

FROM AVALON TO PADDINGTON STATION: WILLIAM DYCE AND THE VICTORIAN REINTERPRETATION OF SIR THOMAS MALORY'S *LE MORTE D'ARTHUR*

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Abstract: In 1851 the painter William Dyce (1806-1864) unveiled his painting *Religion: The Vision of Sir Galahad and his Company* in the Queen's Robing Room in the new House of Lords. The painting depicts the conflation of two scenes from *Le Morte D'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory (1405-1471). Arthurian Romance had not yet achieved the popularity it would gain in the latter half of the nineteenth century and contained thematic material disturbing to many Victorians. The fact that the story of the Holy Grail is heavily influenced by medieval Catholic piety proved particularly contentious for Dyce's primarily protestant audience. This article compares portions of Malory's text on the quest for the Holy Grail with the evolution of Dyce's painting and demonstrates how Dyce worked to revise a medieval text for a nineteenth-century audience.

The years 1816-1817 witnessed the publication of three new editions of Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, the first printings of the text since 1634. English romanticism, and particularly some early poetic efforts of Sir Walter Scott, tilled the soil into which the first seeds of an Arthurian revival were planted, but it would be decades before the Arthurian epic gained cultural dominance. A series of drawings proposed for the Queen's Robing Room in the new houses of Parliament were a major influence on the broader acceptance of the epic in society at large. Prince Albert, chair of the fine arts commission responsible for selecting art that reflected the history and literature of England,¹ sought an English epic that might define his new home as much as the *Nibelungenlied* influenced the mythic character of his native Germany. A conversation with the Scottish painter William Dyce, who was working on a commission for the prince in the summer of 1847, led to the creation of King Arthur as the Victorian national epic. Christine Poulson speculates that neither Dyce nor the Prince had actually read Sir Thomas Malory. Had either party been well versed in Malory's work they would have realized the incompatibilities with nineteenth-century morality.² Dyce quickly discovered these incompatibilities and wrote to the prince that Malory's text, 'turns on incidents which, if they are not undesirable for representation under any circumstances, are at least scarcely appropriate in such an apartment.'³ L.P. Hartley famously observed, 'The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.'⁴ Malory's 'foreign country' contained religious miracles and adulterous affairs, behaviours and occurrences not acceptable in protestant Britain. Dyce became the ambassador of the dark ages to the Victorian world, translating Malory's difficult concepts. This article examines William Dyce's painting *Religion: The Vision of Sir Galahad and his Company* as an adaptation of *Le Morte D'Arthur*, specifically the Quest for the Holy Grail, and how that painting interpreted medieval Catholic piety as a nineteenth-century protestant allegory.

¹ Muriel Whitaker, *The Legends of King Arthur in Art* (Woodbridge, UK: Woodbridge: Brewer, 1990), p. 177.

² Christine Poulson, *The Quest for the Grail : Arthurian Legend in British Art 1840-1920* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 28.

³ Muriel Whitaker, p. 179 quoted.

⁴ Leslie Poles Hartley, *The Go-Between* (London: Penguin, 1998).

This story begins in Rome. In his early twenties, William Dyce made several visits to Italy and studied the masters of the Italian Renaissance and of the nineteenth century self-proclaimed inheritors of the tradition, the German Nazarene artists living in Rome.⁵ Returning to Scotland, Dyce longed to promulgate the moral and aesthetic clarity of sixteenth-century art in Britain, but Britain was interested in neither Madonnas nor other devotional images. Writing in the early 1840s on the subject of religious art, Dyce said,

can it be shewn that any writer of eminence in the English Church ever objected to crosses, crucifixes, pictures, etc. as things evil in themselves. On the contrary, do not later divines defend the use of them on the ground that the danger of worshipping them being gone, the things were not only harmless in themselves, but desirable on account of their help to piety and devotion.⁶

