Wolfram von Eschenbach’s famous narrative parable of the bow and bowstring (241,1) rests on the paradox that the more extreme the bend in the bowstring, the more quickly the arrow reaches its target. In other words, the more convoluted the narrative, the more quickly the audience receives the didactic message. Walter Schröder noted long ago that Wolfram narrates in order to conceal. Insight is inevitably deferred, only to be achieved through the luxury of narrative hindsight. Hatto and Haug have taught us that one best re-reads Wolfram, interpreting backwards from points of insight. So when Wolfram’s narrator announces (1) "It is not crooked like the bow — this tale is true and straight." (805, 14-15), he is, in effect, telling us that the arrow has reached its target. And his announcement comes at a surprising place in the narrative, not when Parzival receives absolution, not when Anfortas is finally delivered, not even when Feirefiz is taken into the Grail Society, thereby symbolically uniting the Christian and heathen worlds, but following the burial of Parzival’s cousin, the anchoress Sigûne. From this narrative signal we may assume that Sigûne holds special significance for Parzival’s development. The purpose of my paper today is to apply hindsight in good Wolframian style in order to reevaluate Sigûne’s role in Parzival’s winding road to spiritual perfection.

II. Judging the Soul's Progress

It is first necessary, however, to set forth the categories by which Wolfram’s audience would have judged Parzival’s progress. I follow here John Benton who has observed that the Middle Ages did not have our 20th-century concepts of the individual or the personality. Carolyn Bynum reminds us, "The twelfth century regarded the discovery of homo interior, or seipsum, as the discovery within oneself of human nature made in the image of God - an imago Dei that is the same for all human beings." This means that no matter how humble or flawed the outer shell, ultimately the developing soul aspires to a universality that transcends all earthly categories, including gender.
Although the interior development of the soul was seen to be universal, the exterior conduct of the body could be particular. Medieval commentators quoted both Paul: "There are many members but one body" and John 14:2 "There are many mansions but one house of God" in recognition of the multifarious possibilities by which life on earth could lead to eternal bliss. Most medievalists agree that the exterior human being’s conduct, as set forth in Arthurian romance, was to be measured according to expectations surrounding his or her social position. Thus, a medieval audience would have judged Parzival’s conduct by its understanding of how an Arthurian knight should act, Erec’s conduct by how a king should act, and Herzeloyde's and Sigûne's conduct according to expectations surrounding the proper conduct of noble ladies. Bynum reminds us that the limits of propriety are set by the actions of exemplars. "All the basic concerns of early twelfth-century spirituality - poverty and preaching, withdrawal and community, love of neighbor and love of God - were expressed in terms of models or exemplars. The fact that the writers of religious polemic almost invariably disputed the meaning of models, accepted some meanings and not others, and argued over whether their own group best fitted the model, suggests that twelfth-century groups were really using these models as tools to define and judge themselves.”

If we apply Bynum’s definition of individuality in the Middle Ages to Wolfram’s Parzival, then, we may expect that Parzival’s spiritual journey will be shaped by the his social class (the knight), his state of grace (the ignorant sinner and the penitent soul), as measured against exemplars both false (Arthur the inadequate king; Gawan the inadequate Arthurian hero) and true. Commentaries have identified two true exemplars: the anchoress Sigûne, whom Parzival repeatedly encounters as he searches for the grail castle, and the hermit Trevrizent, who offers him shelter, wisdom, and a sumptuous meal of water, roots, and herbs.

III. Sigûne and Trevrizent

Commentators, including Art Groos in Romancing the Grail, have tended, certainly with considerable justification, to focus on Trevrizent. On the level of the homo exterior, as a penitent knight, Trevrizent is a more fitting exemplar for Parzival than Sigûne, who differs drastically from Parzival in terms of what social expectations
govern her conduct. Wolfram's audience would certainly have been aware of the fact that Sigûne and Schîânatulander actually had their own Arthurian romance, *Titurel*, in which parallels could be sought, an extra textual excursion unnecessary in the case of Trevrizent. If we measure importance in couplets, Wolfram, too, would appear to wish his audience to focus upon Trevrizent more than Sigûne. Parzival's stay with the hermit occupies most of Book IX. In the extensive conversations between Trevrizent and Parzival, we not only hear crucial information regarding Parzival's fate, we also get an illuminating depiction of salvation history and a discourse on the status of neutral angels.

