

# “MOLT GREIGNOUR SENEFIANCE”

## THE ROLE OF INTERPRETERS IN *THE QUEST OF THE HOLY GRAIL*

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### *Abstract*

In the 13<sup>th</sup>-century French romance *The Quest of the Holy Grail* various interpreters appear, who—through Christian hermeneutics—explain to the knights of the quest their dreams, visions, prophecies, etc. The present article discusses the question of the source of authority of the interpreters, and analyzes in the text itself the foundations of such an authority. One of the most important starting points is the presupposition that the procedures of biblical exegesis influenced the romance and the image of the interpreter.

*Keywords:* hermeneutics, Middle Ages, quest, interpreter, biblical exegesis.

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**»Molt greignour senefiance«. Vloga interpretov v *Iskanju svetega Grala***

*Povzetek*

V francoskem viteškem romanu *Iskanje svetega Grala* iz 13. stoletja se pojavljajo različni interpreti, ki s pomočjo krščanske hermenevtike razlagajo potujočim vitezom njihove sanje, vizije, prerokbe itd. Pričujoči članek razpravlja o vprašanju vira avtoritete takšnih interpretov in analizira temelje za tako avtoriteto v samem besedilu. Ena izmed najpomembnejših izhodiščnih predpostavk razpravljanja je, da so postopki biblične eksegeze vplivali na roman in podobo interpreta.

*Ključne besede:* hermenevtika, srednji vek, iskanje, interpret, biblična eksegeza.

Za Andreja

*The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,  
And comes from a country far away as health.*

Sylvia Plath: "Tulips"

## Introduction

The medieval culture is strongly based on the reverence for authority and tradition. At the moment of the creation of medieval romances of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the medieval intellectual trusts in thinkers and texts that precede him. One of the key influences upon medieval literature derives from the *Bible*: a medieval writer and reader approach their text in a similar manner as they would approach a biblical text. They need an interpreter or a translator, someone, who can vouch for the meaning of the events (images, prophecies, dreams, visions) encountered by the heroes of the quest. A trustworthy authority is required, upon which they can rely in dealing with a text as submerged in religious tradition as *The Quest of the Holy Grail*.

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Since *The Quest of the Holy Grail* (written in the first decades of the 13<sup>th</sup> century) is a text with a strong religious connotation, the chance of an allegorical reading of the episodes depicted therein is much more important than, for instance, in various other romances of the same period. During their enterprises, the knights of the Round Table chance upon a plethora of consecrated individuals (hermits, nuns, priests, etc.), who disclose the hidden meanings behind the visions and dreams presented to them by erring adventurers. It is the precisely interpreters who assure to the quest a holy nature and to the heroes their place in the economy of Redemption.

The article aims to develop the question of authority bestowed upon different interpreters appearing in the course of the quest. Where does said authority come from, what are its origins? We try to tackle this question with the aid of Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy and wonder what are the hermeneutical mechanisms that support the role of interpreters in the process of the quest.

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In the first part of the article, we try to outline the cultural and literary context, in which the romance occurs. We concentrate on the creative power of Chrétien de Troyes, the first author ever to write about the Grail, and subsequently pass onwards to the presentation of cycle *Lancelot-Grail* (*The Quest of the Holy Grail* being a crucial part of the cycle).

In the second part, we discuss the role of the concept of authority in the medieval cultural context and, above all, its role in the romance *The Quest of the Holy Grail*. Here, we refer to the theory of Hans-Georg Gadamer in an attempt to show where the authority of interpreters in the romance derives from.

In the last part of the paper, we aim to show that the authority of an interpreter, since the medieval intellectual is educated in the devoted study of the *Bible*, can be considered as being at least partially rooted in the tradition of biblical exegesis.

### ***The Quest of the Holy Grail: a romance of the 13<sup>th</sup> century***

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When the novel entitled *The Quest of the Holy Grail* (*La Queste del Saint Graal*)<sup>1</sup> was written—approximately 1225–1230 (*Dictionnaire*, 1212)—, the French medieval literary space had already been profusely acquainted with the legend of the Grail. The first writer to thematize this unique symbol was an amazingly talented storyteller Chrétien de Troyes. Sadly, as it happens with many medieval authors, the exact dates of his birth and death escape us. It is fair to say that he lived in the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, creating at the courts of Marie de Champagne and, later on, Philippe d'Alsace. Today, we acknowledge his status of one of the most esteemed medieval writers, who contributed greatly to the birth of a new literary genre—the novel.

Since the scope of the article does not allow us to delve deeper into this however intriguing subject, suffice it to say that Chrétien de Troyes established a form, dependent on the notion known as *conjointure* (the term itself is practically impossible to translate in any other language, but it could be, for lack

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1 Throughout the entire contribution, we quote the English translation of Pauline M. Matarasso. The French edition of the romance—in a bilingual publication comprising the original of *l'ancien français* and the translation into modern French language—can be found in: *Le Livre*, 809–1177.

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of better translation, translated as “composition”) and nowadays recognized as medieval romance. He brought the genre to its peak by way of evolution of both style as well as contents (cf. Berthelot 1989, 70).