As Emma Winter notes, the mid-nineteenth century was a time of great anxiety surrounding the relationship between art and religion. Dyce's artistic heroes, Michelangelo, Raphael, and Perugino painted dogma under the guidance of the Roman Catholic Church. The Protestant Church of England had no artistic equivalent.⁷ A High-Church Scottish Episcopalian, Dyce was intimate with many leaders of the Oxford Movement responsible for the liturgical and theological revolution producing much of the religious anxiety around Catholicism in England at the time. In particular, his friendship with John Henry (later Cardinal) Newman and E.B. Pusey placed him in the centre of a raging debate around the introduction of Roman Catholic practice into the Church of England.⁸ Particularly contentious was the question of whether or not the Real Presence of Jesus existed in the consecrated elements of Holy Communion, and if this Real Presence constituted the Roman Catholic belief in Transubstantiation – the physical transformation of bread and wine into the literal body and blood of Jesus. A particular event in 1843 underscored just how damaging this topic could be to one's career and reputation.

As English fears of a papal takeover⁹ spread in response to the controversy over ritualism, the Reverend Edward Pusey gave a sermon in May of 1843 as part of his role as Canon to Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford. Dubbed the *Doctor Mysticus* of the Oxford Movement by Swedish church historian Brilioth,¹⁰ Pusey believed the purpose of worship and sacrament was a total fusion into the nature of God. As the polemics surrounding the nature of ecclesial practice demanded an either/or approach, it was inevitable that the kind of academic density and mystical piety found in Pusey's text aroused suspicion. Though careful to avoid defining what happens during consecration in the Eucharist, Pusey still implies an intrinsic transformation in the elements independent of the virtue or piety of the recipient. Quoting from a fourth century saint Pusey states,

That which is in the Cup,' S. Chrysostome paraphrases, 'is that which flowed from His side, and of that do we partake.' How should we approach His Sacred Side, and remain leprous still? Touching with our very lips that cleansing Blood,

⁵ Caroline Babington, ed., *William Dyce and the Pre-Raphaelite Vision* (Aberdeen, UK: Aberdeen City Council, 2006), p. 38.

⁶ Caroline Babington, ed., p. 39 quoted.

⁷ Emma L. Winter, 'German Fresco Painting and the New Houses of Parliament at Westminster, 1834-1851', *The Historical Journal*, 47 (2004), 291–329 (p. 325).

⁸ Caroline Babington, ed., p. 39.

⁹ Emma L. Winter, p. 325.

¹⁰ Owen Chadwick, *The Spirit of the Oxford Movement : Tractarian Essays* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 39.

how may we not, with the Ancient Church, confess, ‘Lo, this hath touched my lips, and shall take away mine iniquities and cleanse my sins?’¹¹

The words ‘touching with our very lips that cleansing Blood’ were suggestive enough of transubstantiation to prompt a secret group of clerics and Oxford heads of house to call upon the Vice-Chancellor of the University, accusing Pusey of being ‘an unsafe teacher of the youths committed to his academical care.’¹² The Vice-Chancellor issued a notice suspending Pusey from preaching in Oxford for two years (fig. 1).

