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| **Weston, Jessie (1850-1928)** |
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| Jessie Laidlay Weston was a British independent scholar and folklorist best known for her influential study *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), which sought to trace the Christian grail legend, specifically the story of the Fisher King, back to pre-Christian origins. Her analysis draws from Sir James Frazer’s comparative study of religion, *The Golden Bough* (1890) and its claim that modern religion evolved from older fertility cults and their rites of the dying god/king. The ‘Cambridge Ritualists’, who also took much inspiration from Frazer, likewise influenced Weston – particularly the work of Jane Ellen Harrison – with their theories of ritual practice and their shared belief that ritual preceded myth, with storytelling always an explanation of older rites. |
| Jessie Laidlay Weston was a British independent scholar and folklorist best known for her influential study *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), which sought to trace the Christian grail legend, specifically the story of the Fisher King, back to pre-Christian origins. Her analysis draws from Sir James Frazer’s comparative study of religion, *The Golden Bough* (1890) and its claim that modern religion evolved from older fertility cults and their rites of the dying god/king. The ‘Cambridge Ritualists’, who also took much inspiration from Frazer, likewise influenced Weston – particularly the work of Jane Ellen Harrison – with their theories of ritual practice and their shared belief that ritual preceded myth, with storytelling always an explanation of older rites. Weston argued that the grail and the legend of the Fisher King had similar ritual, rather than Christian or Celtic, origins. Her claims caused some disagreement in the academy and led to minor conflict with the scholar and mystic A. E. Waite, who argued for grail origins in Christian mysticism. Weston’s work proved popular, though, with books such as *King Arthur and his Knights* (1899) written for a non-academic readership, and her ritual theories (like those of Frazer and Harrison) greatly influenced American and European modernism. T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* cites Weston as a major source, and ostensibly borrows from the legend of the waste land and Fisher King that are *From Ritual to Romance’s* primary focus. Weston’s work also influenced writers such as W. B. Yeats, Virginia Woolf, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Mary Butts.  Much of her career was spent in Europe, living between London and Paris, and she was friends with many respected scholars and folklorists, including Frazer and Harrison, William Ker, Alfred Nutt, John Rhys, Ferdinand Lot, and Gaston Paris, her mentor at the Crystal Palace School of Arts. Her first book, a translation of Wolfram’s *Parzival* in two volumes (1894), was inspired by a performance of *Parsifal* she saw at Bayreuth. She quickly established herself as a respected translator of folkloric and grail texts, with work translating many texts into English for the first time. These included *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1972), *Tristan and Iseult* (1899), *Guingamor, Lanval, Tyloet, Le Bisclaveret* (1900), and *Sir Gawain and the Lady of Lys* (1907). Original translations would also appear in two textbooks, *Romance Vision and Satire* (1912) and *Chief Medieval English Poets* (1914). Translations and articles – many published in *Folk-Lore* – helped her establish the major thesis of her work, which was not for ritual origins of the grail but rather for British Celtic origins of the grail romance itself. It was this claim that proved most controversial in its challenge to scholarship that argued for European origins of the romance in the writing of Chrétien de Troyes. Weston argued that older – but now lost – texts predated de Troyes’ work, and she traced the storytelling back to Wales. Her scholarship was attacked for a lack of evidence but her argument again remained popular. She built her case in *The Legend of Sir Gawain* (1897) – her first study of Arthurian legend – *The Legend of Sir Lancelot* (1901), *The Three Day’s Tournament* (1902), and *The Legend of Sir Percival* (1906, 1909). Her final published book, *From Ritual to Romance*, elaborated her theories, winning the Rose Mary Crawshaw prize of the British Academy, and confirmed her position as the preeminent folklorist of the period. |
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