Although Chrétien de Troyes without question represents medieval creativity at its best, he was far from being the first to thematize the so-called “matière de Bretagne” (the name given to the complex of stories about King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table, which were very popular with the cultivated medieval public). In the literary form, the image of King Arthur namely for the first time occurs in the work entitled *The History of the Kings of Britain* (*Historia Regum Britanniae*), written in 1135 by Geoffrey of Monmouth, a cleric active at the court of Henry II and his sophisticated wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine. The stories about the king of Brits and his valiant knights took the British public by a storm, and twenty years later, a French cleric Wace (ca. 1110–after 1174) wrote the first Arthurian romance in a vernacular language *Roman de Brut* (Wace is widely known to be the first to introduce into literature the motive of the Round Table).

None of the diligent medieval romance writers, however, ever rose to the imaginative heights of Chrétien de Troyes: he swept the public off its feet by his masterful use of language and by the richness of the content he introduced. With his exceptional talent, he scooped the stories, the themes, and the heroes already present in his intellectual environment and created artistically accomplished works of art that even today stun us with their psychological complexity and poignancy. He is the author of such iconic Arthurian romances as *Yvain or the Knight of the Lion* (*Yvain ou le Chevalier au lion*; 1177–1181) and *Lancelot or The Knight of the Cart* (*Lancelot ou le Chevalier de la charrette*; 1177–1181), etc. His romances are coherent and stylistically brilliant far beyond the level usually attained in the writings of his contemporaries (cf. Poirion 1994, XLIII). To offer even the most condense summary of Chrétien’s body of work and artistry, we would require an exhaustive digression from our logical path, which is something we will do our best to avoid. We will, therefore, satisfy ourselves by saying that Chrétien de Troyes represents the so-called Renaissance of the 12<sup>th</sup> century at its best:<sup>2</sup> by remaining a full-blown humanist

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2 Anyone who wants to acquaint themselves with this extraordinary and often still

throughout, he puts at the center of his romances a hero, a young knight, who wants to achieve extraordinary acts of extreme courage being incessantly on the lookout for the so-called *aventure* (adventure), for the opportunity of personal and military growth. Chrétien's heroes are (and this distinguishes them from numerous other heroes in medieval literature) full-blooded people. They each have their own personalities, and, during the adventure, undergo a serious personal development, which usually enables them to become not only strong rulers in their own right, but also sophisticated lovers, who know how to treasure their *amie* and prove to be the beacon of fidelity and chivalry. Each romance by Chrétien de Troyes promotes a problem, a central question highlighted throughout the work of art that, therefore, assures to the tale a thematic, ideological (should we say philosophical?), and purely stylistic unity rarely achieved in Chrétien's contemporaries (cf. Pauphilet 1950, 143–144). Romances authored by him are not merely enumerations of events, of heroic enterprises, and of romantic tales without the central *fil rouge*; through his artistic (and probably also personal) development, they become true precursors of the modern novel. Chrétien's heroes are by no means one-dimensional characters that we often encounter in medieval literature: they possess depth and complexity, they are embryonic prefigurations of the modern individual, they have their own strengths as well as their own faults, and their personal growth is the generator of the events in the story. We could discuss Chrétien's talent at length, but since the topic of this paper does not concern solely his immensely engaging opus, we will limit ourselves to saying that he is one of the greatest contributors to the development of the modern novel as well as to the development of the modern literary hero. One of his indubitably most influential romances is, however, precisely *Perceval or The Story of the Grail* (*Perceval ou le Conte du Graal*).

In *Perceval*, as in every work by Chrétien de Troyes, we meet a hero who is unique and original. Perceval is one of the most intriguing personas in medieval

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overlooked period in the medieval history is kindly invited to read the classical treatise by Charles Homer Haskins entitled *The Renaissance of the 12th Century* (cf. 1971), which by all means remains one of basic readings for a scholar desirous of a profounder understanding of cultural, philosophical, and political tendencies in the period in question.

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(possibly even world) literature. At the beginning of the romance, its eponymic hero is a young, inexperienced, somewhat naïve beginner, who, stunned by the image of the knights, wants to become a knight himself. Hidden from the world by his bereaved mother, who wants to spare her son the fate of his older brothers and of his father, all killed in chivalric conflicts, he has no knowledge of chivalry, of proper manners, of love, and of religion. When he enters King Arthur's court, he is met with contempt and ridicule. Later on, chivalry and its ideals are introduced to him by Gornemant de Goor, while courtly love and its finesses are revealed to him through the love relationship with Blanchefleur. However, the most important trial is the visit of the Fisher King. When he witnesses the mysterious procession, in which the Grail appears for the first time in Western literature, he never asks his host the infamous question he should have asked to save the maimed king and the devastated country under his reign. Perceval fails, and the task he was supposed to accomplish remains unfulfilled. Stricken by his ill fortune, he goes on for five years leading a life of a brilliant warrior, oblivious of Christian ideals and love. Only after the meeting with a hermit (who, by chance, is his uncle, and who reveals to him the great mystery of the Grail) he begins to feel the need to become a different kind of knight, a knight of God. What was Chrétien planning to do with his stunning hero, is perhaps one of the greatest enigmas in medieval literature, one that will never stop intriguing scholars, who encounter it on their intellectual path.