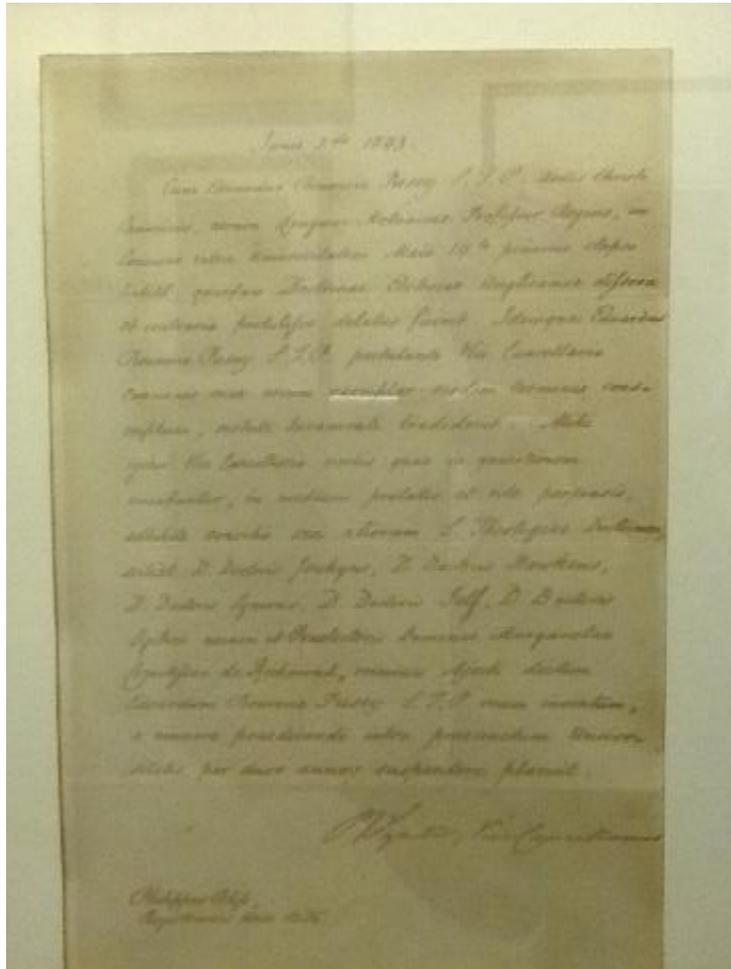


Fig. 1 The Latin notice of Suspension to E.B. Pusey. Signed by the Vice-Chancellor June 2, 1843
Picture by author from Pusey House Archives

Dyce monitored closely the punishment of his friend. Concerned as to his role in the liturgical renewal movement in the church, he also experienced a great deal of anxiety regarding the increasing intolerance for ritualistic or aesthetic forms of piety.¹³ In addition to art, Dyce also collaborated with Thomas Helmore on Gregorian Chant settings of *The Book of Common Prayer*.¹⁴

¹¹ Edward Bouverie Pusey, *The Holy Eucharist, a Comfort to the Penitent : A Sermon Preached Before the University in the Cathedral Church of Christ, In Oxford*, Bodleian Electronic Download (Oxford: J.G.F. and J. Rivington, 1843), pp. 23–24.

¹² Peter Benedict Nockles, *The Oxford Movement in Context : Anglican High Churchmanship, 1760-1857* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 240 note 64 quoting Joshua Watson.

¹³ Marcia R. Pointon, *William Dyce, 1806-1864 : A Critical Biography*, Oxford Studies in the History of Art and Architecture (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 65.

¹⁴ Marcia R. Pointon, p. 98 quoted from a letter by C.W. Cope.

Said collaboration brought unwanted scrutiny upon Dyce, and in the summer of 1847 (the same summer in which he first proposed the Arthurian project), while working for Prince Albert, Dyce received a letter from a friend saying, 'I have heard two or three times that 'a publisher and an Academician' had gone over to Rome. I have been asked by one or two 'were you gone?' I said I knew you were gone as far as Osborne but I did not think further.'



Fig. 2 'Miraculous Bleeding Host of Dijon' Hours of Ogier Benigne: ms. W. 291 fol. 17v c.1480
Walters Art Museum, Baltimore Maryland. Image courtesy of ArtStor

As Dyce scoured Malory's text for a suitable representation of religion in the story of the Grail, he encountered numerous passages such as the following:

the bysshop made sembelaunte as though he wolde have gone to the sakeryng of a masse, and than he toke an obley which was made in lyknesse of brede. And at the lyftyng up there cam a vigoure in lyknesse of a chylde, and the vysayge was as rede and as bright os ony fyre, and smote hymselff into the brede, that all they saw hit that the brede was formed of a fleyshely man. And than he put hit into the holy vessell agayne, and than he ded that longed to a preste to do masse.¹⁵

In this scene, Sirs Galahad, Perceval and Bors learn of the location of the Holy Grail from no less than St. Joseph of Arimathea. The imagery of a child fusing into bread was not mere literary invention on the part of Malory. Contemporary descriptions abound of visions of the Christ Child in the wafer given as a reward to the faithful or sceptics shown a child being cut and turned into the Eucharist as punishment abound. Several churches became sites of pilgrimages