If narrative causality is the standard, Parzival's meeting with Trevrizent outweighs his brief encounter with Sigûne. And it is, after all, Trivrizent who enlightens both Parzival and the audience concerning the sins that Parzival has committed in ignorance, thus resolving the combined sense of wonder and outrage that both Parzival and the audience have shared since Cundrie's denunciation at Arthur's court. If narrative closure is the standard, then Parzival receives absolution from Trevrizent, an act of spiritual closure, before embarking on a final series of adventures which culminate in his asking the proper question of Anfortas and restoring the Grail kingdom to its former glory. All of this evidence to the contrary, I ask you now to draw Wolfram's bowstring to your ear and to target Sigûne's significance for Parzival's development.
IV. Sigûne's Spiritual Development

Parzival first encounters Sigûne upon hearing her screams, as she laments the death of her knight Schionatulander. Already by the early thirteenth century, as Schwietering and Bertau have shown, the position of the corpse (2) "the prinze he found dead there in the damsel's lap." (138) would have evoked the parallel of the pietà in the minds of the audience. Illuminations make this clear. On your handout, the Virgin Mary is on the left, Sigûne as depicted in the Heidelberg manuscript on your right. The mother/lover lamenting the dead knight as she holds him in her lap marks within medieval Mariology the symbiosis of absolute sorrow and divine grace which surrounds the Stabat Mater. From the earliest accounts Mary's tears were seen to symbolize the purifying sacrament of the cross, and by the fourteenth century, according to Marina Warner, "the blood from Christ's wounded side spurting onto Mary's breast and transfixing her (216)" had become a part of popular legend. The iconography sends a clear signal to the audience that Sigûne's sorrow has a both a tropological and an anagogical dimension. Just as suffering in conformity with Christ, that is, becoming Christ on the cross, underlies the drastic ascetic practices of
fourteenth-century women’s spirituality, thus does suffering in conformity with Mary seem to be the ultimate spiritual goal for religious and lay women in the 12th century.

Already by the mid-twelfth century, religious women were entering into the spiritual life in ever larger numbers, either in independent communities or in convents which were eventually reconstituted under the new, rigorous Cistercian rule. Thomas Renna cites the vita of Ita of Nivelle to make several points about this dynamic spirituality within Cistercian walls. The virtue of these brides of Christ was seen to lie in their chastity; their inner perfection should naturally express itself in works of charity. The "intense devotion to Christ, the goal of the spiritual quest" should manifest itself in a commitment to "other members of His family. " "Fasting, praying and almsgiving," expressions of the homo exterior, should be grounded in the "proper inner dispositions." A key measure of the holiness of these Cistercian exemplar-nuns lay in the ability of their perfect cloistered inner lives to effect spiritual transformations in those few wayward priests and knights with whom they might have contact. In other words, these women could be both Mary and Martha, with their spirituality becoming a force for God’s good in the world. When he significantly expanded Sigûne's role in Parzival's conversion, Wolfram certainly expected his audience to have similar spiritual models in mind.

Hiltrud Rissel’s fascinating study of Hildegard of Bingen's correspondence with Cistercian abbesses reveals that the obsession with extreme asceticism as a measure of virtue, never entirely absent from Christian practice, was cause for alarm in at least three Cistercian cloisters of the mid-twelfth century. Indeed, the Cistercian abbess Hazzechoa von Krauftal expresses the desire to leave her cloister and withdraw to a solitary life of penance as an inclusa, thereby prefiguring Sigûne's way. Hildegard warns Elisabeth, Abbess of St. Thomas, about the dangers of extreme asceticism and counsels her on how to bring her errant sisters around to the proper middle way. Clearly, affective spirituality arising in asceticism represented a European phenomenon of which Wolfram and his audience would have been aware, in particular the desire of medieval women to seek new fulfillment in religious life, the fundament of this life being chastity and asceticism, and the real spiritual power that these women were seen to possess.

It is important to recognize that Wolfram's audience would have thought of Sigûne as the dynamic product of a dialectical interaction among her soul (the Christian), her
social group (the aristocratic woman) and her exemplar (the Blessed Virgin). In other words, the connection is between the fallible human soul of Sigûne and the Virgin's perfection, between spiritual practice and exemplary development. Thus the audience would not have been troubled by the fact that Sigûne's sorrow has a worldly cause. Instead they would have recognized that she does not regret her refusal to grant Schîâñatulander her body per se--(3) "I was foolish in my mind not to give him lovel" (141, 20-21)--but rather, as Marianne Wynn has shown, Sigûne's refusal to honor what was an absolute obligation (triwe) required in return for Schîâñatulander's absolute devotion. He not only died in her service, but, as James Marchand has noted, because he also died defending Parzival's lands from Orilus, Parzival, too, shares Sigûne's guilt and obligation--(4) "this prince was killed for your sake, defending your lands even as he defended honor itself."(121, 1-3)--although he does not acknowledge it until Book IX.