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*Perceval*, written probably somewhere between 1180 and 1190, was left unfinished, and the reasons for this elude us (the most widely acknowledged theory is that its author died before being able to complete the ending). However, the story about a mysterious dish, which brings earthly and saintly goods, was met with unprecedented popularity with the medieval audience, and numerous continuations, written in the hope to bring Perceval's quest to its conclusion, attest to that (cf. Walter 2009, 7). *Perceval* truly struck up a chord with the medieval affinity for spirituality, but went far beyond that: the late 12<sup>th</sup> century was an era of great diversity in religious practice. It was a time, when spiritual yearning and experimenting brought forth various sects (for instance, the Cathars), mystics (for instance, Hildegard of Bingen), and religious leaders. It was a time of the ruthless Crusades, who filled the imagination of medieval society with stories about the war fought in the name

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of faith, in the name of the Christian God. It was a time, when the germs of the spiritual and philosophical regeneration of the 13<sup>th</sup> century already begin to flourish, marked by the birth of new monastic orders (in particular, the so-called mendicant Christian orders) and by the previously unseen development of scholastic thought with Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventura, Albert the Great, etc. To further insist on various cultural aspects that crucially contributed to the spreading and the popularity of Grail literature would unfortunately lead towards a regrettable digression; we will, therefore, refrain from it.

194 The prose romance *The Quest of the Holy Grail* was probably created during the first decades of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and was later included in the so-called *Vulgate Cycle* (also known as the *Lancelot-Grail* cycle), an extensive composition of six novels (*Joseph d'Arimathie* [*Joseph of Arimathea*], *Merlin*, *Les premiers faits du roi Arthur* [*The First Actions of King Arthur*], *Lancelot*, *La Queste del Saint Graal*, and *Mort le Roi Artu* [*The Death of King Arthur*]). It can be considered as one of the most influential and far-reaching literary works that the Middle Ages ever contributed to Western culture. In a masterful fashion, it intertwines some of the most prominent stories ever to be born in human history: the eternal love story between Lancelot and Queen Guinevere, the enterprises of the noble King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table, numerous adventures of the sorcerer Merlin, and, last but not least, the narration of the quest of the Holy Grail. This is where the matter of Britain meets a strong religious verve to give birth to an extraordinary tale of love, faith, courage, redemption, and salvation. *The Quest of the Holy Grail* presents the literary public with a new hero—one who does not fight for his king or his beloved, but for God, in an earnest attempt to reach the celestial glory.

Since the essence of the knight's quest in this novel is changed, the itinerary of the knight is also quite different from the one that features in, for instance, Chrétien's romances. The *aventure* of the knights in *The Quest of the Holy Grail* is spiritual and bears a spiritual significance. It leads the chosen one towards a religious experience far beyond the reach of an average knight of the Round Table. Therefore, the warriors who embark upon this quest are in need of guidance, of revelation, of authority.

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## The question of authority in *The Quest of the Holy Grail*

The path of the knights, who embark upon the quest of the Holy Grail, is strewn with visions, dreams, and proofs of faith, the intention of which is to select among the magnitude of those, who had decided to depart, a few chosen ones, who actually arrive to the end of the arduous journey. These visions and dreams are not self-explicatory. In much the same manner as the medieval worshiper needs someone to explain and to intercept between the highest power and human being, the knights need helpers to assist them in reassuring the true meaning of the events they encounter. These helpers come predominantly in the form of saintly persons: hermits (cf. Gros 2009, 1559–1560), priests (cf. Gros 2009, 1562),<sup>3</sup> and nuns. They have chosen the life of self-denial in the fulfillment of divine wisdom. From the hermeneutical point of view, they are immensely important, since they are the ones, who explain the enigmatic events, with which the path of the heroes is strewn. At this point, we need to underline the fact that the mental world of the medieval man is a deeply symbolic one: every phenomenon one encounters, every earthly being is filled with symbolic meaning, within all the phenomena there dwells a deeper signification, assured by a higher force (in the Western medieval cultural realm, this higher force can only be in the form of the Christian God). Within the Christian philosophical horizon, there is no room for meaningless phenomena or coincidence. Everything was created by the omnipresent, omnipotent, and also endlessly gracious God, who reveals himself to the human being through elements of his creation (through objects, animals, plants, etc.); therefore, every single thing is a bearer of a deeper symbolic meaning. Every element of creation reminds the one who perceives it of the endless goodness and endless power of the highest being. When discussing the hermeneutical layers of medieval romances, it is important to understand this intriguing and quite specific trait of the medieval intellectual realm.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Some scholars presuppose that the monks encountered by the knights of the Round Table belong to the order of Cistercian monks, since they are all clad in white (cf. Gros 2009, 1562).

<sup>4</sup> On the Christian symbolism of the Middle Ages cf. Koželj 2013.

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The knights of the Round Table (for the most part) are no theologians: they are warriors and courtly lovers. That is why they require, while meeting with various dreams, visions, and other symbolic phenomena, the help of explanation from the persons, who do possess the necessary knowledge and the spiritual depth. However, to be able to intervene in the way they do, all these saintly personalities need to have a certain authority, an unparalleled wisdom that derives not (solely) from earthly knowledge, but is also guaranteed by the transcendent power far beyond the reach of the hands or reason of man. Let us analyze a typical fragment from *The Quest of The Holy Grail* where a vision is interpreted by a skillful interpreter.

After a long and arduous journey, Perceval (one of the knights, who will partake in the quest to its last episodes) arrives at a desert island, where he sinks into a dream:

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Now a strange adventure befell him while he slept; for it seemed to his sleeping mind that two ladies appeared before him, of whom one was as old as the hills and the other much younger, and beautiful to boot. They did not go on foot but were mounted on two most singular beasts, for the younger rode a lion and the other was seated on a serpent. (*The Quest*, 117.)

