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Noted document

# The counter-Arthurian piracy of Jack Spicer's *Holy Grail*

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**Abstract** This Noted document brings to scholarly attention the existence of a 1969 pirate edition of Jack Spicer's *Holy Grail*. It explores archaising book production choices in the first, authorised edition of *The Holy Grail*. It then describes the pirated edition, showing how the pirates reflected and reinforced the medievalising aspects of Spicer's original text.

**Keywords:** Jack Spicer; *The Holy Grail*; Piracy; Medievalism

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*Editors' note: This piece is a Noted document, a new genre that seeks to introduce a primary source and to make the source and its theoretical stakes accessible to a wider readership (Jagot, Orlemanski, and Ritchey, 'What might a journal be?', *postmedieval* [2021]).*

The poet Jack Spicer (1925–65) translated parts of the poem we now call *Beowulf* (2011), worked on a Chaucerian play, and composed a sustained Arthurian sequence, *The Holy Grail* (1964). Following his death, a pirated edition of *The Holy Grail* emerged in Berkeley, California (Spicer 1969), and the pirates added some medievalising touches of their own. After some new observations on the codicology of the first edition of *The Holy Grail*, the only edition printed within Spicer's lifetime, I outline here how the pirates behind the second edition engaged with and extended Spicer's



playful treatment of Arthuriana through the edition's paratexts; I show how their use of layout and writing surface displayed a unique sensitivity to Spicer's verse-craft, not paralleled in subsequent editions; and I describe how their choices of pseudonyms adopt an anti-authoritarian position, and come tied to the changing status of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the 1960s.

The following discussion of physical codices benefits from fruitful past research on Spicer's ties to premodern writings. Scholarship has traced the medievalism of *The Holy Grail* (Finke and Shichtman 2019). Past studies have also explored what might be called the work's meta-medievalism, its possible roots in the modern Arthurian paintings displayed in the Boston Public Library (Ellingham and Killian 1998, 69; Mueller 2019). Researchers have also addressed Spicer's Chauceriana (Hadbawnik 2013), and his relationship to the teaching and philological research of Arthur Brodeur (Remein 2015; 2022).

In the light of these studies, the pirated second edition of Spicer's *Holy Grail* demands attention. The text of Spicer's *Holy Grail* both alludes to and mocks its Arthurian forebears; the pirated edition, engaged in a process of knowing literary illegitimization, enshrouds the poem's own attitude with further counter-authoritarian—counter-Arthurian—signals. By redeploying bibliography to pursue the fruitful 'dissonance' and 'instability' found in a pirated Arthurian poem composed by a gay, copyright-sceptical poet, this work presents one small answer to calls for 'a new codicology, a queer philology' (Magnani and Watt 2018, 252) that attends to the dissonant, the strange, and the awkward. This example also offers a chance to consider what we might call bibliographic medievalism, engagement with the medieval in modern book production through the imitation of codicological features from premodern manuscripts.

Jack Spicer composed *The Holy Grail* in 1961 or 1962, but the poem was first published in 1964 (Spicer 1964; Ellingham and Killian 1998, 211), inadvertently causing variation in the dates that future scholars would claim for it. It consists of seven books, each assigned to a character: in order, Gawain, Percival, Lancelot, Gwenivere, Galahad, Merlin, Arthur. Each book itself delivers seven numbered stanzas.<sup>1</sup> When Spicer lived, and controlled his publications himself, his work appeared in unassuming printed codices, often in short print runs from small, local presses (Spicer 2008, xxviii). He opposed copyright on principle (Ellingham and Killian 1998, 235–36) and took part in unofficial publishing himself in the short 1959 run of his magazine *J* (Clay and Phillips 1998, 59). The 'Pirate's Note' that precedes the second edition of *The Holy Grail* itself observes this, characterising Spicer's editions as 'small and scruffly [*sic*]' (Spicer 1969, leaf 2r).