Parzival encounters Sigûne thrice more, and on each occasion her outer appearance and inner essence, her mortal body and immortal soul have undergone a metamorphosis. Surrounded by exemplars of spiritual development associated with sorrow both in literature and in life and stimulated by the Mariological associations such as the turtledove and the linden tree, Wolfram's audience certainly would have seen in Sigûne's spiritual development an exemplary way for her cousin Parzival. Rather than exploring the significance of one iconographical symbol, something that Art Groos has already accomplished, I propose we explore the process of inner evolution as defined in Cistercian spirituality of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries.

In judging Sigûne's inner journey, as revealed in her four encounters with Parzival, Wolfram's audience would have considered the via triplex, the three-step hierarchy omnipresent in medieval contemplative writing, most clearly articulated in Pseudo-Dionysius and Augustine, and brilliantly adapted by Bernard in his allegory of the three kisses. In the fifty-seventh of the Sermons on the Song of Songs, Bernard describes three levels coexisting within each soul, using the terms amica mea, columba mea, and formosa mea. These three stages are then linked to biblical exemplars. As Bernard McGinn summarizes it, 'The soul is a 'friend' who takes the role of Martha in Luke 10-39-40 when she preaches, advises, and serves others, The soul is a 'dove,' or a Lazarus, when she weeps and prays to God for forgiveness of her sins; and she is a 'beautiful one,' or Mary, when, 'gleaming with heavenly desire, she clothes herself with
the beauty of heavenly contemplation, though only for the time when this can be done properly and conveniently (McGinn, 184-5).” Even the less sophisticated “recken” in Wolfram’s Thuringian audience might well have measured the Sigûne’s spiritual progress in terms of these three exemplars.

If we read backwards from Bernard to Sigûne’s first encounter with Parzival, we realize that both figures are embarking on spiritual journeys marked by sin. The principal difference lies in consciousness of sin. Sigûne is aware of her transgression. Parzival remains tump, oblivious to his matricide. He seeks the courtly world in ignorance. She flees the courtly world in penance. Through the initial encounter he learns of his heritage and his connection to Sigûne. From this moment on he is no longer "bea fiz" but Parzival. in that she tells him of his heritage, first informs him of her relationship to his mother Herzeloyde, and purposefully misdirects him lest he come to harm before he is up to the encounter with Orilus.

When Parzival and the audience next encounter Sigûne, it is after he has visited the grail castle and has failed to ask the question. He has lost the trail of the enemies of the Grail society he wished to encounter and hears Sigûne’s lament from afar. As he approaches her, the narrator describes her shining with the morning dew, a mark of indifference to the world but also a popular metaphor of God’s grace. At this encounter she is sitting in a linden tree holding Schîânatulander’s embalmed corpse in her arms. Wolfram alerts the audience to its role, which is one of sympathy with her plight (5) "If anyone were not to take pity on her, seeing her sitting in this stae, I would accuse him of disloyalty," and affirms her otherworldly virtue as an exemplar of fidelity (6) "All earthly loyalty was but a breath of air, compared with what was seen in her." (249, 24-5). Parzival, her "the child of her aunt", as Wolfram reminds us, fails to recognize her, greets her politely as a knight should a courtly lady he does not know and offers her service as a remedy for sorrow.

Sigûne, too, fails to recognize him, at least initially. Her wonder at seeing a knight in this wilderness serves to authenticate her self-imposed isolation. Parzival’s astonishment at her changed appearance lets the audience visualize the outward decay of a true penitent. Her clothes are soaking wet with tears. Her red mouth, a courtly badge of beauty, is pale, her hair has fallen out, her skin is blanched, her entire manner betrays the fatigue and spiritual desiccation of a true penitent. Her initial grief and alienation from the courtly world, expressed over the corpse of Schionatulander,
corresponds to the initial stage of spiritual development called the "via purgativa," in which the penitent learns through self-imposed suffering and through the actions of exemplars how to distance herself from the world. As she reveals to Parzival, she now sees Schîanatulander's death in different terms, not as a personal loss, but as a gift from God: (7) "Now jude the duress God has given me on his account — that he should live no longer!" (252,20-3). Sigûne has moved beyond her sorrow at his death alone: (8) "He fostered manly kindness. His dying pained me then, and ever since, from day to day, I have known new and further sorrow" (252,23-6). In addition, Sigûne assumes the role of Martha the advisor, instructing Parzival as to the heritage of his sword and rebuking him for his thoughtless silence at the Grail Castle. Sigûne's words correspond to Bernard's "kiss of the feet," the penitential preparation he explores further in Sermon 3,2 on the Song of Songs, the stage he calls "devotio" in the fourth sermon.