¹⁵ Sir Thomas Malory, Eugène Vinaver ed., *Malory : Complete Works*, second (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 603.

for a host transformed into a bleeding image of Christ, (fig. 2)¹⁶ and stories and images about Pope Gregory seeing the wounded Christ physically present on the altar at the mass circulated widely (figs. 3 and 4). Such a piety could not be represented in the religious climate of the 1850s. Thus, to represent religion, Dyce selected a more general image; the setting forth of the round table knights in search of the grail. Dyce justified his choice by noting the scene displays faith without depicting, ‘the particular adventures of the St. Greal, which, regarded either as Arthurian myths or as Christian allegories, appeared to me to involve matters of religious and antiquarian controversy, which had better be avoided.’¹⁷



Fig. 3 'Mass of St. Gregory' Book of Hours displaying Jesus rising up from behind the altar. c. 1430 Source: Bodleian Library Image Courtesy of Artstor

¹⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality, an Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), pp. 142–143.

¹⁷ Muriel Whitaker, p. 180.



Fig 4 'The Mass of St. Gregory' Verdun Missal c. 1485 Courtesy of ArtStor

In this tableau Arthur sorrowfully watches the break-up of his chivalric community while Lancelot kneels in front of Guinevere and kisses her hand. Dyce combines several elements of Malory's account of this moment while editing out the most overt adulterous undertones. Malory described the scene thus:

Then after the service was done the king would wit how many had undertake the quest of the Holy Grail; and to account them he prayed them all. Then found they by the tale an hundred and fifty, and all were knights of the Table round. And then they put on their helms and departed, and recommended them all wholly unto the queen; and there was weeping and great sorrow. Then the queen departed into her chamber and held her that no man should perceive her great sorrows. When Sir Launcelot missed the queen he went till her chamber, and when she saw him she cried aloud, 'O Launcelot, Launcelot, ye have betrayed me and put me to the death, for to leave thus my lord.' 'Ah, madam, I pray you be not displeased, for I shall come again as soon as I may with my worship.' 'Alas,' said she, 'that ever I saw you; but he that suffered death upon the cross for all mankind be unto you good conduct and safety, and all the whole fellowship.' Right so departed Sir Launcelot, and found his fellowship that abode his coming.'

Dyce eliminates Lancelot secret audience with the queen, instead depicting the whole company departing at once. This first sketch was rejected on the grounds it was too sad, but in probability, it was also rejected because it implied Guinevere's infidelity. The adultery of an ancient queen was not fit viewing matter for the current queen.



Fig. 5 William Dyce RA HRSA 'The Trinity' c. 1850
Image by kind permission: Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums Collections

Unsuccessful with his first proposal, Dyce returned to his original desire of producing English art with a religious theme in the style of the old masters. At the time he was working on sketches for *Religion*, Dyce was simultaneously sketching *The Trinity* (fig. 5). The composition of this drawing emphasizes the primary or so-called 'Domenical' (from the Lord) sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. The scene might be a historic baptism, a favoured subject of Dyce, or might simply emphasize the mystical connection between the sacraments on earth and their heavenly provenance. The eye is drawn upwards to Christ enthroned, surrounded by a company of saints. The dove of the Holy Spirit descends from Jesus onto the altar and the corresponding baptismal font. Of relevance to this particular paper is the striking resemblance *The Trinity* has to Raphael's painting the *Disputa*, found in the Vatican Palace (fig. 6). The *Disputa* depicts Christ, enthroned in celestial majesty, surrounded by angels and a company of Old and New Testament figures. The Dove in a perfect circular halo corresponds visually with the monstrance containing the sacramental host on the altar below. Heaven and earth, Christ and the Sacrament, are unified. Surrounding the altar are other important figures of the church witnessing a discussion (disputation) concerning the truth of the miracle of transubstantiation conducted by fathers of the Church. The painting is magisterial and didactic. The viewer is not to question, but to receive. In *The Trinity*, Dyce retains the visual composition of the *Disputa*, but eliminates the monstrance, replacing it with a simpler chalice implying the presence of the Spirit in the sacrament but not the more contentious doctrine of transubstantiation. He is exploring how Anglican art can still be mystical. This is, in some ways, the visual correspondence to Pusey's exegetical invitation to touch the Blood with one's very lips.



