

The Operation of Sir Galahad in
Thomas Malory's *Tale of the Sankgreal*

Can the Holy Grail Teach Us About Holiness?

Literary and Medieval Context

- Malory's *Arthuriad*: Stories of King Arthur and the Round Table
- The Quest for the Holy Grail (*The Tale of the Sankgreal*)
- Three Grail knights: Perceval, Bors, and Galahad



Literary and Medieval Context

- Malory's source for the *Tale of the Sankgreal*: the French *La Queste del Saint Graal* – a religious text
- Understanding the religious context is fundamental to understanding the narrative.
- In fact, proper interpretation is itself a major motif of the text—the holy reading of the Quest landscape, events, and characters is the only interpretation that makes the Quest possible





Literary and Medieval Context

One significant part of the context of the Quest for the Holy Grail is the reputation and role of King Solomon in the medieval world.

Solomon-*Auctor*

- Discernment
- Administration
- Author:
 - Proverbs
 - Ecclesiastes
 - Song of Songs
- Interpreter of the Torah
- Spiritual educator: 3 books present a progressive education for prepared penitent

Solomon-*Magus*

- Esoteric or hidden and supernatural knowledge of the world
- Magician: using his esoteric knowledge to manipulate reality (potions, objects, etc.)
- Ability to exorcise and control demons, often through a ring with the tetragrammaton

The Perfect Knight on Spiritual Quest

- Galahad is the kind of guy who gives the English word “perfect” a bad name (one of the challenges of understanding “holiness”). Galahad of the Solomon-*Magus* tradition is code and cipher simultaneously.
- Viewed from the Solomon-*Magus* perspective, Galahad “quits” or completes the Grail Quest once and for he—he is unique with attributes beyond the ordinary mortal.
- Galahad of Solomon-*Auctor* tradition, however, gives hope to the ordinary mortal...

The Perfect Knight on Spiritual Quest

Solomon's Christian Education Module as interpreted by St. Bonaventure:

- Proverbs-level: "teaches a son how to live wisely in this world"
- Ecclesiastes-level: "teaches a contempt for present realities"
- Song of Songs-level: "he teaches the love of what is heavenly, especially, of the Bridegroom [Christ] himself"

Monks, recluses, and spiritual advisors of all sorts pop up in the Grail landscape, and they constantly proclaim Galahad's singular attributes as The Grail Knight.

Galahad, however, never makes such a proclamation about himself.



The Perfect Knight on Spiritual Quest

- Galahad's ability to "live wisely in this world" begins before the narrative of the Quest—his genealogy and his upbringing in a convent have provided him this interpretive skill.
- Galahad moves to the Ecclesiastes-level of understanding in the Ship of Solomon episode, when he and his companions leave behind the accoutrements of chivalry to enter the mystical Ship.
- Galahad non-sexual relationship with Percival's Sister (including their embrace at the end of the episode) shows his ability to reject present/chivalric realities for eternal ones.



The Perfect Knight on Spiritual Quest

Origen, early Church Father, on the necessary preparation for the reading of the Song of Songs:

“So indeed, this book occupies the last place, so that a person may come to it when he has been purged in morals and has learned the knowledge and distinction of corruptible and incorruptible things...For with these preliminaries accomplished by which the soul is purified through its act and habits and conducted to the discernment of natural things, the soul comes suitably to doctrines and mysteries, and is led up to the contemplation of the Godhead by a genuine and spiritual love.”

- Galahad witnesses Percival's Sister embrace this level when she allows herself to be bled for the salvation of the the Castle of Maidens.
- Galahad miracles—he embraces the eternally wounded resulting in a healing death.

The Perfect Knight on Spiritual Quest

- Galahad is the only human to actually see the Grail.
- Galahad is embraced by Christ and taken to heaven.

Unlike the French knights in Monty Python, we cannot claim to have our “own” Grail. The Grail Quest occurred once, and the Grail disappeared with Galahad, regardless of what Indiana Jones and Robert Langdon may have found.



But the reader of the Grail Quest can follow the biblical perfection of Galahad-*Auctor* who learns to live wisely in this world, exchanges worldly entanglements for spiritual realities, and, finally, chooses love and lordship of Christ over life itself.

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