Galahad, Perceval, and the Holy Grail: Crash Course World Mythology #28

Crash Course: World Mythology
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Hi there. I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Mythology, and today we're going to talk about the Holy Grail...of Mythology. Which is the actual, literal, non-metaphorical Holy Grail. King Arthur, Knights of the Round Table, and most importantly, questing.

The Holy Grail is always just out of reach, it's the end of the road, the ultimate goal the greatest adventure. And so the Grail quest, for whoever takes it, is a ready-made hero's journey. No. Nobody. It's a grail, not a scale. Close though.

In this video, we'll talk about two different knights who quested after that pesky grail, and we'll examine two things. First, where these stories depart from Campbell's monomythic pattern. And second, how they combine the values of Christianity with the tropes and characters of pre-Christian myths.

Grab your armor, and your coconut halves, and let's quest for knowledge.

[Opening music]

The legends of King Arthur and his knights have been retold endlessly from the Middle Ages through today. Many versions of the story contradict each other or change focus. Historians even disagree over whether there was a real, living, breathing King Arthur.

That doesn't bother us though, because either way the body of Arthurian legends remains incredibly influential. Most of the stories that make up Arthurian hero myths come from the late Medieval period, the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. They coalesced in what most of us would recognize as Arthur's tale with Merlin, and Lancelot, and Guinevere, and all the rest, in Thomas Malory's late 15th century stories collected as *Le Morte D'Arthur.*

However we're going to focus on two other version of the grail story centered around two other knights, Percival and Galahad. To explore this paradigmatic legend of England, we're gonna start in France. Because the first time the Holy Grail appears as part of the Arthurian myth is in Chretien De Troyes' "Story of the Grail," a romance composed between 1181 and 1191 CE.

De Troyes not only made his Arthurian tale about the quest for the elusive grail, he also made Percival, and not Arthur or any other knight, the hero. And Percival is maybe not the kind of knight you're used to. He's a very brave young man, but he's not the sharpest lance in the armory. And it also turns out that his chivalry and naivety play big parts in his hero's journey.

When our story begins Percival is living alone with his mom in the Waste Forest, which sounds unpleasant and almost like a Fallout location. Percival is an only child to a single mom because his dad and all his older brothers were killed serving as knights. Percival's mom never tells him this. She's all he has left and she worries that if young, not-so-bright Percy learns the truth, he'll want to be a knight and he'll get himself killed too.

Mom's plan works, until one day Percy's out hunting, and he comes across five glittering figures on horses. They are literal knights, in literal shining armor. But Percy has no idea what a knight is, because his mom has shielded him from them. So he thinks they must be angels. Like I said, not the sharpest.

Once he realizes they're not angels, Percival starts asking the knights a ton of questions, like "Whatcha carryin'?" The knights look at each other like, "It's a lance, dude." Eventually one of the knights leans over to his commander and says "Sir, you must be aware that all Welshmen are by nature more stupid than beasts in the field." Percy's not making the best first impression.

Percival runs home and tells his mom all about the knights. She sees the writing on the wall, so she breaks down and she tells him the truth: "Your father and your brothers were knights and they died because of it."

Percy's eyes light up. It doesn't seem like he gets the moral of the story. He says, literally, "I don't understand your words, but I would gladly go to the king who makes knights; and I will go, no matter what."

So off he goes on his quest, never to see his mother again. Right out of the gate, Percy gets in a fight with a knight, and defeats him in solo battle. So, maybe he's got heroic talent after all. Shortly after, he encounters an old nobleman. In classic spiritual adviser fashion, the old man teaches Percy a lesson. "Don't talk too much because you don't want to offend others." Percy takes this to heart and you should too. It's going to come back and bite him.

We're going to continue Percy's quest in the Thought Bubble.

Percival next meets the Fisher King. Who is, you guessed it, fishing. FK takes a shine to Percy, and invites him to a special banquet at his castle. At dinner Percy finds out the king has been grievously wounded, and is on death's door. None the less the Fisher King, a gracious host, presents a sword he claims was destined for Percival.

Suddenly a progression of squires parade in with all of these weird objects. First a white lance with blood dripping from it's tip. Next, a candelabra. After that a maiden enters bearing a beautiful grail. Psst... That's the Holy Grail y'all.

Everyone turns, and looks at Percy. The good, obedient boy that he is, he remembers the weird old stranger's advice and he doesn't say a thing. Dinner wraps up, and Percival goes on his way. Everything seems fine, until he meets a damsel wailing and cradling the body of a headless knight.

Percival asks what happened, but the maiden turns on him. She asks point blank, "Did you say anything about the lance you saw? Did you ask any questions about the grail?" Percy explains, "Of course not!" He didn't want to be rude. The woman yells at him. "That grail has great power! If you'd only asked about it - just one question - the dying king would have been healed."

She further explains "Hey, your mom's dead. I buried her. Also, I'm your cousin. And also, also, you gotta suss out this grail thing. I can't help, I got more burying to do. See ya; wouldn't want to be ya."

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So, this is a lot to take in. Getting told off by his cousin, though, is Percival's turning point. He swears an oath. He won't rest until he learns what exactly the deal with the grail and the bleeding lance is. Such is the start of his grail quest, which lasts five years.