Fig 6 Raphael 'Disputa' 1509 Vatican, Stanza della Segnatura copyright 2006 SCALA courtesy of ArtStor



Fig. 7 William Dyce RA HRSA 'The Vision of Sir Galahad and his Company' Sketch c. 1850
Image by kind permission: Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums Collections

If one compares *The Trinity* and the *Disputa* with the first sketch of *Religion* (fig. 7), one sees the similarity immediately. For the painting Dyce selected two different portions of the Grail quest and conflated them into one scene. The central action focuses on Galahad receiving a mystical vision of the Holy Grail described near the conclusion of the quest narrative. Galahad arises early and discovers a man in bishop's clothing 'that had aboute hym a grete feliship of angels, as hit had bene Jesu Cryste hymselff. And than he arose and began a masse of oure Lady.'¹⁸ Upon the conclusion of the mass the man, revealed to be the son of Joseph of Arimathea, turns to Galahad and says,

'Com forthe, the servaunte of Jesu Cryste, and thou shalt se that thou hast much desired to se.' And than he began to tremble right harde whan the dedly fleysch began to beholde the spirituall thynges. Than he hylde up his hondis towarde hevyn and seyde, 'Lorde, I thanke The, for now I se that that hath be my desire many a day. Now, my Blyssed Lorde, I wold nat lyve in this wrecchid worlde no lenger, if hit might plese The, Lorde.'¹⁹

As Malory does not describe precisely what it is that Galahad sees in his apotheosis, Dyce was forced to confront the problem of how to represent this particular mystical vision. Thus the vision and surrounding details derive from an earlier portion of the Grail narrative. Galahad, Perceval, Bors, and Perceval's sister are riding through the woods following a white hart being pursued by four lions. The animals enter a small hermitage where a priest is just beginning mass. At the moment of the Sanctus when, according to the liturgy, the heavens are made open, a transformation occurs. The hart disappears and is replaced by Jesus enthroned on the altar. The four lions metamorphose into representations of the four evangelists in 'the fourme of a man, and another to the fourme of a lyon, and the thirde to an egle, and the fourth was changed to an oxe.' Following these transformations, the visionary beings departed through the glass window without breaking it. A voice proclaims, 'In such maner entred the Sonne of God into the wombe of Maydyn Mary, whos virginité ne was perished, ne hurte.'²⁰

In the painting Dyce utilizes the same composition as seen in *The Trinity* and in the *Disputa*: Christ, floating on clouds, sits above an altar surrounded by a company of saints. The dramatic reduction of the supporting cast is perhaps the most noticeable difference among the paintings. Whereas Raphael overwhelms the viewer with vast numbers in heaven and on earth, emphasizing the incontrovertible teachings of the church, Dyce creates a more intimate scene. The piety is more personal. Only the knights and the sister of Perceval stand before the altar. Galahad, stunned, kneels in devotion apart from the others. A bishop and two acolytes stand to the side of the altar. One acolyte holds a censer, ready to swing the moment the singing the Sanctus commences. As in Malory, the heavenly company is now only the four evangelists. Gone are the numerous saints who suggest Catholic superstition and mythology. The Evangelists, in contrast, are *historical* and *scriptural*. This combination is much more pleasing to the Protestant eye. The chalice and the monstrance are replaced by the grail ~ situated not in the centre, but to the side. While in Raphael's work the monstrance forms a horizontal axis with Jesus, Dyce's placement of the Grail creates a diagonal axis connecting Galahad to Jesus. The suggestion is less transcendent than Raphael, yet subtly implies the power of a personal experience with the Holy. While the other figures in the painting are astonished, Galahad experiences a unique and deeper ecstasy.

¹⁸ Sir Thomas Malory, Eugène Vinaver ed., p. 606.

