

## INTRODUCTION: THE KNIGHT, THE PRINCESS, AND THE JESTER

*Warning: This introduction spoils the comedic events of the piece. It is recommended that you read through the piece through once, and read the Introduction afterwards, and then read the piece one last time.*

For my final project, I chose the creative option, and wrote a piece of Grail Romance literature. Guiding the production of such a narrative was an overarching question: Was the work I was going to hand in ever going to truly reflect real medieval Grail Romance? No. Unlikely. Negatory.

For an undergraduate student to make such a claim to historical veracity is heresy. Even in utilizing all of the knowledge and acumen my undergraduate education at the College of Wooster has offered to me, I could make no such claim. Our comprehension of medieval texts comes from forms of analysis developed long after the medieval world's genres grew out of fashion.

So, how do we read medieval texts, then? Answering this question was tantamount to me being able to actually start such a creative piece, for it would elucidate where in the narrative I would need to draw upon medieval themes and tropes, and where I would need to write by the seat of my pants. In producing a Grail Romance story for your viewing pleasure, I had to recognize our own ability to fill in the gaps left by the passage of time between cultures old and current.

Life experience is a good place to start. My experience in Siena this past summer informed much of my physical understanding of the medieval world. Travel is a great educator, for the fatigue we suffer in a world alien to us produces visions of people known only to us from the past. We begin to, as we walk the streets of cities inhabited for thousands of years, understand the lives of our ancestors in a different manner. No longer are we interested in the actions of great men on battlefields. Our attention turns toward the normal. The furniture kept tidy by an innkeeper. The dull and drab meeting agenda of

the city council. The morning path of the baker's daughter as she descends the hills to fetch water. In living amongst the relics, we become privy to the concinnity of life, from ancient to medieval to now.

No, we cannot ever have the same deep comprehension of these texts that an actual medieval citizen would have. But we can learn from these texts how these people thought, and through that venue, get even a small glimpse at their ways of understanding the world. And through physically embodying their toil, we can understand how their bodies would have moved, acted, and navigated this world.

But for all of the toil I suffered and philosophy I understood, there still remains the question of how one can communicate this to a modern mind—one who has not devoted themselves mind body and soul to the lessons of the medieval world—and keep such information relevant. Accuracy, I find, is the crux of this issue. Without accuracy in reporting findings, the veracity and integrity of the wisdom being communicated by literature is reparably damaged.

Yet, modern ears are not always appreciative of every detail of the past. Do we lose something in presenting that which our audience only finds palpable? Is there wisdom in something so far removed from their daily lives? Are they right to deny these thoughts space in their minds, when they are so concerned with the necessities of life at this very moment? As with everything, there is a balance. What that balance is changes, and has been changing. History helps us see what a good life is. Lives change and morph, are born, and yet die.

In writing *The Knight, the Jester, and the Princess*, I wanted to both capture and transcend the literature we had read in class about the Holy Grail. Grail literature, as with many Romantic Epics, contained within them a set of tropes that any peruser of the genre would be able to identify. If one constructed a story whose telling invoked such tropes, whose themes of purity and chasteness seemed similar enough to that of other medieval stories, whose embracing of tone matched that of medieval texts'—then you could tell an entertaining story that retained the *spirit* of the medieval.

The recurring themes and motifs I decided to embrace in this story were each chosen intentionally. Using them, I built a medieval sandbox in which a modern author could build something similar enough to the medieval.

First comes the device of inscription. Seen in *Gawain and the Green Knight* (22), *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (5), and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* (479), inscription in a poem provided an opportunity for an author to leave their mark on a story. Many medieval texts existed as a part of a much larger oral literary tradition, so in inscribing one's self into the work, the author could establish themselves in that genre as well. I invoke this at the beginning of my own poem as a way of letting the audience know why I am writing it, and to characterize it more as something I wrote.

Grail Literature has a certain fascination with the Fey. Fairies, magic, and forests. Malory's *La Morte Darthur* heavily relies upon the knights of the round table having to venture into the woods in pursuit of their quests, finding huts out of thin air, being accosted by damsels in distress, and encountering trickster gnomes and dwarves wherever they turn. In *Gawain and the Green Knight*, the eponymous Green Knight is green as a symbol of his belonging to the world of the fey. Forests are another world in medieval literature. Where much of the earth is of the mundane and separated from the realms of magic, the forest seems to be a liminal space between earth and heaven where the spirit is in constant warfare with the arcane nature of the wild. This is why in my own poem, much of the magic that occurs inside of the forests is unquestioned and glossed over by the protagonists: they would have been acutely aware of the character the woods have, just as the characters in Grail Literature were aware of the magic in their own local woods.