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1 For convenient reading across editions, I reference *The Holy Grail* by book, stanza number, and line number within that stanza; quotations come from Spicer (2008).



The first, authorised *Holy Grail* edition conformed to this pattern in its size and materials, but nevertheless shows medievalising impulses. Any edition emerges from negotiation between publisher, author, and practical constraints (Shillingsburg 2017, 66–82). We know some details of this negotiation in the first edition's case from Robin Blaser's notes:

Number of copies unknown. The design of the book was worked out by Jack with Graham Mackintosh, red and black cover design and red and black lettering. Graham Mackintosh allowed an unknown number of copies printed in purple and gold, with purple and gold lettering to be printed. These were withdrawn because Jack insisted on the red and black and said the purple and gold edition 'looked like an Easter Egg.' (Spicer 1975, 382)

Spicer's personal intentions do not, then, necessarily spring forth from every detail of the 1964 edition. Its construction matters, however, because no other edition of the poem emerged during Spicer's lifetime, and because it gave the pirates their only model.

The common form of the first edition was the softcover form, although Mackintosh also printed a small number of copies—possibly thirteen—of the first edition in hardcover (Lepper 1976, 380). In the softcover version of the first edition, each stanza of each book within the poem receives a dedicated page, so that stanza divisions coordinate with page divisions and, necessarily, also with leaf divisions. Since each book has seven stanzas, each book therefore takes up seven pages and four leaves, with the verso of the last leaf—the eighth page—left blank. The stanzas are printed on sheets of white paper. A dedicated title leaf announces each book, with the book title printed in red and black writing. For these title leaves, the printer used thicker cream-colored paper. To achieve this, they created the whole codex as one gathering, bound by two large staples that meet, at the book's heart, between stanzas 4 and 5 of the 'Book of Gwenivere.' Given the predictable page-count of each book of the poem, the printer had only to intersperse one sheet of cream paper after four sheets of white paper within the whole gathering to achieve this effect. Probably by accident, this arrangement of paper echoes the visual and tangible effect of a premodern manuscript made up from quires of paper sheets each with parchment quire guards (Ryley 2022, 76–79).

The book displays other more deliberate medievalising choices. Each book's first stanza in the first edition of *The Holy Grail* begins with a large initial, in imitation of premodern manuscripts. This feature creates an entertaining tension between archaising impulse and modern orthography at the start of the 'Book of Merlin.' The 'Book of Merlin' begins with a disembodied quotation, alluding to a popular board game to recall the legend of Merlin's imprisonment: "Go to jail. Go directly to jail. Do not



pass Go. Do not collect \$200.00.” / The naked sound of a body sounds like a trumpet through all this horseshit’ (Merlin, 1.1–2). The publisher therefore had to begin the ‘Book of Merlin’ with the characters <“G>, initial characters that lacks premodern manuscript precedents, because the quotation mark postdates the era. The printer crafted an enlarged quotation mark, but the resulting effect is amusingly destabilising: apart from anything else, a mind honed on modern orthography struggles to accept that quotation marks of unequal sizes can open and close the same block of speech. The first edition, the pirates’ model, therefore displayed various medievalising desires in ways that already seemed fruitfully strained.

Pirates printed the second edition of *The Holy Grail* in 1969, four years after Spicer’s death. They mimeographed it from typewritten text, and it claims a print run (mimeograph run?) of 500 copies. The pirates did not fold sheets to create one or more gatherings, as in a conventional codex. Each leaf in the second edition is a separate, differently coloured piece of paper. This use of coloured paper makes for a flamboyant codex. Conventional publishers at the time—and now—could not do this without hefty expense, and so this aspect of the edition’s making shows us the pirates taking advantage of opportunities afforded by underground publishing.