After conversing with both of the women in his sleep, Perceval wakes up. Confounded by the vision in his dreams, he turns to God in the hope that he will grant him some explanation of the images he came to see in the dream:

Next morning when the sky was bright and the sun had risen so high that its fiery rays shone warm upon his head, Perceval opened his eyes and saw that all was light. He sat up then and making the sign of the cross he begged Our Lord to send him some counsel which might profit his soul, for he gave less thought to his body than he used, having given up all expectation of leaving the rock where he found himself. He looked about him, but saw neither the lion that had kept him company nor the serpent he had slain, and he wondered greatly at their disappearance. (*The Quest*, 118.)

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According to the passage, the young knight finds himself in considerable distress. Abandoned and astray, he sees no possibility of escape from the island. Furthermore, he is confronted with a powerful and meaningful dream, but lacks the means to interpret it and find a gateway to freedom. In his hour of need, he appeals to God, to the highest authority he can imagine in his very simplistic perception of faith.

While he was turning this matter over in his mind his gaze strayed out to sea; and there he saw a ship with sail spread taut skimming the waves and making straight for the spot where he waited to learn whether God would send him some good fortune. The ship sped on apace, for she had the wind abaft to chase her on and she flew like an arrow towards him, coming right to the foot of the peak. As he observed this from his lofty perch Perceval knew his fill of joy; convinced there would be many men on board he jumped to his feet and took on his arms. As soon as he was accoutred he made his way down the crag with all the eagerness of a man impatient to know who the occupants might be. On drawing near he saw that the ship was shrouded within and without with white silk, so that nothing met the eye but perfect white. And when he reached the ship's side he bound a man robed like a priest in surplice and alb and crowned with a band of white silk two fingers deep; and this circlet bore a text which glorified Our Lord's most holy names. (*The Quest*, 119.)

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The mysterious ship is bringing not a company of men (as Perceval first believed), but one man dressed in a (meaningful) white silk.<sup>5</sup> Perceval is taken aback by the fact that the wise man knows his name before he reveals it to him. Sensing that the priest must be sent to the island with some particular intent, he asks him (he poses a *question*), expecting to obtain an informed answer. According to Gadamer, “the path of all knowledge leads thorough the question” (Gadamer 2006, 357), and “the significance of questioning consists in revealing the questionability of what is questioned” (Gadamer 2006, 357).

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<sup>5</sup> For further information on the symbolics of colors in the Middle Ages see Pastoureau 2004, 128–236 and Ribard 2001, 11–46.

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We can, therefore, maybe draw the conclusion and speculate that the answer is already comprised in the question and vice versa.

The dialectic of question and answer disclosed in the structure of hermeneutical experience now permits us to state more exactly what kind of consciousness historically effected consciousness is. For the dialectic of question and answer that we demonstrated makes understanding appear to be a reciprocal relationship of the same kind as conversation. (Gadamer 2006, 370.)

Asking a question, posing a question in an ever-tender and eternally fragile balance and counter-balance between two sides in the situation of communication is more than just an act of mere utility: it is an act imbued with a profound ethical impulse:

198 Thus it belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says. (Gadamer 2006, 387.)

Perceval and the mysterious priest are drawn together in a dialogue, filled with deep religious, even mystical signification. Because they share a similar religious, theological, and spiritual horizon, their questions and answers play out in the same field and guarantee both the understandability of question as well as, at the same time, the understandability of answer. Perceval's question is in a way (latently, implicitly) pre-answered at the moment of its emergence:

Then he related in order all that he had heard in his sleep, just as the words had been spoken to him, for nothing had as yet slipped his memory. When he has told his dream he asked the good man to explain it to him, and he said he would do so gladly and began at once:

“Perceval, the meaning of the two ladies, whom you saw riding on such unwonted beast as are lion and a serpent, is truly marvellous, as you shall learn. The one who sat upon the lion signifies the New

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Law, that is set upon a lion which is Christ; it has its footing and its ground in Him and by Him was established and raised up in the sight and view of Christendom to serve as a mirror and true light to all that fix their hearts upon the Trinity. This lady sits upon the lion, Christ, and she is faith and hope, belief and baptism. This lady is the firm and solid rock on which Our Lord announced that he would set fast Holy Church, there where He said: 'Upon this rock I will build my church.' Thus the lady seated on the lion denotes the New Law which Our Lord maintains in strength and vigour, even as a father does his son. Nor it is surprising that she seemed younger to you than the other, since she had her birth in the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, while the other had already reigned on earth through untold generations. The former came to talk to you as to her son, for all good Christian are her sons, and she proved herself your mother by the great solicitude which drove her to forewarn you of what the future held. [...] The lady whom you saw astride the serpent. She is the Synagogue, the first Law, that was put aside as soon as Jesus Christ had introduced the New." (199  
*The Quest*, 121–122.)

In this paragraph, we can clearly see, how both the questions as well as the answers unfold within the same ideological and religious scheme (that is, the scheme of Christianity), which in the Middle Ages assures the coherence of every single interpretation of phenomena encountered in the world. Gadamer puts it thus:

One of the most fertile insights of modern hermeneutics is that every statement has to be seen as a response to a question, and that the only way to understand a statement is to get hold of a question to which its statement is an answer. (Gadamer 2007, 241.)