He has wild adventures, meeting knights, doing battle, and even learning a lesson about the meaning of Good Friday. This sets up the particularly Christian faith-based conclusion of this particular tale. Because eventually Percival comes across a wise hermit. And after years of questing with nothing to show for it, Percy confesses his sorrow.

It turns out the hermit knows why Percival has failed. "Remember your mom?" He asks. "As soon as you left home she died of grief. That sinfulness is why you never asked about the lance or grail." And the man who was served from the grail? Percival's uncle. And the Fisher King? Percy's cousin! He's been letting his family down left and right. The hermit tells him, "You need to do penance. Go to

mass. Have faith in God. Take communion on Easter."

This is where Chretien De Troyes' version of the grail story ends, with Percival learning the truth about the grail, and thereby fulfilling his oath.

You may have noticed all the standard features of Campbell's hero's journey. Auspicious birth and hidden parentage, damsels, and father figures, sages offering advice. But the grail never becomes the ultimate boon. Percy doesn't find it. He isn't even really looking for it. Instead, he's looking for knowledge. "Of the grail!" you may interject, but really about himself and the world. You can also see the way Christianity gets wrapped up in the mythical grail.

Let's look at another version of this story from the anonymously written "Quest of the Holy Grail," a thirteenth century prose romance. The story differs from Chretien's in at least two major ways. First, the hero isn't Percival, it's Galahad. And second, while Percival didn't know much about Christianity or anything for that matter, Galahad is a model of Christian virtue, especially chastity. That's important. This version has an overtly Christian morality, connecting the grail to the doctrine of transubstantiation, the explanation of how bread and wine morphs into Jesus' body and blood during communion.

In this story, our hero Galahad is the son of Lancelot, and Galahad is beautiful. So fair and shapely a youth that one could hardly find his equal in the world. He's also crucially a virtuous virgin with no fever of lust in him, unlike his dad Lancelot. Sleeping with the Queen, how disvirtuous.

Galahad's virtue marks him out for a special role that he's ushered into by a spiritual guide. An old man who introduces Galahad to Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Galahad even gets a special seat reserved for the grail knight. It's called The Seat of Danger, (danger, danger).

So Galahad sits in his danger chair and announces that he'll take up the grail quest. He proves his worthiness first by pulling a sword from a stone, echoing Arthur’s miraculous feat with Excalibur, and again by defeating all the other knights in a tournament. At a celebratory feast the grail appears in a vision and miraculously feeds everyone, especially hungry, hungry Arthur. Galahad and the other knights have many adventures, but the crucial turn comes when Galahad, Percival, and a knight named Bors set out on a self-sailing ship.

The ship takes them to a small island where they find a magic sword and Percival's sister. She says hi to Percy, and explains, "This sword is destined for Galahad. To complete your quest you must take it to the house of the maimed king." Which is harder than it sounds, and that's saying a lot because it doesn't sound easy.

It takes five years of running around separating, reuniting, but finally the three knights arrive at the castle of the maimed king, Castle Corbenic, the castle of the grail. And who do they meet inside? Jesus. That is not a joke. They literally meet Jesus, who explains at long last the mystery and significance of the grail.

“It is the bowl from which Jesus Christ ate of the lamb on Easter day with his disciples. This is the bowl which has served acceptably all those whom I have found serving me; this is the bowl which no faithless man ever beheld without suffering for it. And because it has thus served all manner of people acceptable, it is properly called the Holy Grail. Now thou has seen what thou has so desired to see and what thou has coveted.”

With the truth of the grail revealed, Galahad continues to travel the land, embroiled in various adventures. (?~11:05) return home, however, Galahad never makes it home to Camelot. Instead he ends up locked in a dungeon, where he eventually dies and is miraculously lifted to Heaven. So it's left to Bors to cross the threshold back into Camelot and to tell everyone the true wonder of the grail.

Obviously there's more to these Arthurian myths than just the quest for the Holy Grail. We haven't even mentioned the incest, and there's a fair amount of incest. Still, the grail myths offer a nice parallel to other hero myths. Miraculous feats, magical weapons, spiritual guides, and epic road trips.

In the end, the quest for a particular object gets intertwined with the articulation of particular religious and cultural values. Just like in the Ramayana, where adherence to dharma is the real heroism. We might also compare these stories to the Aboriginal tale of The Seven Sisters where the quest is one of self-improvement rather than the pursuit of some external wealth or precious object.

For Percival and Galahad, the quest isn't about the grail itself, but the grail's meaning. Perceval isn't seeing a bejeweled golden chalice, but the answer to a question he should've asked. Galahad too finds out the meaning of the grail, which is what Bors must bring back to the round table.

Remember, for Campbell and other scholars the hero's journey is a metaphor for any human being's journey towards greater understanding of themselves. Sure, these knights defeat enemies and save maidens and fight with magical swords, but they're heroes because of the knowledge they gain along the way.

Which I guess makes you a hero for watching Crash Course, which we're mighty thankful you do. We'll see you next time.

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Thanks for watching, and if you have a lot of questions about the woman holding the headless knight, you're not alone, and trust us, reading the source material does not help.