Each of the distinct leaves, separated by their contrasting colours, contains a distinct book within the poem. Since each book is assigned to a different character, the shifting material writing supports themselves declare the poem’s shifting voices and addressees. Both copies near me, those in the Bodleian Library, Oxford and Cambridge University Library, use the same sequence of colours:

- front cover: deep pink
- inner cover and publication details: ochre
- ‘Pirate’s Note’: white
- ‘Gawain’: yellow
- ‘Percival’: dull green
- ‘Lancelot’: ochre
- ‘Gwenivere’: pale pink
- ‘Galahad’: dull green
- ‘Merlin’: brown
- ‘Arthur’: pale blue
- rear cover: black

The consistency between the two copies I have consulted suggests that all copies used this colour sequence, but I would welcome comments from



researchers nearer than me to the North American libraries holding other copies in institutional hands. The exterior of the black rear cover carries a faint illustration of a spear-wielding rider mounted on a mythological beast; in both of the copies I have consulted, this illustration has faded too much for clear identification.

The only sheet of white paper, the kind of paper most typically used in books, holds the paratextual 'Pirate's Note,' and this restriction of the typical writing support to the one element most clearly separate from the poem proper might invite readers to hunt for meaning in the colours of the other sheets. The black sheet for the rear cover well fits a sequence that ends in 'The Book of the Death of Arthur.' The dealing-out of pale blue paper for Arthur and pale pink for Gwenivere implies a rudimentary gender distinction, albeit one immediately questioned by the poem's content and by the pirated edition's cover. The poem's content eschews either Arthurian or all-American masculinity:

There is always one lone person on it sailing  
Widershins.

His name is Kate or Bob or Mike or Dora and his sex is almost as  
obscure as his history. ('Gawain,' 5.4–6)

Some lines might speak at once of finding gay community and of meeting homophobia:

The Irish have only invented three useful things:  
Boston, The Holy Grail, and fairies. ('Lancelot,' 6.1–2)

Daniel Katz proposes that Spicer's 'fairies' here refers to Boston's gay poets (2013, 125), and Mueller has layered over this interpretation a second point, that the use of 'fairies' might bitterly recast homophobic abuse that Spicer endured at the Boston Public Library (2019, 33), while recalling the fairy imagery of that library's murals (36–38; see also Ellingham and Killian 1998, 69). The front cover, meanwhile, is a deep pink.

Both the content and, in this pirated edition, the cover colour of Spicer's text might defy mid-century expectations of an Arthurian work in the United States. Arthurian characters and stories had for some time served: as models to shape masculinity, especially in books for boys (Mancoff 1996; Fox-Friedman 1998; McCausland 2019a, 17–52; 2019b); as figures recruited into arguments for this or that perceived improvement to the republic (Helbert 2019, 303–7); as a framework within which to inflict racist violence (Helbert 2019, 299, 305–6); and as ideas with which to police the Californian city (Pinder 1998). By the middle of the twentieth century, the Arthurian-educational model had met disruption (McCausland 2019a, 115–42), and even the comforts of pulp literature had set about replaying it in a bleaker, disillusioned key (Rizzuto 2021). We might



reasonably guess that both Spicer's text and the pirates' choice of writing support exist in some tension with model masculine Arthurianism. The second, pirated, edition declares this more loudly than the first: the first has a medievalising cover, with writing imitating textura script models, while the second has a deep pink cover that eschews medievalising typefaces and bears the image of a plant, rather than anything martial.

The pirates' choice to give each book of the poem a physically distinct leaf also marks out the second edition. The layout differs, in its strict placement of each book on one physical leaf, from that of *The Holy Grail* in the current standard edition (Spicer 2008, 329–58), and in the previous *Collected Books* (Spicer 1975, 187–213). Despite its constrained resources, the pirated second edition is the last printing of the poem to preserve a strong sense of the physical, codicological separation between the poem's distinct books—and therefore between Arthurian characters and voices—found in the first edition and perhaps sought by Spicer. Probably unintentionally, but nevertheless in a charming way, this layout parallels the concerns of premodern scribes copying poetry in England. Many (though not all) scribes worked to avoid splitting rhyme units and stanzas up with column or page divisions, sometimes by managing the number of lines on the page and sometimes by ruling pages for set numbers of stanzas (Sawyer 2020, 131–32; 2021, 209–10; Wakelin 2022, 83–84, 105–6). The pirated second edition's material construction engages knowingly with Spicer's verse form and with the nature of the first edition, and unknowingly with premodern precedents.