In *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, the phenomenal canvas of everything that happens pertains to the nature of the mission revealed at the beginning of the romance by a "venerable man wearing the religious habit" (*The Quest*, 46):

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“Hear my words, my lord knights of the Round Table, who have vowed to seek the Holy Grail! Nascien the hermit sends you word by me that none may take maid or lady with him on this Quest without falling into mortal sin; nor shall anyone set out unless he be shriven or seek confession, for no man may enter so high a service until he is cleansed of grievous sin and purged of every wickedness. For this is no search for earthly things but a seeking out of the mysteries and hidden sweets of Our Lord, and the divine secrets which the most high Master will disclose so that blessed knight whom He had chosen for His servant from among the ranks of chivalry: he to whom He will show the marvels of the Holy Grail, and reveal that which the heart of man could not conceive nor tongue relate.” (*The Quest*, 47.)

200 The venerable man was sent forth by Nascien, a Galahad’s ancestor (cf. Bruce 1918, 134), who already appears in the romance *Joseph of Arimathea* and somehow admirably glues together the entire prose cycle. He is figure more than appropriate to promulgate the true nature of the mission that lies before the brave members of Arthur’s court. His appearance—with the aid of an intermediary, an interpreter of/for an interpreter—is a sure sign (one that not all the knights are capable of deciphering) that what awaits them is a unique experience, something they have never met before, something inexplicably sublime, something, to which not all of them will have the access.

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer claims that authority is based “on an act of acknowledgement and knowledge” (Gadamer 2006, 281). Gadamer insists on authority as deriving from an act of reason, where we, in the lack of more profound knowledge and insight, rely on someone else’s expertise. The attribution of authority to someone else happens at the moment, when we acknowledge the fact that someone’s understanding of a certain problem is more reliable than our own (cf. Gadamer 2006, 281). The authority of the bearer of Nascien’s message is total and absolute, and is guaranteed by the exceptional nature of the mission ahead. In the Middle Ages, it is only with extreme reluctance that authorities are put into question, once their religious origin has been established. This is no time of an open dialogue or rational critique as, later on, promoted by the Enlightenment (cf. Gadamer 2007, 70).

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In the romance, we also stumble upon an episode where a false priest offers to Bors a false interpretation of a dream. The reader (a medieval author always presupposes a reader, who is sufficiently intellectually informed to read the signs and the symbols—the false priest, for instance, sits on a black horse—the hidden meaning behind words and actions) is in this episode met with two separate interpretations of the same dream (one coming from a false mouth, the other from a reliable source). From this fragment, we can draw the conclusion that the Middle Ages understand and acknowledge the possibility of two opposing interpretations of the same phenomenon, albeit always with hints that are meant to guide the reader to the more credible interpretation. The medieval author hesitates to leave much authority to the reader (it is true that, for instance, Jürgen Habermas also finds Gadamer “too accepting of prejudice and authority”; Palmer 2007, 76). *Auctoritas* plays an important part in the medieval intellectual perception of the world: in art, science, and philosophy, this period relies strongly on its predecessors of Antiquity.

But, as we have seen before, the brave knights do not encounter only wholesome saintly persons on their winding paths: Perceval is confronted with a beautiful young woman, who offers him a pool of earthly delights. She poses to be an authority, yet is, in fact, nothing else but one of the many transformations of the Devil. Her symbol is (again) the black color. Her beauty stuns Perceval, and she seems to have a lot of information about Perceval's past and his quest. Although she proves to be intelligent and even somehow clairvoyant like the good men, who usually explain the dreams and the visions, her message is a false one: she tells Perceval that the “good knight” he is so ardently looking for is dead (which is, of course, not true) (cf. Amiri 2011, 39).

When discussing the interpretation of dreams in the Middle Ages, Imen Amiri emphasizes the fact that Christian theologians and philosophers, having inherited the practice of such interpretation from Antiquity, are somewhat oblivious of how to transpose it into the Christian context (cf. Amiri 2011, 104; Baldon 2017, 37). Yet, it is precisely here that we can observe the point dividing literature (as a manifestation of artistic activity) and biblical exegesis (we will discuss this cleavage in more detail in the continuation of this article).

The problem of the knights in *The Quest of the Holy Grail* is that their usual thirst for adventure, applauded and nurtured in the first four romances of the

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cycle, now, after it has given them their real *raison d'être*, suddenly fades and eclipses to the secondary rang of endeavors a knight might undertake. Precisely the authority, invested in a wise interpreter, explains to a knight the error of his ways: without this exceptional aid, the warrior finds himself completely lost and confused. The knights are, however, well aware of the circumstance that they need to find an appropriate interpreter, who will show them the way they need to take. Gawain and Hector have a formidable dream and, as they wake up, they immediately know what to do:

“In God’s name,” went on Sir Gawain, “we have seen such things this night, both sleeping and waking, that the best course open to us in my view, is to seek out some hermit or some man of God, who can tell us the meaning of our dreams and interpret what we have heard.” (*The Quest*, 165–166.)

