

Journeying to the Bitter End: An Introduction and Examination of the Archetypal Medieval Death [Anti]-Quest

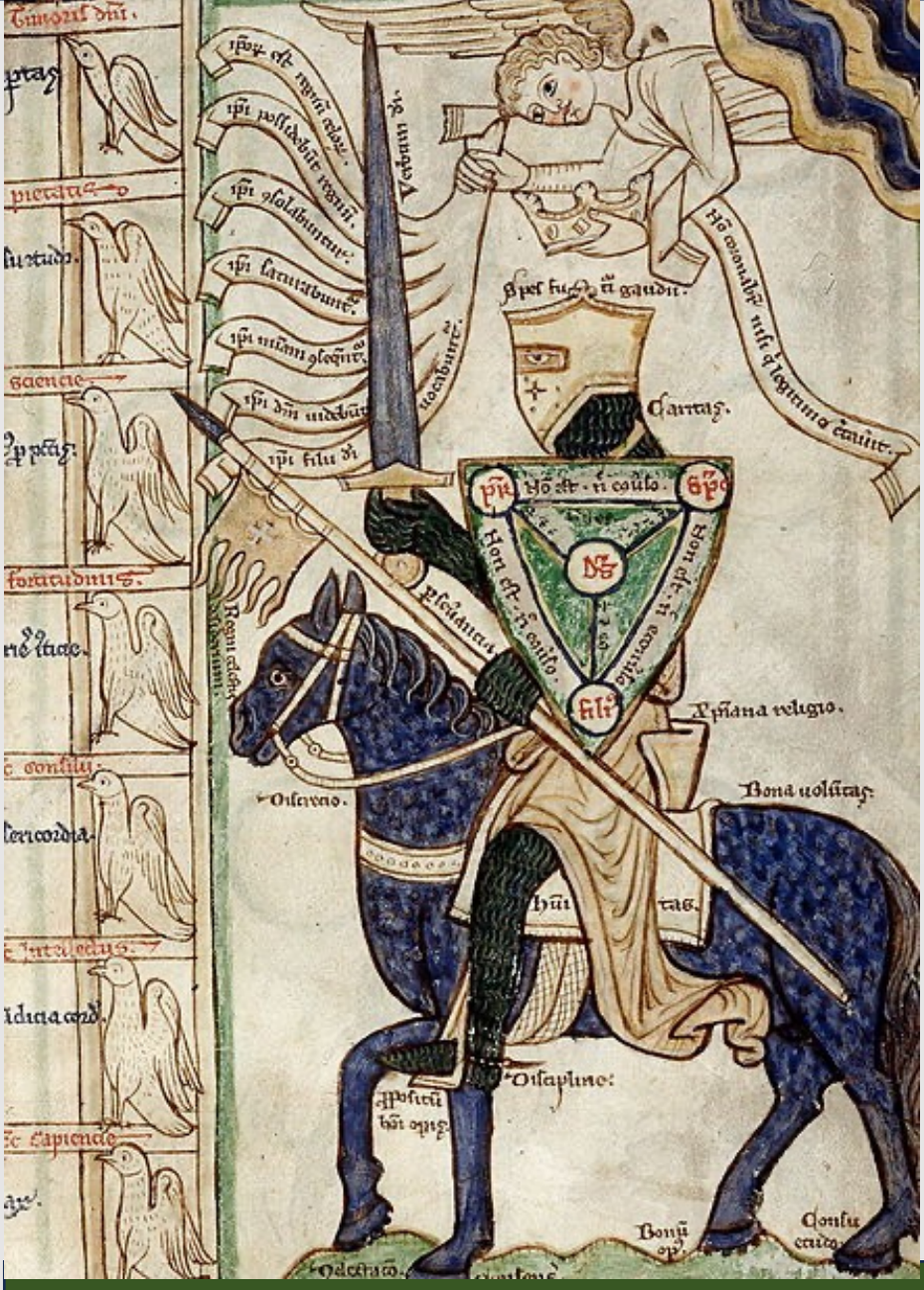
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The Medieval Quest

The typical medieval quest is a structural sequence of adventures where the protagonist knight is moving toward a goal or prize. A classic example of the typical medieval quest is Galahad's journey for the Holy Grail. Medieval quests are associated with the genre of chivalric romance.

Left: Allegory of *miles christianus* in a *Summa Vitiatorum* by William Peraldus, 13th c.



The Medieval Death [Anti]-Quest

I argue that the medieval D[A]Q is a phenomenon from the later Middle Ages that mutates the outcome of the quest by replacing the prize to be gained at the end of the quest with a death sentence at the announcement of the quest in the beginning of the narrative. The DAQ has the subsequent effect of challenging the idea of the typical quest for glory.

The Rules of the D[A]Q Archetypal Subgenre:

1. The protagonist knight must gain his quest through selfish temptation.
2. The protagonist knight must know that their quest will end in death.
3. The protagonist knight must embark toward the end of their quest reluctantly rather than excitedly.
4. The protagonist knight must escape death at the end of the quest.



Les Très Riches Heures du duc de Berry, March: the Château de Lusignan



The Green Knight
Detail of MS Cotton Nero A.x. fol. 94v.



King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table
Detail of MS Cotton Nero A.x. fol. 94v.

Examples of Medieval Death [Anti]-Quests:

- Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (approx. 1400)
- The Wife of Bath's Tale*, Chaucer (1400)
- The Romance of Melusine*, Couldrette (approx. 1401)
- The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* (15th c.)
- Sir Orfeo* (1330-40)

The Foundational Elements of the Medieval D[A]Q

There are eight fundamental elements that make up a Death [Anti]-Quest and they are divided evenly into structure and diegesis (plot).

Structural Elements:

- Launch
- Journey
- Ending
- Fulfillment

Diegetic Elements:

- Temptation
- Games, rules, bargains
- Monstrosity, the unnatural
- Power and knowledge



Gawain and the Loathly Lady;
Illustration by W. H. Margetson for Maud Isabel Ebbutt's *Hero-Myths and Legends of the British Race* (1910)

Pictured below: Replica of a 15th c. fresco, *The Dance of Death*; National Gallery of Slovenia

