

FRENCH LITERATURE – Postclassical Period

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Overview

Though the deep origins of both the people and the language of France must be traced as far back as the tribe of the Galli, a tribal group living on the borders of the declining Roman Empire, and ultimately destined to build their Gallo-Roman dialect into what we call Old French, the language form in which we find the first authentic texts of French literature, is found in the 11th century.

From the outset, the creative output of this culture devolved about a variety of kinds of expression: religious poetry, *chansons de gestes*, 'songs of heroic deeds,' and epic style romances.

Four short works, chiefly of linguistic interest, were written in the tenth century. In the eleventh century, The importance of the Church and of feudalism are indicated by the three types of literary productions: saints' lives, neo-Latin religious works; and *chansons de geste*, poems concerning the mighty deeds of heroes. Both the large number and the excellence of *chansons de gestes*, poetic romances, and lyrics written during the twelfth century, have led critics to call this the Golden Age of mediaeval French literature. This poetry shows an increase in polish, in sophistication, and in social consciousness over that of preceding centuries.

The thirteenth century is noteworthy for its prose romances, its drama, its satire, its lyrics, and its allegory. Much of the literature of this century reflects the rise of the bourgeoisie. It shows an increasing tendency toward rationalism, realism, and cynicism. The literature of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries shows the disastrous effects of the Hundred Years' War. There was at that time little opportunity or inspiration for imaginative works. A few narrative poems, a few prose chronicles, and a few lyrics were written, but as a whole the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were literarily sterile.

Discussion questions

Christine de Pisan has become an object of attention among Feminist critics. Do you see why? Is she a proto Feminist in her writing? What attitude did her culture tend to have, toward the place of women in society?

Is there a meeting point between the sacred and the criminal, in the work and thought of Francois Villon? Is that a meeting point which you can identify in other parts of mediaeval French culture? Architecture? Sculpture? Music?

What is the meaning of the 'grail' in *Perceval*? Does that epic centrally concern religious ritual, or is it primarily a simple Bildungsroman quest narrative?

What kind of devotion of the Virgin Mary quickens in the *Roman de la Rose*? Is this a literary or a devotional text?

Does Roland die a hero in the *Chanson de Roland*? Or was he a fool not to call Charlemagne to his military aid?

Poetry

Lyric

Christine de Pisan

Christine de Pisan. Christine de Pisan (1363-1430) was a remarkably self-willed and creative lyric poet, eminent to us now for the vigor with which she stood up for women's rights, in an era when women were being viewed as breeders and beauties, and on the street and in literature widely viewed as harlots. Christine was none of those things, and deeply resented this harsh male dominated attitude.

Life and work of Christine de Pisan. Christine de Pisan was married at fifteen to a French nobleman, who died ten years later, leaving her a widow with three children dependent on her. Unlike most women in her situation, at the time, she managed to create a role for herself as a professional writer, the first such in the West. The capacity for this self-creation lay in her early exposures to literature and culture. Born in Venice, her father a Councillor to the City of Venice, she remained in the shadows, learning, marrying, mothering, but from early childhood on conversant with major libraries and book collections, in that cultural crossroads environment. Until the mid 1390's she wrote ballads, heavily tinged with chivalry and chivalric lore, a chief stock of her reading. After her husband's death she began to show her works, which were of great autobiographical as well as chivalric interest, and she gained widespread attention among the noble courts of France. It was in that fashion, as her work was heard and read, that she won appointments as court writer for several dukes and finally for the King of France, Charles VI. In this professional life she supported herself and her children, and ultimately completed some forty one books in a thirty year period of writing.

Themes in the work of Christine de Pisan. The major collections of Christine de Pisan's work are her *Book of the Three Virtues*, a history of her nation—which was barely conscious of its nationhood at this time—from the Trojan War to the founding of France. Her second, and most widely read and influential, book was *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405). In that book she imagines a symbolic city in which women are greatly admired and emulated—a fantasy that lies deep in Christine's drive. The greatest of the female virtues—Reason; Justice; Rectitude—are celebrated and virtually divinized in this text, which especially needs understanding against its background.