The connection between purity, womanhood, and spirituality is directed interrogated through the Grail Narrative. Women in medieval literature tend to fall into one of two archetypes: either they are dutiful and therefore pure (i.e.: Dame Ragnelle of *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*), or deceitful and therefore corrupt (Meed of *Piers Plowman*). Women can transition from one archetype

to the other depending on what the story requires, as seen in the case of Guinevere (who transitions from the pure archetype to the corrupt because of her affair with Lancelot), or in the case of women such as Mary Magdalene (in which Christ can redeem a woman through salvation to be pure once more). In many tales, there is a direct correlation between a woman's chasteness and her level of purity. Having sex out of wedlock is bad in tales such as *The Romance of Tristan*.

Despite this, there was a certain understanding of the reality of sexual activity among medieval people. In the story, the purity of the Princess is called into question, and because she loses her purity, the trio is unable to achieve the Holy Grail. Despite this, she is not scorned for her loss of purity. I believe that this accurately reflects the ambivalent disposition many medieval peasants likely had towards sexuality and virginity as a sign of purity, as evidenced by medieval plays which joke fun at stuffy poetry's depiction of women as serene and pure (*Second Shepherds' Play*; *Saga of the Mantle*).

The question of the connection between purity, woman, and spirituality come under assault when The Lady in Black (my stand-in for Morgan le Fay) uses deception and magic to turn the Princess' purity against her. In surviving, she loses her chastity through an implied sexual encounter with the Jester offscreen, but loses the kingdom's chance to claim the grail. This works to adhere to a number of medieval devices: Women cannot achieve the grail because original sin stemmed from Eve; Losing one's chastity is not unforgivable; A woman compromising her purity must have some sort of narrational repercussion for her actions.

Questions of purity and what it takes to be worthy of the grail are at the forefront of discussion in my own grail narrative. Towards the end of the story, the heroes are only able to obtain the grail through the maintenance of their purity, sometimes even sacrificing their limbs to do so. No matter what, those who are impure never are able to achieve the grail. This is a truth that maintains itself throughout the entirety of grail fiction.

As with most medieval literature, my job as an author was to provide a story that could operate within this bounds while at the same time providing a twist. In Malory's *La Morte D'Arthur*, the grail cannot be achieved by any knight with sin. Even Lancelot, who is the best knight of all, fails in his quest. So, I too had to have my archetype of the knight. Accompanying him is a woman who functions somewhat similarly to a damsel.

Finally, we come to speaking about the intentionality behind the rhyming structure of the septains of this piece. I did this to mimic the plight of a translator who is stuck between adhering to the original verse, all while trying to maintain the spirit of the verse in modern English. Exasperated? So was he.

Onward: to the poem!

## THE KNIGHT, THE JESTER, AND THE PRINCESS

Since my master of Medieval Literature wishes me to begin a creative piece,  
I shall do most willingly, like any student in the service,  
of one who holds power over the very fate of their final grade.  
Perhaps he will smile upon me,  
Just as the Lord our God smiles upon sinners,  
And bless me good grades, instead of an attitude most rime,  
In exchange for an evening well spent with poems and rhyme.

Long after the fires of Troy died out,  
After Aneas, poor Romulus and Remus built Rome,  
Rose a kingdom on a small island, far off,  
Where Britons; among them, the greatest King to ever live,  
Conquered the earth, and stood still the flood of evil,  
Warriors of purity, protectors of the purest kingdom  
That to this say, whose history still sways the rulers of the Isle.

In a land long after the King of Kings reigned,  
Somewhere on the Isle of Briton there was slain,  
Two Kings, brothers, and the first one's first son,  
And from that fratricide, a battle was won,  
Now King John, of a snowy land up north,  
Rules over the south, of Avalon on earth,  
And seeks to restore his kingdom.

One spring morning, they crowned their new King,  
who approached his council with a decree: "To all in all kingdoms,  
and all in all lands, I vow that I will see this kingdom restored.  
I have for my youth studied the tales of those who came before,  
of a King among Kings who although he now resides in Avalon,  
of a relic of power which certified his prosperity.  
Claim it, and we too shall be rich in life as he."

To this end good King John choose from among his castle  
A team of those who would be fit for the quest;  
A Knight, whose armor glistened, shining bright and proud,  
whose humility and prowess knew no limits;  
A Princess, whose purity cast an aura of light in the dark,  
whose touch was so holy as to be worthy of even the grail;

And finally a Jester, a most controversial picking.  
Said the King: "certainly a man to who lives in fiction,  
Should be comfortable on this quest for a relic.  
And thought the King, secretly to himself:  
Jesters make fools of rulers, gods, and priests,  
Perhaps the grail will teach this one a lesson,

Or teach it to the others, should he not survive.

2.