¹⁹ Sir Thomas Malory, Eugène Vinaver ed., p. 607.

²⁰ Sir Thomas Malory, Eugène Vinaver ed., p. 589.

Anxious to please the very Protestant queen, while also creating English Christian art worthy of the Renaissance but free of Roman Catholic doctrine, Dyce exercised even more restraint in the final version of the painting (fig. 7). As he felt the Arthurian myths were best understood as a kind of proto-*Pilgrim's Progress*,²¹ Galahad becomes like Christian of Bunyan's tale, in search of the Celestial City. No longer kneeling in wonder, lost in a mystic reverie, Galahad stands and contemplates the miracle. This image might very well prompt the Protestant viewer to recall John Wesley's famous moment of inner conversion on May 24, 1738 about which he wrote, 'I felt my heart strangely warm'd. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for Salvation: and an assurance was given me.'²² In this version, Galahad becomes more accessible, more like the viewer. The painting differs in other subtle ways. The grail is now removed from the altar and instead is in the hands of the priest, thus eliminating any possible connotation of its mediating power. The censer now rests discreetly on the ground, obviating any ritualistic use. As Debra Mancoff points out, the scene is thoroughly reworked for a Protestant audience. The grail is a symbol pointing to Christ but cannot encompass Christ.²³ The humanity of the four evangelists is emphasized as the animal representations are reduced and the halos are merely suggestive. Christ is less radiant, less celestial than in the Raphael. Although there are delicate wounds in the hands, there is no side wound. This is a Christ triumphant. It is also a distant Christ. In Malory, Jesus appears in the chalice and then approaches the knights with the sacrament. He is miraculously immediate. In *Religion*, Jesus floats serenely for contemplation, but not for connection. Marcia Pointon writes, 'The fresco is charged with dramatic force but, in sacrificing the proximity of Christ...Dyce lost an equally important element. The intimacy of the occasion is what is remarkable in the textual version.'²⁴

²¹ Caroline Babington, ed., p. 41.

²² John Wesley, *An Extract of the Rev. Mr. John Wesley's Journal from February 1, 1737-8. To His Return from Germany.*, British Library Electronic Resource (London: W. Strahan, 1740), p. 34.

²³ Debra N. Mancoff, *The Arthurian Revival in Victorian Art*, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities (New York, London: Garland, 1990), MXXXIV, p. 141.

²⁴ Marcia R. Pointon, p. 117.



Fig. 7 William Dyce RA HRSA 'Religion : The Vision of Sir Galahad and his Company' 1851
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Dyce died in the midst of completing the frescoes in 1864. Years behind schedule, the work grew onerous and depressing. He despaired at constantly trying to force Malory's text into a nineteenth-century domestic frame. Like many a successful ambassador before and after him, he is more recognized by his fruits than by his actions. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, upon seeing the proposed sketches for frescoes, enthusiastically embraced Dyce's Arthurian vision. When Tennyson finally turned to the completion of his *Idylls of the King*, it was the Pre-Raphaelites who provided the illustrations for the work that made Arthur known throughout late nineteenth-century Britain.²⁵ Galahad, no longer a symbol of unattainable purity, became a model for the young Englishman clamouring for glory in the far-flung reaches of the empire. It was also Galahad who memorialized these young men's tragic deaths. For over sixty years the Royal Navy has maintained the name Galahad for one of its ships.²⁶ Following his death, there was a public viewing of Dyce's frescoes. The reviews were appreciative, with no hint of the controversy Dyce so assiduously avoided.²⁷ In 1847, when he proposed Malory to the prince, William Dyce simply wanted to create a unique style of English moral and religious art. Instead, his work played a vital role in presenting Victorian Britain its defining myth: King Arthur, *rex quondam, rexque futurus*.²⁸

²⁵ Muriel Whitaker, p. 208.

²⁶ Royal Air Force <www.raf.mod.uk>.

²⁷ Christine Poulson, p. 45.

²⁸ Sir Thomas Malory, Eugène Vinaver ed. translation 'once and future king' - inscribed on Arthur's tomb.

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