The background of Christine de Pisan's defence of women. There has been much discussion of Christine de Pisan's so called feminism. The distinguished Existentialist thinker, Simone de Beauvoir, believed Christine de Pisan was an early feminist, interested in gender issues; others followed that conception, making her something of a hero to some in the 'women's movement' of the last century. However we see Christine's strong position, we know it was aired conspicuously, in her time, by her public critical attacks on the poet Jean de Meung, and his *Roman de la Rose*. In that chivalric epic, Jean de Meung celebrates the wonder of women, while at the same time denigrating them. It would be fair to say that, in the epic, Jean de Meung slanders and vilifies women, agents of seduction, untrue spirits, vulgar sluts. The language he adopts is from the streets, and expressed current attitudes bitterly familiar to Christine de Pisan.

Reading

Primary source reading

The Book of the City of Ladies, trans. Brown-Grant, 1999.

Secondary source reading,

Willard, Charity, *Christine de Pisan: Her Life and Works*, 1984.

Further reading

Altmann and McGrady, eds., *Christine de Pisan: A Casebook*, 2003.

Original language reading

Kosta-Thefaine, Jean-Francois, *La Pretresse et la guerrière*, 2008.

Suggested paper topics

Was Christine de Pisan a feminist, as we might understand the expression today, or was she simply a talented woman of her time playing at the chivalric rules of male female give and take? Is it easy to misinterpret gender attitudes at a distance of several centuries from ourselves? Why?

Review the attitude toward woman in fourteenth century France. What kinds of freedom did women have? Study the problems Christine de Pisan had, in acquiring the inheritance due her on her husband's death. Do you think those problems were at the root of her fierce defense of women?

Excerpt <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/ballad-v/ttp>

Since, O my Love, I may behold no more
Thy sovereign beauty that was all my cheer,
My heart is given up to sorrows sore :
For though the wealth of all the world were here,

There is no ease but in beholding thee
Who art afar ! Whence I of tears am fain
Mourning the happy days that used to be :
Yet unto none but thee may I complain.

Doubt not of this, true love whom I adore,
Thine image in my soul is ever clear :
I think but on the blessedness of yore
And on thy beauty, simple-sweet and dear.
So fiercely smiteth love, I may not flee
Nor may my soul the dread assault sustain :
Death could not bring a sorrier weird to see,
Yet unto none but thee may I complain.

Alas ! one only mercy I implore.
When I am dead (as I to death am near)
Pray for me, and thy praying shall restore
My wounded spirit : shed one tender tear.
Great were my comfort if my piteous plea
Might touch thy heart, if sorrow might constrain
Thy lips to sigh, such need of sighs have we.
Yet unto none but thee may I complain.

Sweet flower, to whom I do abandon it,
My heart is broken down with bitter pain
For one whom Fortune would not have me see :
Yet unto none but thee may I complain.

Villon, Francois

Francois Villon; the mystery of his work and life. Francois Villon (1431-disappears into the mist, ca. 1480)) was the strongest French lyric poet of the Middle Ages, and to our day one of the most influential French poets, regularly translated, staged, and put to music around the globe. And yet this man was a rascal, as they said in his time, meaning actually a serious criminal. How is this state of affairs possible? Is it not significant that he was born in the same year in which Joan of Arc was burned to death at the stake, as a supposed heretic.

Villon's Life. Born Francois de Montcorbier (or Des Loges or Corbueil or Corbier) he assumed the surname of his foster father, who was a Professor of Canon Law kind enough to take Villon into his house, after the early death of Villon's parents. Francois received both a Bachelor's and a Masters degree at the University of Paris (1452) and seemed destined to be a clergyman; but on the way to that career he became associated with a band of vagabonds and thieves and got into serious and lifetime trouble with the law. (In 1456 he was involved in a 'scuffle' argument in which he was apparently found guilty of murdering a priest—who was part of the brawl; not long after he was suspected of involvement in the robbery of the chapel of the College de Navarre, after which he given a sentence of banishment—later reprieved; whereupon he set out on four years of wandering, one step ahead of the law, writing his major poetry—*Le Grand Testament*—and, as we know from his poetry itself, picking up every nuance of the street and underworld language of the time.

Villon's Work. Villon's poetic output was small. His two longest works were *Le Petit Testament* (1456) and *Le Grand Testament* (1461), in which he bequeathes many imaginary objects and qualities to his friends and enemies—who range from dignitaries to ruffians. Inserted within the Testaments are many short lyrics, chiefly ballades and rondeaus. Two famous lyrics are the 'Ballad of Lost Ladies' and the 'Ballad of the Hanged.' Many of these poems are difficult to interpret today, because they turn on in-jokes, slang, or the kinds of socially unpermitted language of the streets—the attack level we find in the *Roman de la Rose*, which Christine de Pisan found so objectionable.