202 Gawain and Hector find a hermit (they must approach him on foot, since he lives on a hill inapproachable with horses). After receiving the interpretation of their dreams, they are confronted with the sad truth: they are spiritually and morally fallen and, therefore, unqualified to approach the greatest mystery and the object of the quest, the Holy Grail:

“The adventures you are now to seek concern the nature and manifestations of the Holy Grail; these signs will never appear to sinners or men sunk deep in guilt, and never therefore to you, for you are most heinous sinners. Do not imagine moreover that the adventures now afoot consist in the murder of men or the slaying of knights; they are of a spiritual order, higher in every way and much more worth.” (*The Quest*, 174.)

Only three knights are chaste enough to arrive to the end of their journey and dwell in the sacred presence of the Holy Grail, of the vessel, passed onwards to them by tradition, as revealed in the first romance of the cycle, in *Joseph of Arimathea*. The question, put forth by the two confused knights, is answered with superior authority. And Gawain and Hector show at least the minimal

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amount of awareness by *posing the question*, by merely knowing who and when to ask. Gadamer writes: “The real power of hermeneutical consciousness is our ability to see what is questionable.” (Gadamer 1976, 13.)

Asking a question and getting the answer to it is always a step on the way to the Holy Grail or away from it (cf. Baldon 2017, 63). Some thinkers see it as a monotonous and pretentious practice that bores the reader and could not be further from Chrétien de Troyes’s brilliance and elegance (cf. Waite 2006, 492). But we must understand *The Quest of the Holy Grail* in the context of the cycle, from which this particular romance gets its full meaning, its full symbolic richness. *The Quest of the Holy Grail* can namely only obtain true relevance, when it is understood in the context of the entire cycle, just like the cycle does not make much sense, if we subtract the romance from it. Understanding this complex relationship between the part and the whole is one of the most important aesthetic delights that the book can offer to its (contemporary or modern) reader. *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, although perfectly functional when read without the context, is especially suggestive and alluring, if we read it as a part of the meaningful conversation between various romances (for instance, Lancelot in the *The Quest* can be fully understood only when we have already witnessed his love story in the romance *Lancelot*).

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By participating in the unveiling of “riddles,” of *senefiances* (cf. Pintarič 2005, 133), put forward by the romance, the medieval reader probably gains the same aesthetic pleasure as by admiring paintings and sculptures in a church or a cathedral, thus continuously renewing the greatest story one can know: the story of Redemption.

Arguably, one of the primary functions of the Grail texts is to stimulate the reader’s desire to engage with Christian ideals, and to improve their own understanding of it. The popular Arthurian subject is a medium through which the authors of the Grail narratives from the *Didot-Perceval* onwards can encourage their readership to improve their own Christian understanding. By putting the reader in a position similar to that of the knights on the quest, the Grail narratives stimulate the readers’ desire to improve their own relationship with God through inviting them to interpret and reinterpret the *aventures* that they read in accordance with

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Christian theology. In each of the Grail narratives the knights and the readers are invited to become interpreters of the Grail quest, and the unique structures of the Grail narratives are designed to direct the reader's attention towards the importance of interpretation. (Baldon 2017, 71–72.)

The most important difference between the modern and the medieval reader, however, lies in their disposition towards authority. The reader of the *The Quest of the Holy Grail* can, naturally, engage in his own interpretation of the *senefiance* before him, but the only *true* interpretation can be obtained from real authorities: monks, hermits, nuns, etc. They have the access to true God's mysteries, they reveal to the knights the true meaning of their quest as well as of the peculiar dreams and visions that plague them on their way.<sup>6</sup>

### **The role of tradition in the reading of a medieval romance**

204 Within the Christian medieval mentality, every book (to actually see a book is a rare occasion for an average European in the Middle Ages) alludes to The Book, i.e., to the *Bible*. Therefore, it is approached with the greatest of caution and with the presumption that there exists a person wise and learned enough to explain the complicated symbolic of the narrative. The man in the Middle Ages in a way yearns for an authority—unlike the modern reader, who, due to the turn of the realm of understanding from tradition to the individual (cf. Gadamer 2006, 274), claims to possess all the tools that enable one to interpret the given text according to one's own logic and one's own understanding, even according to own prejudice. Here, we encounter one crucial and highly complicated question, the answer to which requires great sophistication—maybe greater than the writer of these words possesses. Nevertheless, we will pose it and try to at least scrape its surface: how does in the Middle Ages the reading of the *Bible* affect the reading of a text (namely, of a book)?

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6 The title of the present paper employing the word *senefiance* is inspired by the episode, in which “a worthy man” interprets Lancelot's dreams by saying in the English translation: “know, too, that the significance of what you saw is more profound than many people think” (*The Quest*, 150). The contribution's title “Molt greignour senefiance” could, thus, be (loosely) translated as: “A Profounder Significance.”

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It is fair to reiterate that we are referring to a period, in which the *Bible* was the first and, in many cases, the only book that a medieval man came into contact with. To the—for the most part illiterate—audience, it was transferred and interpreted by some sort of ecclesiastic authority. The main manner of confronting the sacred text in the Middle Ages is the exegetic reading, which comprises a very thoughtful search for analogies between the *Old* and the *New Testaments* (cf. Huizinga 2011, 342), the ceaseless search for parallels, for echoes between the two parts of the *Bible*. This exploit was, albeit intellectually challenging and fulfilling, not always an easy one: the world of the medieval man was (as it is—perchance differently—also today) fraught with paradoxes, with sometimes unintelligible harshness, it was full of unanswered questions or at least questions that seemed to go unanswered until the Judgment Day. Biblical exegesis was a common procedure offering a compact vision of the cosmos, fighting its fragmentation, fighting its irrational ways.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> and the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the reading culture is yet to become wide-spread, the reading of the *Bible* actually represents the primary example of a meeting with any written text, especially if we take into account the fact that all the writing in the Middle Ages was mostly done by clergymen (cf. Guiette 1954, 107–111), who were naturally deeply imbibed by the exegetic process.

