

Education as an Art

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Teaching Medieval Romances
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In an era when all curriculum is being examined for its "relevance," Waldorf school teachers must often explain why they include Parsifal and other medieval literature in the third year of the high school curriculum. The following comments, based on my own experience in teaching these stories, may therefore be of some use to those who wish to consider this question.

It's quite true that young people like the stories uncommonly well and that not a few prefer them to current fiction. It may be the forthright and youthful style, or the appeal of the high and noble adventure, or perhaps the remoteness in time that pleases so greatly. And there may be deeper reasons, though these are not always appreciated at a first reading by the young or even the old.

The story of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, of Tristan and Isolt, and of Parsifal(1), are accounts of the trials to be endured and the achievement to be won by all who seek the Ideal. This quest is timeless, of course, and perhaps more actively sought by the youth of today than outer evidence would indicate. Rudolf Steiner, founder of the first Waldorf school, suggested in several of his lectures and books that Parsifal was, in fact, a story of the future development of mankind, and no doubt Richard Wagner was moved by the same conviction in composing his opera?

Another reason for teaching Parsifal to sixteen-or seventeen year-old students is that the study of a great quest seems to lead young people toward a quest of their own. It is no news that sixteen year-olds want to understand themselves and to get some hint of their future. But it is news that today's sophisticated youth should find inspiration in a 12th Century romance, at least it was to me. I made this discovery when I first asked each student to write a story in the spirit of a medieval quest, as part of a three-week course. To my astonishment, students produced in a few days readable, interesting stories, some more than twenty pages in length that seemed to flow from eager pens. These adventure tales about knights and ladies were written with varying degrees of earnestness, of imaginative power, and of insight a few, of course, with tongue-in-cheek. Yet almost all the stories contained some clue of self-recognition, magically released by the medieval spirit and especially, I believe, by the study of Parsifal.

A few thoughts as to why students succeed in this venture: First, the well-established symbols, adventures, settings, and themes provide forms into which personal experiences can be readily translated. These forms satisfactorily camouflage the writer's own personality, yet provide the much desired clarification, the transcendence of life's perplexities, and even the humor with which to deal with them. In medieval stories 'shortcomings' such as jealousy, fear, pride, and laziness appear in brilliant dress. Yet they are set forth matter-of-factly, without censoriousness, and without psychological probing. Most young people find it is just the right tone, and one that is not difficult to imitate. The foolish questions and social blunders of Perceval in Chretien de Troyes' story, the flinching of Gawain before the Green Knight's blade, the evasions of Tristan, are viewed with sympathy by most high school students. Though they may be awakened to similar shortcomings of their own, the knowledge of them becomes less painful, and the hope of overcoming them becomes somewhat brighter.

While the medieval romances serve to turn one's glance inward, they can also open a way outward. Parsifal's bold undertaking of a mighty task speaks to all who would undertake their own life-tasks and responsibilities. The stories of the Grail knights, of their ideal of sacrifice and service, may actually be understood better by youth than by age. The Middle Ages have sometimes been pictured as the youthful period of Western man's development, before he achieved his full manhood in the

Renaissance. It is certainly evident that medieval men, like the young, were all too heavily burdened by the demands of the flesh. Yet they understood the brotherhood of man and the Fatherhood of God with a particular purity and clarity never since equaled. In medieval romances these ideals shine as light through a stained glass window, now blue, now red or gold depending on the position of the viewer. A fresh glimpse of them may make us feel as Perceval felt, when he first encountered knights in armor:

When he saw them clearly as they appeared out of the wood and observed the jingling coats of mail and the bright, gleaming helmets and the lances and the shields, such as he had never seen before, and when he described the green and the vermilion catching the light of the sun, and the gold, blue, and silver, he was so delighted that he exclaimed: "Ah, Lord God, have mercy! These are angels that I see."

Under such inspiration, a first step toward placing one's own talents at the service of others can be readily made. I like to think of the writing of a story as a symbolic act in this direction.

1. The text used is *Medieval Romances*, ed. Loomis (New York, The Modern Library, 1957). Unfortunately, this book is out of print. A replacement has not yet been found.
2. For a fine study of this work, see Dr. Franz E. Winkler's article on Parsifal in *Proceedings No. 21*, Myrin Institute, 1968.