Villon's world view. Villon is justly praised for the depth and sincerity of his emotions and for the vigor and precision of his style. He combines feeling with a hearty sense of humor. He can weep over the transiency of beautiful things, and yet jest grimly about his approaching execution. He has infinite zest for physical pleasures—wine, food, warm shelter in winter, beautiful women. Nature, for him, is nearly always harsh or cruel, and he has great pity for poor suffering rascals. Yet he never whines with self-pity, nor does he blame his own miseries on Fate; he confesses his guilt and prays only for God's mercy and forgiveness. This last preoccupation of Villon is deeply typical of his time, clerical throughout and saturated with the doctrines of the Church, but living the secular life to the hilt, as though to guarantee oneself enough to confess.

Reading

Primary source reading

Georgi, D., editor and translator, *The Poems of Francois Villon*, 2013.

Secondary source reading

Fein, David, *Francois Villon Revisited*, 1997.

Further reading

Kinnell, Galway, translator, *The Poems of Francois Villon*, 1982.

Original language reading

Le Testament, "Ballade de bonne doctrine," ed. Richner and Henry, 1974.

Suggested paper topics

Do you know other poets than Villon whose lives and works were created from the social depths, in or out of crime? Is there a tradition of the poet as a social misfit? When did this tradition form? Where? Does it apply today? Does this tradition have a presence in Asian, as well as Western, literature?

Does the dark and often cruel humor of Villon's poetry go with the Christian world view which forms the backdrop of his work? Is there room for play in the Mediaeval Christian world picture, which offers assurance of salvation but keeps the sinner, which we all are, hanging cheerfully on the brink? Is the gargoyles tradition, on Gothic churches, part of this dark hilarity of the Christian Middle Ages?

Excerpt <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/ballade-to-our-lady/>

*Lady of Heaven and earth, and therewithal
Crowned Empress of the nether clefts of Hell,—*

*I, thy poor Christian, on thy name do call,
Commending me to thee, with thee to dwell,
Albeit in nought I be commendable.*

*But all mine undeserving may not mar
Such mercies as thy sovereign mercies are;
Without the which (as true words testify)
No soul can reach thy Heaven so fair and far.
Even in this faith I choose to live and die.
Unto thy Son say thou that I am His,
And to me graceless make Him gracious.
Said Mary of Egypt lacked not of that bliss,
Nor yet the sorrowful clerk Theophilus,
Whose bitter sins were set aside even thus
Though to the Fiend his bounden service was.
Oh help me, lest in vain for me should pass
(Sweet Virgin that shalt have no loss thereby!)
The blessed Host and sacring of the Mass
Even in this faith I choose to live and die.*

*A pitiful poor woman, shrunk and old,
I am, and nothing learn'd in letter-lore.
Within my parish-cloister I behold
A painted Heaven where harps and lutes adore,
And eke an Hell whose damned folk seethe full sore:
One bringeth fear, the other joy to me.
That joy, great Goddess, make thou mine to be,—
Thou of whom all must ask it even as I;
And that which faith desires, that let it see.
For in this faith I choose to live and die.*

Epic

Chanson de Roland

The French Epic. *The Chanson de Roland* was one of many heroic songs, some of epic dimension, which circulated throughout France in the Middle Ages, and which were very popular from the 12th to the 14th centuries. (We need to note that France was during this period not yet quite France, but was a loosely bundled together collection of duchies and kingdoms, in which royal courts hosted entertainment both for the nobility and for the man and woman serving as serfs on the manor.) These songs were recited (to music) by a group of *jongleurs*, who were no doubt familiar with the basic outlines of the songs they performed, but at the same time improvised as their genius permitted. The writing down of this traditional heroic material is hard to date, but we are in any case certain that composers came along, in the course of time, who brought tales to a certain fullness, and that then clerics were primarily responsible for the written texts. In the case of the epic before us, the *Chanson de Roland*, the decisive composer, Turoludus by name, was the one who wrote out the text of the epic, containing some 4,004 lines, in the form we now call the Oxford manuscript. The date of Turoludus' brilliant composition was between 1140-1170.