Beyond these tacit engagements, explicit paratextual medievalism further heightens the second edition's interest. The paratexts in question are, specifically, peritexts, since they come physically joined to the work (Genette 1987, 10–11). The publishers' details on the verso of the inner title leaf contain their own use of Arthurian material:

THE HOLY GRAIL was printed in a limited second edition of 500 copies at jolly roger press by Sir Bercilak and Morgan Le Fay in february 1969. please help to further in every way, anyone caught selling this book for money will be drawn and quartered.<sup>2</sup> (Spicer 1969, leaf 1v)

2 Transcriptions reproduce punctuation and capitalization.

The joking reference to hanging, drawing and quartering engages with common understandings of the medieval, but it is the pirates' choices of pseudonyms that seem especially fruitful. Morgan le Fay moves through many tales (Larrington 2006, 29–96). However, the invocation of 'Bercilak' shows that the publishers allude to the Middle English poem that we now call *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the only work containing Bertilak/Bercilak.



The pirates' allusive pseudonyms marry up with the presence of the 'Book of Gawain' as the first book in *The Holy Grail*, and might affect how readers approach that book. The 'Book of Gawain' does indeed play with *Sir Gawain* in its opening stanza, both in its glancing allusions—'Later shot a green knight' ('Gawain,' 1.9)—and in momentary formal echoes: the line 'Gawain no ghostman, guest who could not gather' does not form a fully orthodox later fourteenth-century alliterative line ('Gawain,' 1.6), but its AALAA alliteration and optional rhetorical caesura recall the prototypical alliterative line's AALAX alliteration and obligatory metrical caesura. Yet Spicer's *Holy Grail* draws on a wide range of other Arthuriana. For example, the final book is not named, on the pattern of the other books, 'The Book of Arthur,' but rather announces itself as 'The Book of the Death of Arthur.' This title aligns the poem's close not with the self-contained romances among which *Sir Gawain* sits, but with the more (pseudo-)historical works that tell of the Round Table's sundering and Arthur's end. The poem goes conclusively beyond allusion to *Gawain* even within the 'Book of Gawain,' as it moves to chess imagery ('Gawain,' 2) and then the Grail ('Gawain,' 3). In this forest of references, pointing in various directions, the pirates' peritext affects—for those who read it—which allusions will stand out most.

The publishers' details achieve other effects, too: they position the pirates relative to authority and conformity. Bertilak and Morgan serve as the closest thing *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has to antagonists. The publishers chose figures who disrupt courtly order from beyond and outside as their pseudonyms. This choice seems apt and witty: the names carry on Spicer's spirit of scepticism about traditional publishing, and match the pointed and forthright content of the prefatory 'Pirate's Note.' The choice sits well, too, with the attitude of *The Holy Grail* itself to Arthur and to Arthuriana, for the poem pursues 'the role of poetry in the modern world' at least as much as it pursues Arthur (Lupack 2005, 259). Developing the ambivalence about Arthur found in some premodern Arthuriana, the work frequently indulges in bathetic juxtapositions of legend with the mundane, demotic, and colloquial. Spicer has Arthurian characters voice everyday sentiments: Lancelot 'has all the sense of fun of an orange, Gawain once explained to a trusted friend' ('Lancelot,' 7.1), while the final line has Arthur referring in frustration once again to 'all this horseshit' ('Arthur,' 7.9). *The Holy Grail* is, if anything, counter-Arthurian, in the sense that it tends to assail authorities legendary and modern, and to undercut the glamour of its apparent topic. The peritexts in the second edition detect, respond to, and extend this counter-Arthurian lean, as does the simple legal-economic fact that the second edition is pirated.