On the seventh month of the seventh day of the year,  
the team departed into the forest, and in mere days,  
were lost among its many leaves, branches, and winding paths.  
The Knight prayed to The Lord: "Show us the way,"  
The Princess clutched her cross: "Mary, give me strength,"  
The Jester laughed, and walked on, no stranger to dirt,  
Peasant-born, Peasant-wise, learned of the earth.

Deep in the woods, smoke arose during the day,  
And the Knight, the Princess, and the Jester followed the trail,  
Coming across a mysterious and mystical clearing.  
Contained was a hamlet, and in it, a building large and grey.  
With plowman in the field who welcomed the trio to this land:  
"Welcome, friend, lady, and knight, to the Abbey of Dirk".

The group there kept walking towards the grey building:  
A castle, where smoke billowed out of the tallest tower, on hills  
Covered with clover, without shadow touching the ground,  
Approached first the Knight, then the Lady, and the Clown.  
From out of the tower came a Lady, dressed in black,  
Whose face was pale, and eyes placid white,  
"Seek here your grail? Leave, you do not deserve it."

"By god," said The Knight, "We are here for the truth,  
How do you, lone matron in the woods, judge for the Grail?  
Careful we must be of anyone who claims its power,  
For its inheritance belongs to a King of the people,  
Whose actions show incorruptible purity inside,  
And if you stand to besmirch my quest for my King,  
you will wound more than simply my pride."

"Very well," spoke The Lady in Black, grinning wide,  
"I will assist you in this perilous quest, Knight.  
But do know now that you have heard my warning,  
Men such as yourself can do nothing but fail,  
And a woman of only purity cannot perform such a feat,  
As a woman's true power comes from deceit."

"I hid it because of evil, because of mad men on earth,  
Unmighty are Kings who love owning naught but foul dirt,  
Beseeching the Lord on High with their songs, and prayer,  
their poems, their literature, O so very scared,  
Of the judgement of their peers, where the Lord's is *supreme*,  
So seek they relics of power; of glitter, of gleam.

You'll find nothing here: go to the cavern downstream."

3.

They took travel to the cavern, right where the Lady said it would be,  
And The Knight at once jumped in, to pursue his King's dream.  
With trepidation the Princess followed him, step for step,  
But meanwhile the Jester, who stayed outside, took a nap.  
At the end of the cavern, the Knight found the Dragon Gungahir,  
A monster of two heads, who was eating entire maidens bare.  
The Dragon captured the Princess, and fought the Knight with flair.

Cutting the beast's neck, severing its head from its torso, the Knight  
Stood victorious, Princess saved and battle won, if only for a moment  
Before in wild vengeance, the Dragon's brood attacked the Knight,  
And pierced his shield with their teeth, strong and with might  
Inherited from giants that used to roam the Promised Land,  
With the loss of a hand, the Knight killed this new foul beast.  
Saving the Princess, a naked Maiden, but finding no grail.

Wounded and wound up, the trio left the cavern,  
retreating to the Abbey of Dirk in the dark, with loss on their mind,  
For without his shield or even his hand, how was The Knight  
supposed to fight for his king, for his kingdom, or this earth?  
And yet with victory in their hearts, they were received  
With a commotion, and the plowman gave the heroes lodging and food,  
For returning their daughter and slaying the Dragon's brood.

Only one person was angered by their return: The plowman's wife,  
who wanted nothing more than to savor ever bite of food,  
for the winter, which was coming with due time,  
And yet here were three fools, chowing down on her husband's work  
"No more," she screamed, and sent the three to their den,  
And in the morning, they approached the tower on the hill again.

"My Lady," spoke the Princess, "Perhaps we did not explain,  
That we needed this grail, and not quests given of disdain?  
I would like some wisdom as to where we should journey,  
Or else I fear we will grow quite weary, for our battles  
exhaust even the most embodying of sloth of our trio;  
and guests should never live in fear for their lives:  
these are the basics of etiquette, for women, and wives."

The Lady in Black, who had not wanted to listen,  
Beckoned the Princess closer, accepting this bargain.  
"Thus I am brought into your worldly quest,  
Not by my decision, but as your status as my guest.  
Distress follows those who seek the grail, the gift,



but alas: I will tell you, if only because I am miffed.  
Go to the Black Tower, and in the basement, sift."

4.

But in the Black Tower, which reached into the sky,  
The trio found nothing, save for a Gnome,  
Who asked them a riddle filled with malice, in glee:  
"I am a wonderful help to man,  
harming only that which threatens my lord.  
Yet, I cannot speak, and have no sword.  
What am I?"

The Knight replied: "A Steed?"  
The Jester questioned: "Coin?"  
But the Princess came up with the answer for both  
men: "A Hound. They hunt for their master, and have  
no weapons but their teeth." At this the spirit laughed:  
"My, what a brain! What shame then  
that you have been led astray again."