The Christian hermeneutics stems from the firm conviction that a written text *can* be understood as long its reader possess the right intellectual and moral tools (cf. Gadamer 2007, 46). Such tools are provided by tradition: the first thinker to reveal the exegetic potential of the *Bible* was Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 B.C.–after 40 A.D.), while the stronger theoretic background in the context of the Christian faith was developed by Origen (185–254). We should not overlook the circumstance that the system, in which the exegesis takes place, is safely enclosed by the firm boundaries offered by authorities. Saint Augustine (354–430) introduces the distinction between the *allegoria in factis* and the *allegoria in verbis*, while the great scholastic Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) decides that the *Bible* disposes solely of the *allegoria in factis* (cf. Strubel 2002, 73). *Allegoria in factis* is, as a method of interpreting the Scriptures, a procedure, in which one person or event from the *Old Testament* finds its full meaning in the *New Testament*. Adam, for instance, is therefore the prefiguration of Christ;

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the murder of Abel prefigures Christ's sacrifice; Eve prefigures Mary. The so-called typologies play intensively into the medieval vision of the world as a well-ordered, outstandingly organized cosmos, within which each element, no matter how insignificant at first glance, bears a deeply-rooted meaning arising from the fact that everything is a creation of the infinitely benevolent Creator, who, in his endless mercifulness, would not create anything incomprehensible to the feeble human mind. Within the medieval Christian intellectual realm, everything can be explained, there is no chaos, there is nothing but the immense feeling of a humbling gratitude. An event described in the *Old Testament* is not merely a bearer of its inherent meaning, it can also point towards an event in the *New Testament* (cf. Gadamer 2006, 292).

206 The Middle Ages are (at least that is how it would appear at first glance) a period in the human history, which is deeply imbedded in the mentality that praises tradition. The medieval intellectual achievements rely deeply and firmly on knowledge inherited from the Antiquity. The medieval intellectual feels a wholehearted gratitude towards the great minds of Antiquity: the medieval bestiaries, the works of natural science, and the most eminent philosophical treatises are heirs to the great minds of Antiquity. However, it would certainly be false to presume (as it nonetheless often happens) that medieval knowledge is derivative and without originality. That would be a misconception, similar to the one that pronounces modern science to be nothing else but a dense successor of the Enlightenment or the Renaissance. The Middle Ages have at their disposition many original approaches in philosophy as well as in science. Nevertheless, it would be bold and even misguided to assert that a reading of a book in the Middle Ages does not seem to be an echo of The Reading of The Book. The reading material in the 13<sup>th</sup> century is scarce, limited to and reserved for the wealthy and the well-educated. For this is the time when the laic population almost does not read (even the richest and the most powerful members of the upper classes have the texts read to them rather than read them by themselves) and encounters books predominantly in the church. And the book one sees most often is The Book of Books, the greatest story ever told.

The medieval intellectual's reading of a text simply cannot escape the premises arising from the reading of the Holy Scriptures. Hans-Georg Gadamer

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thus expresses the co-determination of a text and the historical situation, in which it is read:

Every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way, for the text belongs to the whole tradition whose content interests the age and in which it seeks to understand itself. The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and his original audience. It certainly is not identical with them, for it is always co-determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history. (Gadamer 2006, 296.)

The tradition of the allegorical reading of the *Bible* (and, therefore, by analogy, any text, especially one so deeply immersed in religious meanings as *The Quest of the Holy Grail*) is very vivid within the medieval cultural context. Literary works were mostly read and written by people, who were educated in the rich tradition of the medieval biblical exegesis. Since the entire world and every phenomenon within it could be read as a symbol, why not then also every literary element? And the more the work was close to the realm of religious space, the more the symbolic reading proved to be fruitful, natural even. For the medieval intellectual, raised and educated in the singular world of symbols and typological reading of the *Bible*, the leap from reading The Book to reading a book must have come easily, since it was facilitated by the long tradition of allegorical approaches to the Scriptures. Although Patrick Moran warns us against excessively enthusiastic drawing of parallels between the *Bible* and the work of literary art in the Middle Ages (cf. Moran 2017, 44), we think the exegetical theory must have influenced the approach assumed by the medieval intellectual confronted by a text so rich in religious symbolism as *The Quest of The Holy Grail*.

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According to numerous experts, the tradition of biblical exegesis must have somehow also contributed to the creation of the role of interpreter as depicted in the medieval fiction.

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So much then for the way that leads to perfection, but what of that perfection itself, how to describe the indescribable? Here the author had recourse to the Scriptures, to the wealth of symbolism contained in them, and particularly to the Song of Songs, the book of the Bible that above all others lends itself to mystical interpretation. He was able to draw upon a language hallowed by tradition, supple yet precise, carefully weighted, rich in overtones, a language whose full depths of meaning can only be plumbed by those as familiar as himself with both the biblical and apocryphal traditions. (Matarasso 2005, 21.)