When Parzival encounters Sigûne in Book IX, she is an anchoress. Her cell, newly built above a flowing stream, contains Schîanatulander's corpse and her meager lodgings. The narrator is, as always, fulsome in his praise of Sigûne, but this time with a spiritual emphasis which was lacking before; (9) "He found a hermitess, who for the love of God had renounced her maidenhood and her joy. Womanly sorrows' source blossomed ever anew from her heart, although old loyalty was the cause" (435-13-18). In a typically Wolframian reversal, he enhances the drastic nature of his description through a dramatic reversal of the audience's expectations (10) "Dochesse Sigune rarely heard mass" would lead one to question her piety until the narrator asserts: "yet her whole life was a genuflexion" (435,23-25). We revisit her outer transformation (11) "Her full lips, hot, red-hued, had by now become pallid and pale" (435,26-7) but this time connected directly to her suffering: (12) "Never did maiden suffer such great torment. In order to mourn she must be all alone" (435,29-30). The words (13) "Because of the love that died with him...she loved his dead body" (436,3-4) are meant less to shock than to illustrate the kind of obsessive devotion or "triwe" reserved for saints, which Wolfram delights in contrasting with "untriwe" shown by Hartmann's Lunette in advising Laudine to abandon her dead husband for Yvain.

As Parzival dismounts and approaches the shrine, he passes the threshold from the outer desolation of the wilderness, (14) "Residing as you do so far away from the track in this wilderness" (438, 24-5), to the inner spiritual desolation of Sigûne's self-imposed suffering: (15) "The cell was devoid of joy and bare of all mirth. He found nothing
there but great grief" (437,16-19). The fact that Parzival fails to recognize Sigûne again, even though he had previously encountered her in her sorrow is meant to illustrate how far her outer aspect has taken her from worldly concerns: (16) "AS yet he had no idea who she was or might be" (437, 22-3). The sodden courtly clothing she had wore before has been replaced by a spare, gray habit, under which she wears a hair-shirt. Self-imposed suffering as penance has replaced the passive suffering previously described. She takes sustenance directly from the Grail, thus forging a bond of sin and suffering with her brother Anfortas. She holds a Psalter in one hand, on the other she wears a ring with stone of garnet. When Parzival misunderstands the meaning of the ring, she describes the precise connection between life, death, trine and divine love:

(17) He is, however, my husband before God. If thoughts are to bring about deeds, then I bear no hiding-place anywhere that might fly between my marriage. His death brought affliction upon my life. This ring of reue wedlock must be my escort into God’s presence. It is a seal upon my loyalty, my eyes’ flood from my heart. There are two of us inside here – Schionatulander is the one, I the other. (440,10-14)

Sigûne has achieved the second stage of development, the "via illuminativa," marked by ever more distance from the world and the emergence of powers of discernment which allow her to meditate on higher spiritual matters, described by Bernard as the "kiss of the hands," and signaled by the practice of virtue. There are also subtle references to physical death. Sigûne is Lazarus here, as described by Bernard having been reborn in divine love, both in her prayers for forgiveness and in the fact that her sorrow and penitence have transcended their initial courtly cause. She can therefore best understand the significance of Parzival's suffering in and of itself, both his longing for the perfect conjugal love of Condwî âmûrs, and his yearning to see the grail. Although Parzival remains ignorant of his sins, he has begun to acquire Sigûne's patience in suffering (18) "You did, indeed, lose much joy when you permitted yourself to dealy with the noble question" (441, 20-22). Sigune also sees the only possible solution in God's grace: (19) "Now my His hand help you, to whom all troubles are known. Perhaps you may so far succeed that a trail may take you to where you will see Munsalvaesche.”(442,9-13).
It is no accident that Parzival himself initiates his final encounter with Sigûne, as he, Condwîrmûrs, and his company ride to the grail castle to deliver Anfortas from his suffering and redeem the grail society. He recognizes the landscape. Through his own suffering he has won greater insight. We learn that Sigûne's ascetic piety has transcended her social isolation and is now well known to his retainers -- The words "she is true goodness" are meant as a last, ironic reference to Hartmann's words from the prologue of Iwein. As Groos and Schwietering note, the fact that the company finds Sigûne dead on her knees tells all that she maintained her selfless goodness until death. The balsam smell that wafts from Schîânatulander's tomb and the fact that Sigûne is laid there to rest supply the essential physicality of sainthood. From these motifs the audience would have inferred that Sigûne did in fact rise to the final stage of spiritual development, the "via unitiva," described by Pseudo Dionysius as the "transport of the unfathomable, simple, pure spirit into the brilliant radiance of the divine darkness." It is no accident that Bernard links this stage with the Virgin Mary, when, 'gleaming with heavenly desire, she clothes herself with the beauty of heavenly contemplation." Remember when Parzival first encounters Sigûne, the audience is prompted to view her in terms of her soul's potential. We may assume that Sigûne's soul has approximated Mary’s spiritual perfection through self-abnegation so exemplary as to transcend its initial cause.