So back to the town the trio wandered,  
this time, without regard,  
For the rules of high society, and lady's society  
had failed both Knight and Princess.  
Up to the test now was a man neither had thought  
keen: the Jester, a man common and glib.  
He approached the Lady in Black in a small jig.

"My Lady," spoke the Jester, "Perhaps you can explain,  
To I, poor sod, who have nothing to gain,  
In understanding why the grail is deserved,  
To who it is ascribed, or towards what end preserved.  
Can a normal, unassuming commoner like me,  
Ever *honestly* make use of a power so holy?  
I think fools understand such truth not entirely."

"Your body and soul are ill formed for this task,  
But yet you drink from Dedication's flask;  
It is pointless to endeavor you away from the grail.  
But this is a task where Death awaits those who fail.  
In the woods, o'er an altar across a bridge,  
Lies the Grail, and with it, the lord's image,  
Of God's kingdom on earth, to whoever pays it homage."

5.

Deep in the forest, just where the Lady said it would be,

Was bridge across a ravine, to a hill filled with moss.  
Atop it was an altar, with a sparkling chalice housed inside.  
But the bridge was protected by a man standing tall,  
Covered in Green stripes, his armor clad in emerald.  
The Knight challenged the Green Man, to a battle of skill,  
That whoever disarmed the other won passage to the hill.

The Knight fought the Green Man, straight to a standstill,  
Trading blows, clashing swords, and hurriedly dodging.  
For two days these men fought without tire,  
While the Jester and the Princess looked on, until  
The Jester shot his arrow straight into the Green Man's eye.  
Blinded, the Knight severed the man's left hand,  
And won the duel, without killing the man.

The Princess gave haste to travel across the bridge,  
She climbed the altar, and seized her prize,  
Holding the Grail high for her companions to see,  
When from out of the shadows, a foe arrived, frenzied.  
The Lady in Black laughed very loudly, for she had won:  
In picking up the Grail, the Princess was cursed,  
To never see the bridge, for her Purity was now terse.

An enchantress to the end, she chuckled wildly,  
While the Bridge disappeared for those with purity.  
"The Grail has proven you only to be worthy of punishment,  
As I foresaw before, your failure was in your hunt.  
All mad men seek are baubles and the sublime,  
Focused on the item, never understanding their crime:  
A cliff requiring *faith* is not for the impure to climb."

She twirled and whisked away into the darkness of the brush,  
Leaving the Princess blind as a bat, and the Knight, crushed,  
Beneath the weight of his failure, and incompetency,  
for the bridge out had vanished; it was nowhere to be seen.  
Gone too was the grail for which they had so tirelessly quest,  
One more feature of their protector's failed test,  
Our heroes, now prisoners, stood under an enchantress's hex.

One lone soul could still see the way out:  
The Jester, whose soul was black and ached of gout.  
He had a fast plan, darting across the bridge with fright,  
Took the hand of the Princess, rushing her out of sight,  
returned an hour later, revealing that he had kissed her just right.  
The Knight, having lost his charge's chastity,  
could now see the bridge, in its entirety.

6.

As they left, the Jester was accosted by a damsel  
Who flew out of the trees, falling on the ground ahead,  
“You have lost the grail, but gained a lesson,”  
She exclaimed, with sorrow on her brow.  
“You have one more chance to gain it back,  
But only if you kill the one who made Princess wail.”  
With a tepid thought of the evil that he would do,  
The Knight drew his blade, and the Jester ducked under a Yew.

But no mere Jester could escape from a Knight vexed.  
The Jester made merry trying to joke through this test,  
All while the Damsel stood by and watched with glee,  
Struck once, struck twice, suddenly the Knight’s blade swung free!  
Straight into the Yew the Knight’s sword was now stuck,  
Quite a difficult shot to aim with the Jester amok,  
Turning to the damsel, he dashed, and he ducked.

The Knight picked up the damsel with care, and yet ease,  
Speaking loudly, all while she bellowed and wheezed.  
“Fair damsel, you ask of me a task I cannot mete,  
While Jester’s true actions were ones made in great heat,  
And corrupted a Princess whose purity I swore to protect,  
She did it of her own free will: this I must respect.  
For women deserve choice. No matter how bullnecked.

So do not ask me to kill a man who brought her no dread,  
Begone you foul wench”. He put her down; she fled.  
Now freed of the burden of impurity, the lot,  
The Knight, Princess, Jester, devoid of what they sought,  
Trudged out of the forest, and back to their ruler to plea,  
Where despite their failure, they were met with mercy.  
A fine return home for the adventurers three.

See dear reader, this was an ample reward.  
Mercy for punishments instead of the King’s sword.  
For good kings praise those who succeed very well,  
Instead of punishing indiscriminately those who fail,  
For The Lord on high will judge all when time comes,  
It is not the realm of mortal men to mimic what God drums,  
But to listen; learn; find salvation’s anthem.

AMEN!