208 What Pauline Matarasso implies in the quoted passage is, to put it in plain terms, that the writer of a text like *The Quest of the Holy Grail* must have been well acquainted not only with the tradition of the Scriptures, but also with the way they were read: allegorically and symbolically. Paul Ricoeur demonstrates how interpretation makes for one of the key methods in the reading of biblical excerpts: he analyzes a passage from the *Bible*, where the appearance of a vision is followed by its interpretation (cf. LaCoque and Ricoeur 2003, 247). Allegorical reading is, therefore, intrinsic already to the *Bible*, and the Middle Ages were the direct heir to this intriguing and enriching tradition.

The interpreters in the romance are never in question: we are to trust their interpretation, their unlimited knowledge. Yet, their authority is not unfounded. It derives from the long tradition of the symbolical reading of the *Bible*, from biblical exegesis. They are teachers, they are living authority (cf. Bertucio 2016, 332), they are willing to assume the responsibility for their actions, for their intervention. Their hermeneutical task is to interpret the visions and the dreams that the knights of the Round Table encounter while following the logic of the quest. In the economy of the quest, the interpreters never fail to allude to the deeply Christian nature of the adventure undertaken by the heroes. It is through their interpretations that the knights learn, grow, and are spiritually fortified. They assure to the quest the mystical aura, in which the events take place. Through the meaningful, albeit frugal encounters with interpreters, who decipher the *senefiance* of the images, which the adventure lays upon them and through which the selection is made between the ones, who will be summoned to bask in the presence of the Grail, and the ones, who

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will return defeated to king Arthur's court only to witness the devastation of the only meaningful world they know.

However, when the last three knights finally arrive in the vicinity of the Holy Grail, the interpreters become scarce. This is the time, when holy objects, enveloped into the mystical aura of the Grail, begin to speak for themselves. This process of self-explanation can be observed when Bors, Perceval, and Galahad arrive to the Miraculous Ship, where they find a marvelous sword. The inscription on the sword is not ambiguous:

I am a marvel to behold and apprehend. For none was ever able to grip me, however big his hand, nor ever shall, save one alone; and he shall pass in excellence all who preceded and shall follow him. (*The Quest*, 214.)

Interpreters are, therefore, in the end no longer in demand. Those knights, who were summoned to bask in the direct glory of the holy objects, are capable (and worthy) of interpreting the inscriptions by themselves. They have grown, they have evolved. The economy of the Grail quest is such that they have reached the peak of moral evolution a mortal being can achieve. However, it is only to Galahad that the Holy Grail reveals itself in all its splendor. The young knight seeing that this is the most he could hope for during his terrestrial life asks for his soul to be relinquished to heaven:

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“Blessed Lord Jesus Christ, now have I my heart's desire. I beseech Thee now to come to fetch me in this my present state, for I could not die in any spot so pleasant and delightful as is the one in which I find myself. For this bliss which I have yearned after so long is all composed of lilies and of roses.” (*The Quest*, 269.)

## Conclusion

The present article aimed to establish the significance of the role of interpreters in the 13<sup>th</sup>-century romance *The Quest of the Holy Grail*. Our goal was to inspect the origins of authority imparted upon the various interpreters

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of dreams and visions that the wandering knights chance upon. We attempted to show that the authority of interpreters is most likely rooted in the tradition of biblical exegesis. Since the writers of medieval romances were indubitably well-acquainted with this tradition, we concluded that it most probably influenced their own literary creations.

The interpreters are without exception deeply devout individuals, whose moral and religious background allows them the access to the transcendent significance behind events that the heroes of the quest encounter. The path of the knights is filled with allegories, which they cannot unravel by themselves. It is full of symbols that cannot be understood (or are even misunderstood) without the help of authority. And the authority of interpreters originates from their unyielding devotion.

210 On the other hand, the authority of interpreters stems from the sole fact that we are confronted with a kind of a text. A text that alludes (as almost all books in the Middle Ages) to the *Bible*. The way of reading the *Bible* in the Middle Ages is unique: all events of the *Old Testament* somehow resonate in the events of the *New Testament*, a symbol from the *Old Testament* develops its full meaning in the *New Testament*. From this play of doubles, the medieval intellectual draws intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual delight. The form of interpretation is in both cases the same: the knight is confronted with a vision or a dream that he is incapable to apprehend. Later, he comes across a figure of authority, who is in position to reveal the hidden meaning behind the mysterious, incomprehensible episode. This procedure resembles in no small measure the interpretation processes connected with biblical exegesis.

In his famous passage, St. Paul states that while living on earth man only sees *per speculum in aenigmate*. He cannot perceive, cannot comprehend the divine truth directly. To obtain a glimpse at transcendence without an intermediary would resemble staring straight into the Sun. The role of interpreters is crucial: God communicates with his Creation in symbols, indirectly. It is the well-educated, pious interpreters, who divulge the meaning of the symbolic image to the feeble human mind. However, there comes a time when an individual (not just any individual—a chaste, an accomplished individual, chosen among many others) is summoned to stare straight into the Sun, straight into the Christian Truth. This can only happen at the end of an arduous, yet fulfilling

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journey, at the end of a long spiritual quest, full of trials and labors. Only then the interpreter is no longer needed and the complete revelation can be attained, but it is paid for with the sacrifice of earthly life. This is the end of the quest of the Holy Grail. This is when the Holy Grail and its most valuable seeker, Galahad, abandon life to ascend straight into Heaven. This is the time “of lilies and of roses.”

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