V. Parzival and the Book of Experience

The Grail material, whether drawn from Chrétien or Kyot, presented Wolfram with narrative features that made impossible the portrayal of growing congruence between inner development and outward conduct that defines the hero's successful quest in more conventional Arthurian romances such as Erec or Iwein. Parzival's rise and fall from fool to heretic to Grail king confronts the audience with nothing less than Wolfram's provocative exploration of the question of predestination and guilt in the Arthurian quest. Augustinian models explain Iwein's superbia, his fall into madness, and redemption. Augustine's insistence that sins committed in ignorance are less weighty than sins committed with the knowledge and compliance of the will fits Chrétien's Perceval like a glove. When Wolfram makes Parzival ignorant of his mother's death, he is using the grail material for a different purpose, to explore a different spiritual issue, namely, the conundrum of Parzival 's sins of omission which he commits in ignorance, and for which God appears to offer no chance of absolution.
This is Job's dilemma, as Wapniewski has recognized, the medieval Job, the patient sufferer, whose fate was sealed by Adam and Eve.

Knowledge, then, is only of limited usefulness. The retractions offered by Cundrie and Trevrizent are proof of this. Here again we must turn to Bernard, who insisted, as did all of the Church Fathers, that "only love can attain God in this life; knowledge cannot." (McGinn) The questions remains where Sigûne is as flawed as the others appear to be. Her words certainly serve blindness as well as insight. Yes, she does inform Parzival as to his true identity, thus allowing his spiritual quest to begin, but she also willfully misdirects him lest he be killed. Yes, she does tell him of his sword's heritage and castigate him for his failure to ask the question, but she also leads him to believe that he can find the grail castle by following Cundrie. Is Sigûne as flawed an exemplar as the others appear to be? Cundrie is Parzival's Augustinian conscience, Trevrizent his fount of knowledge. Both fail and must apologize to the new Grail King. Sigune's spirituality remains untainted. Her redemption is assured.

What spiritual path does Sigune exemplify? Medieval believers were counseled to seek God in his two books, the Book of God's Works and the Book of God's Words. As McGinn reminds us, "In humanity's unfallen state, the book of creation was fully adequate to teach the necessary truths about God and humans' responsibility to him, but since the fall we are no longer capable of reading "this book properly." Original sin dooms to failure Herzeloyde's heroic attempt to return with Parzival to such a state. The second book, the Book of God's Words, scripture was provided by God to "convey to fallen humanity the mystery of his being and his saving love." Scripture contains all knowledge. The book of God's Words and what they teach us remains the province of Trevrizent, whose function we have already discussed.

Bernard, if we are to believe McGinn, writes his commentary on the Song of Songs in part to explore a third book, the book of experience of God, exemplified in Mary Magdalene's ability to "touch the risen Savior by faith, not by the senses." This experience is synaesthetic and transcends knowledge. It is not exclusively mystical, because it encompasses both the rapture of Paul and the transcendent despair of the Blessed Virgin. If spiritual progress is possible through suffering and introspection in and of themselves, as Sigûne's actions teach us, then Parzival's fall (through a sin of omission) and rise (through suffering and revelation) do indeed define a new path for the Arthurian knight, a new role as Grail King which transcends that of Arthur, and a
new sensibility capable, of uniting the Christian world with its pagan counterpart, as Wolfram seems to imply before retreating into the safety of the comedic marriage of Repanse and Ferefiz. Iwein ascends to Arthurian spiritual perfection by becoming the lion in an ultimate *imitatio Christi*. Parzival’s ascent does not rest on virtuous feats of arms, nor on the fruits of exegesis, but rather on delayed predestination and the ability to suffer until God’s grace is granted. The insight that he gains from Sigûne is the insight that there is no insight, there is only waiting and suffering. Like the Grail Castle, deliverance cannot be sought. It comes to the penitent like the dew to the grass in the blindness of the dark night of the soul.