Examining a Human Universal: the Quest for Paradise in “The Lady of the Fountain,” *Le Chevalier au Lion*, and *The Secret Garden*

**Introduction**

In a world all too often focused and formed by what differentiates one man from another, there exist certain universal threads that stretch across oceans and bind humanity inextricably together. Nowhere are these threads so clearly expressed and distilled as they are in mythology and literature.

My proposed University Scholar project builds on the insights I have acquired in the study of English, French, and Irish literature to examine a universal mythological trope: the search, in a world fraught with darkness and uncertainty, for a paradisiacal haven that transforms the quester even as it requires great hardship to attain. I will focus this study through the examination three great works of literature that all contain such a quest: the Welsh mythological tale “The Lady of the Fountain,” *Le Chevalier au Lion* by Chrétien de Troyes, which reworks “The Lady of the Fountain” in a more medieval, French Christian context, and finally the more contemporary children’s book *The Secret Garden*, written by Frances Hodgson Burnett at the end of the Victorian period.

The first two works will permit me to examine the evolution of a myth, as well as to determine the points of convergence between Celtic belief and medieval Christianity as examples of universality. Burnett’s work will allow me to analyze how the constants observed in “The Lady of the Fountain” and *Le Chevalier au Lion* reoccur with such startling vividness in a modern context. The complexity and extent of analysis required by this project will surpass the normal expectations of an Honors thesis. The interdisciplinary subject will also enable me to produce a thesis better reflective of my academic experiences at the University of Connecticut, and will serve as invaluable experience for pursuing future graduate work in literature.
Review of Literature

The project I am proposing is in many ways unique in the field of existing literature. While *The Secret Garden* has often been analyzed alongside nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction and children’s literature, it has rarely been linked with a more ancient literary tradition. A strong body of literature does address the Garden of Eden symbolism prominent in the text’s titular garden, but the influence of other mythologies or mythological tropes on Burnett’s novel has not been sufficiently addressed. “The Lady of the Fountain” and *Le Chevalier au Lion* have been similarly confined to their respective époques, although to a far lesser extent. My aim in this project is thus to demonstrate the timeless and universal qualities expressed in each text and to emphasize the continuing presence of mythology in contemporary literature.

To fulfill the demands of such an intensive and interdisciplinary project, a wide breadth of study is required in history, in historical thought and culture, in comparative, Celtic, and Christian mythology, and on the specific works and authors. An extensive body of literature exists on evolving belief, religion, and spirituality in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain. During this time a fascination with the distant past developed that touched every aspect of popular culture. Interest in Celtic myths and fairytales, Arthurian legends, and medievalism infiltrated art, literature, and social thought, and the period was also one of widespread spiritual experimentation. Works on this topic include *Victorian Faith in Crisis: Essays on Continuity and Change in Nineteenth-Century Religious Belief* by Richard J. Helmstadter and Bernard Lightman (1990), *Religious Thought in the Victorian Age: Challenges and Reconceptions* by James C. Livingston (2007), *Reinventing King Arthur: the Arthurian Legends in Victorian Culture* by Inga Bryden (2004), and *Folklore and the Fantastic in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* by Jason Marc Harris (2008).
On a more specific level, there are numerous works dedicated to Frances Hodgson Burnett and Chrétien de Troyes, including *The Unexpected Life of the Author of The Secret Garden* by Gerzina Gretchen Holbrook (2004) and *The Arthurian Romances of Chrétien de Troyes: Once and Future Romances* by Donald Maddox (1991), as well as various works and scholarly articles dedicated to the texts I intend to study. Previous analysis on Christian and Celtic influences in *Le Chevalier au Lion* is considerable, and as stated above, there exists considerable commentary on Christian iconography and symbolism in *The Secret Garden*. Additionally, I plan to search through records of Burnett’s letters and papers gain insight into her beliefs and into the inspirations for her novel.

I will also have access to a rich and diverse body of work on the topic of mythology. Scholars such as Joseph Campbell, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Georges Dumézil have written extensively about the role of mythology in human society and about the patterns that reliably emerge across diverse cultures. Mircea Eliade has produced similar studies, including detailed analyses of reoccurring symbols and images, although he employs the word “religion” where other scholars use “mythology.”

