors. Caught up in the whirlwind shriek of history's dissemblance and disintegration, we, the reader, are tied to Pete. We have seen in the novels of Hammett and Chandler grim yet stoic portraits of the alienated knight, cut free from tradition and forced to rely on nothing more than his own ego to survive the world's machinations. Here, however, Ellroy brings chilling reality to the scenario and confronts his reader with

his dramatic and terrifying vision of postmodern reality, in which even the tough, self-assured attitude of the hardboiled detective is no match for the out-of-control eddy of an uprooted and tradition-starved America. Ellroy has accomplished the goal he states in his introduction, the goal that Hammett and Chandler worked at before him. "America was never innocent," he writes. "It's time to demythologize an era and build a new myth from the gutter up. It's time to embrace bad men and the price they paid to secretly define their time." In this novel, he achieves this feat. By bringing the decomposition of American value structures against the backdrop of Arthurian legend full circle in detective fiction, Ellroy successfully completes a bleak, hyperrealist portrait of the fractured and fragmented constructs of chivalry as they exist in contemporary Western culture.

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