The hero of the epic. The hero of the *Chanson de Roland* is a noble knight fighting in the army of Charlemagne. (Note: the fighting involved, and described in the poem, dates from three hundred years prior to the composition by Turoludus.) The plot of the tale is complex as is the significance of it, and we have to marvel at the internal brilliance of the oral popular tradition. It goes like this. The army of Charlemagne is engaged in combat with the Saracens in Spain; the armed conflict between Christians and Muslims is raging. Charlemagne decides to propose a truce to the Saracens, and thereupon the French army, under the command of Roland, decides to send a deputation to Spain to negotiate a settlement. Roland chooses his uncle, Ganelon, to carry out this sensitive mission. Ganelon accepts the assignment, but with deep resentment, because he knows the fatal dangers of the mission, and suspects Roland of wanting to get rid of him. So deep is Ganelon's resentment that instead of negotiating a peace settlement he plots with the Saracens to ambush Roland and his men as they withdraw from Spain. The treacherous ambush takes place, Roland finds himself and his men cut off, and then Roland makes a gesture which characterizes him and brings the moral energy of the epic to the fore. In his pride and honor he refuses to call on Charlemagne's help, which he could have done by blowing Roland's famed hunting horn—which acquires almost a magical power here. Only when it is too late does Roland, expiring, blast out his lungs into the trumpet, but the gasped fury is so strong that the hero dies in the effort, and is in that moment taken up into heaven. In the aftermath, still within the epic, Charlemagne fights the battle of Roncesvalles, finally making the Saracens his servants.

The Christian Tenor. The contemporary reader must work to assess the Christian tenor of this epic. Roland is called *proulx*, brave, but one must read into this trait his entire knightly dignity. (We are reading about the world of Charlemagne, which was itself already touched by early mediaeval Christianity. At the same time we are reading a poem composed *at the time of the Crusades*, when the image of the faithful knight hero was predominant.) Roland's ascension into heaven is a credible event horizon, given a pervasive world view that includes the everpresent possibility either of salvation or damnation.

Reading

Primary source reading

The Song of Roland, trans. Crossland (Cambridge, Ontario, 1999), pp. 1-78.

OR

Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/391>

Secondary source reading

Keen, Maurice, *Chivalry*, 1984.

Further reading

History of Old French Literature; Holmes, Urban (Nook Books, 2012).

Original language reading

La Chanson de Roland, ed., tr. Joseph Bedier, 1937 (and often republished)

Suggested paper topics

What kind of hero is Roland? Does he use good judgment in sending Ganelon to negotiate in Spain? Is his refusal to call for assistance, after the ambush of his forces, heroic or foolish? What do you make of his instantaneous ascension into heaven? Does that event indicate God's total approval of Roland's behavior?

The *Chanson de Roland* was apparently composed, as a full scale epic, some three centuries after the events that form its material. From what perspective does the epic seem to be written, that of the participants in the 'original events,' or that of the world of the composer, Tuoldus? Do many epics reflect a significant time gap between the composer's perspective and that of the participants in the original events of the epic?

Excerpt <http://www.wright.edu/~christopher.oldstone-moore/roland.htm>

XXX

Oliver mounts upon a lofty peak,
Looks to his right along the valley green,
The pagan tribes approaching there appear;
He calls Rollanz, his companion, to see:
"What sound is this, come out of Spain, we hear,
What hauberks bright, what helmets these that gleam?
They'll smite our Franks with fury past belief,
He knew it, Guenes, the traitor and the thief,
Who chose us out before the King our chief."
Answers the count Rollanz: "Olivier, cease.
That man is my good-father; hold thy peace."

LXXXI

Upon a peak is Oliver mounted,
Kingdom of Spain he sees before him spread,
And Sarrazins, so many gathered.
Their helmets gleam, with gold are jewelled,
Also their shields, their hauberks orfreyed,
Also their swords, ensigns on spears fixed.
Rank beyond rank could not be numbered,
So many there, no measure could he set.
In his own heart he's sore astonished,
Fast as he could, down from the peak hath sped
Comes to the Franks, to them his tale hath said.

LXXXII

Says Oliver: "Pagans from there I saw;
Never on earth did any man see more.
Gainst us their shields an hundred thousand bore,
That laced helms and shining hauberks wore;
And, bolt upright, their bright brown spearheads shone.
Battle we'll have as never was before.
Lords of the Franks, God keep you in valour!

So hold your ground, we be not overborne!"
Then say the Franks "Shame take him that goes off:
If we must die, then perish one and all."