A few other aspects make Bertilak and Morgan fitting figures. Both stand for a particular sub-type of opposition to the court in Arthurian romance: underground, behind-the-scenes action. Bertilak claims responsibility at the poem's close for the strange task that Gawain has faced (Andrew and Waldron 2002, lines 2358–62), and adds that the old lady that Gawain met in the castle is Morgan le Fay; she, supposedly, conceived of the whole plan so as to frighten Guinevere to death (2446–66). Morgan's distanced and minor role in the plot feels arbitrary: the grisly be-and-re-heading sequence that might scare the Queen happens at the poem's start, after all, so the plan as experienced by Gawain far exceeds the brief Bertilak claims. These distanced and oblique qualities make both figures even more fitting pseudonyms for piratical publishers. Finally, one need not read *Sir Gawain* especially hard against the grain in the fourteenth, twentieth, or twenty-first centuries to notice that Bertilak kisses a man; scholarship has by now hashed out the queer aspects of the poem over several decades, and sexuality and gender already occupied a chapter of an undergraduate companion during the previous millennium (Gilbert 1997). Published work had not discussed the topic so thoroughly in the 1960s, though, and this thought brings us to the question of the changing canonical position of *Sir Gawain*.

The second leaf of the second edition, the one using white paper, bears a 'Pirate's Note.' The 'Pirate's Note' presents a Spicer of myth, wielding inexpressible gifts:

every word in these poems comes straight out of cold mountain,  
spoken in the mask of a god who was once a man. every word hurt  
like a wordless pain in the intestines. i do not know the exact words  
to tell you how Spicer was a master. (Spicer 1969, leaf 2r)

The note also places itself beyond academia, and rejects what it sees as a prevailing pedagogical canon:

it becomes repetitious [*sic*], thinking about how false artists are  
admired and real ones neglected. on the campuses they have read Bly  
or Ferlinghetti rather than Spicer, and they haven't yet gotten to the  
hard stuff in Patchen. (Spicer 1969, leaf 2r)

'I find it difficult,' says the piratical-editorial voice, speaking from and into the political ferment of Berkeley in the late 1960s, 'to believe in a revolution that will open all these minds far enough' (Spicer 1969, leaf 2r). The note, with its deified Spicer and acerbic mentions of other poets, preserves a brief insight into one Californian view on poetry at the time. Given that both Spicer and the pirates allude to it, where did *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* itself stand for readers and students of poetry in the 1960s?



We might, in the 2020s, too easily forget how brief a spell of popularity *Sir Gawain* has had. During the 1960s the poem first came to a fully canonical position, as something read widely and often taught to undergraduates. Thomas Hahn and Leah Haught observe, sketching the history of the poem's fame (2012), that the decade forms the pivot in the Gawinian critical history: articles and dedicated monographs began to treat it as an object with serious literary interest (Howard 1964; Burrow 1965), and in 1968 *Sir Gawain* entered, in translation, the second edition of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. *Sir Gawain* is therefore probably the only Middle English work to have travelled from relative obscurity to Hollywood adaptation within the space of one human lifespan. Another rather different California poet, Yvor Winters (1900–1945), had reached the party earlier (Winters 1937), but even his precocious verse response to *Sir Gawain* would only become widely available in later collected editions of his poetry. The choice of pseudonyms probably felt less obvious or inevitable in the late 1960s than it might today, and probably partook of the energy of a very immediate, contemporary surge of interest.

Anonymous, unverifiable, but well-referenced online information suggests that the identities of 'Bercilak' and 'Morgan le Fay' were Richard Krech and John Oliver Simon (Verdant Press, n.d.), though whom I do not know. They deserve credit for their witty peritexts. Their pirated edition shows that Jack Spicer's medievalism found a receptive audience at the end of his life and just after his death, and that some among that receptive audience in turn used their knowledge to add an extra counter-Arthurian spin to the material. The field would benefit from further work on the informal circulation of Jack Spicer, including but not limited to instances of bibliographic medievalism.

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