Research that focuses exclusively on European or Celtic myths has been conducted by H. R. Ellis Davidson in *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe* (1988) and by Miranda Green in *The Celtic World* (1996), among others. Proinsias Mac Cana, an enormous figure in Celtic and Irish mythology, also produced detailed insight into the Celtic otherworld, although his work is somewhat older. Academic study on Celtic mythology usually addresses Celtic history and culture, as mythology tends to both reflect and shape the society it belongs to. This research will therefore provide insight into the social environment that produced each text.

**Methods**
When approaching an original research topic, the primary texts become the fundamental point of analysis. Therefore, most of the literature I will utilize will serve as tools necessary to the critical interpretation of the three primary texts.

Rather than going immediately to the primary texts, I intend to initially study the broader historical, anthropological, and mythological context that produced each of the texts. Research on comparative mythology and on the medieval European and Victorian societies will provide a sound base on which to build later research and analysis. I will simultaneously be using works on the lives and works of Burnett and de Troyes, as well as commentaries on Welsh mythological compilation *The Mabinogion*, to familiarize myself with the history behind the creation of the three primary texts.

I will be spending the 2012 spring semester in France studying at l’Institut Catholique de Paris, where I intend to enroll in courses in medieval French literature and history. The experience gained and the expertise of the faculty will be invaluable in conducting research on *Le Chevalier au Lion*. Studying in Paris will also facilitate travel to Wales and England, if necessary, to pursue inquiry into Celtic mythology and its place in Victorian thought, as well as research on “The Lady of the Fountain.”

In the 2012 fall semester, I will enter into increasingly intensive research, with trips to the New York Public Library and other collections in the area to access Burnett’s personal letters and papers. I will be taking classes that further deepen my understanding of the material, as well as courses that relate to the role of mythology and religion in human society. At this point, I will also be delving into the text itself, analyzing the meanings and symbols present in each work and connecting my findings to mythological research. In addition, returning to the university campus will give me more direct access to my faculty advisors, Professor Thomas Recchio and Professor
Tamarah Kohanski of the English department and Professor Anne Berthelot of the French department, who will be guiding me through this process.

In the 2013 spring semester, in preparation for the final phase of the project, I hope to enroll in upper- and graduate-level English and French courses that will further supplement my research and develop my faculties of textual interpretation. I will also begin the process of composition, drawing on the previous semesters of research and analysis to produce a thesis that makes a meaningful contribution to the field of literary study. As the semester progresses, I will continually refine the paper with the guidance and advice of my faculty advisors.
Plan of Study

Having completed all general education requirements and preparing to conclude required courses for the French major while in Paris, I shall have a good deal of freedom to take courses in a wide variety of disciplines my final semesters at the University of Connecticut. In the spring of 2012, a course on literature from Christian sources and the second half of Medieval French Literature, an upper-level literature class I am currently enrolled in, will both conclude the formal requirements of the French major, as well as provide invaluable insight into both the religious and the Britanic literary traditions, from whence originated much of French popular literature of the period. In addition, I will be taking a class on medieval French society and a graduate-level seminar in English on Arthurian myths and legends.

Upon returning to Storrs in the fall of 2012, I will be immersing myself in classes in literature, history, and anthropology. Children’s Literature and Social and Economic History of Modern Britain will expose me to study and research beneficial in the analysis of The Secret Garden. The complementary pairing of Literature and Religion, which I hope to convert to an Honors course, and Culture and Religion will serve as a wonderful counterpart to mythological research. I also hope to take The Middle Ages: Myths and Legends, although due to the limited amount of French classes offered each semester, this will depend on the course being offered.

As I go about the task of composing the final thesis, I will continue to supplement my research with upper-level French and English classes, with the goal of enrolling in graduate courses in each discipline. Taking advantage of the university’s nationally-ranked French department, I hope to enroll in a graduate course on old French literature. I would also aim to expand on the undergraduate children’s literature course in a graduate context, which would simultaneously serve as my advanced study requirement for the English major.
References