Roman de la Rose

Overview This chivalric romance epic length poem reveals one of the fullest expressions of chivalry and romance in the high Middle Ages, the 13th century. It is in the first part of the poem that these qualities are on display, for that part reflects the dominant chivalric mode of mediaeval sensibility. That first part, 4058 lines of heroic pentameter, was composed by Guillaume de Lorris, ca. 1230. It is entirely about the art of love, mediaeval style—suggestive perhaps of Ovid's *Art of Love*, but strongly tinged with courtly values. The second part of the poem, taken on at the death of Lorris, was composed by Jean de Meun, who began his work in 1275, and composed 17, 247 lines of the same verse pattern. His work, as we shall say more fully, was of a deeply different tenor from that of Lorris, more worldly and cynical. The result is a double epic, consisting of two sharply different, though remotely related, parts.

The Themes of the *Roman*. The theme of both parts of the poem is love, of course, and the way to understand ladies and win the one you want. The first part, in which chivalry and romance dominate, starts with the implication that the poem is a dream, related by a lover. The lover's first steps, as the poem opens, carry him to a high wall, which surrounds the castle of a nobleman, a castle called Dedit, or Pleasure. The lover is counseled by the Love God on the best way to pursue the lovely lady he seeks within the *hortus conclusus* (the enclosed garden) which lies within the castle walls—and which in the thought of the time served as a metaphor for the perfect womb of the Virgin Mary. In the course of setting up a plan for the lover, the Love God dispenses a great deal of useful advice on female psychology—no small part of the wide fascination of the text in its time. In the later portion of the poem, while still holding to the dream castle theme, the poet Jean de Meun studs his advice on love with many warnings about the degraded nature of women. For Jean de Meun *Raison*, *Reason*, becomes the presiding deity, and the spokesperson for caution in the battle ground of romance. But Jean de Meun goes farther, in his spirited assault on the many vices of his time. He takes particular aim against sodomy, which was a sin for the Church, and which seems to Jean to be a beastly deviation from nature. The allegorical deity Genius is assigned especially to the attack on the sodomites, whom he urges to use their styluses to write on the beautiful tablets, women, God has provided for them. Genius wishes sodomites to burn in hell, and in addition 'may they suffer the loss of scrotum and testicles.' It is this kind of attack, and a wide range of scurrilous languages Jean de Meun employs, that in part account for the widespread fascination with this text of his.

The Influence of the *Roman de la Rose*. More than 300 manuscripts of the *Roman* were in circulation not long after its composition, which testifies to the attraction of the work. Part of the poem was in its time translated from Old French into Middle English, and one of the translators, reputedly, was Chaucer.

Reading

Primary source reading

The Romance of the Rose, trans. Hargan, 1999.

Secondary source reading

Lewis, C.S., *The Allegory of Love*, 1936. (Old, but absolutely the classic on the topic.)

Further reading

Huizinga, Johan, *The World of the Middle Ages*, 1989.

Original language reading

Zumthor, Paul, *Essai de poétique médiévale*, 1972.

Suggested paper topics

Look at some of the illustrated mediaeval manuscripts of the *hortus conclusus*, to see what ravishing concepts of beauty and peace are summoned up there. Can you see why the lover, in the first part of the *Roman de la Rose*, needed advice on how to proceed within the castle walls? What is the relation between the doctrine of the closed garden and Catholic tradition concerning the birth giving of Mary?

Look into the intersecting world perspectives of Christine de Pisan, Francois Villon, and Jean de Meun. Can you see why Christine de Pisan eagerly joined the public debate about Jean de Meun's work, and why she so disparaged it? Can you imagine Francois Villon reading Jean de Meun? What would his attitude have been?

Excerpt <http://www.library.rochester.edu/robbins/medsex-heckelR1>

The God of Love and the Affair of the Heart

The God of Love, who had maintained his constant watch over me and had followed me with drawn bow, stopped near a fig tree, and when he saw that I had singled out the bud that pleased me more than did any of the others, he immediately took an arrow and, when the string was in the nock, drew the bow -- a wondrously strong one -- up to his ear and shot at me in such a way that with great force he sent the point through the eye and into my heart. Then a chill seized me, one from which I have, since that time, felt many a shiver, even beneath a warm fur-lined tunic. Pierced thus by the arrow, I fell straightway to the earth. . . . I took the arrow in my two hands and began to pull hard at it, sighing as I pulled. I pulled so hard that I drew out the feathered shaft, but the barbed point called Beauty was so fixed inside my heart that it could not be withdrawn. It remains within; I still feel it, and yet no blood has ever come from there.

I was in great pain and anguish because of my doubled danger: I didn't know what to do, what to say, or where to find a physician for my wound, since I expected no remedy for it, either of herbs or roots. But my heart drew me toward the rosebud, for it longed for no other place. If I had it in my power, it would have restored my life. Even the sight and scent alone were very soothing for my sorrows.

I began then to draw toward the bud with its sweet exhalations. Love selected another arrow, worked in gold. It was the second arrow and its name was Simplicity. It has caused many a man and woman all over the world to fall in love. When Love saw me approach, he did not threaten me, but shot me with the arrow that was made of neither iron nor steel so that the point entered my heart through my eye. No man born, I believe, will ever dislodge it from there, for I tried, without any great joy, to pull the shaft from me, but the point remained within. Now know for a truth that if I had been full of desire for the rosebud before, my wish was greater now. As my woes gave me greater distress, I had an increased desire to go always toward the little rose that smelled sweeter than violets.

Chretien de Troyes

Chretien the man and writer. Chretien de Troyes (1135-1190) was a learned and imaginative courtier, who served for many years at the court of Marie de Champagne, a setting in which he gained his sharp eye for behavior and psychology, and learned the ways of the world in a protected environment. In that elite world he carried out an active writing life, and though *Perceval* is the text which most carries his name today, he was prolific in many versions of romance: in the *Erec*, the story of a patient and long-suffering wife—the story which the English poet Tennyson retells in *Geraint and Enid*. *Lancelot the Cavalier of the Cart* tells of the amour of Lancelot and Guinevere. Other surviving works are *Yvain, the Cavalier of the Lion*; *Percival the Gallois*; and *William of England*. Chretien was the greatest of the French Romancers and the first to organize the Arthurian tales into a cycle. He was also the first to introduce into written literature Lancelot and his love for Queen Guinevere.

Chretien's Perceval. The *Perceval* itself is the fifth romance of Chretien, a 9000 line poetic account of both the life of Sir Gawain, and of the grail legend, which deals with the fate of the chalice from the Last Supper of Jesus Christ. That Chalice was ultimately saved by the faithful Jew, Joseph of Arimathea. In Chretien's account of the grail legend much attention is paid to the character of the young knight, Perceval, who is raised as something of a wild child, in the forests of Wales, and sets forth on adventures—first to the castle of King Arthur. While at Arthur's court, Perceval distinguishes himself by an act of remarkable bravery, by killing a knight who has been harassing the king. Perceval falls in love with Blanchefleur—a lady of distinction at the court—thereby showing his sensitivity to the finesse of love—this is, after all, Romance literature. While returning one day to King Arthur's castle—the fictive *geography* of these events is hazy—Perceval comes upon an aged ill man, whom the texts calls The Fisher King, a figure of royalty sitting in an area of depressed land situated next to a body of stilled and stagnant waters. (This figure is inherently mysterious, a representative of the sickness of the land or the times.) While staying with the Fisher King, Perceval beholds a strange procession including a beautiful lady carrying a bleeding lance; the wounded King seems some kind of representative of a Christ transpierced. On return to Arthur's castle, Perceval is confronted by a very ugly woman who asks him why he had not inquired of the Fisher King the reason for the King's illness. It is here that the *Perceval* section of the Romance breaks off, leaving us with a sense that a great mystery had lain before our knight, and that he had not altogether fathomed it, or its healing/saving potential.

Perceval and Eliot. The American poet T.S. Eliot, in his long poem *The Wasteland*, reaches to Chretien's vision, of a world sick and despondent, and needing to be asked the right questions as a step toward healing. This is a powerful example of the living energy of a classic literary insight.

Reading

Primary source reading

Chretien de Troyes, *Perceval, the Story of the Grail*, tr. Bryant, 1996.

Secondary source reading

Loomis, Roger, *The Grail: From Celtic myth to Christian symbol*, 1991.

Further reading

The New Arthurian Encyclopedia, ed. by Lacy Norris, 1991,

Original language reading

Koehler, E., *L'aventure chevaleresque*, 1974.

Suggested paper topics

What is literarily compelling about the legend of young Perceval and his search for the grail? Is there a luring mixture of concrete quest with vagueness, which makes one feel in the presence of a mystery?

What seems to you the relation between the tale of Perceval, and that of the far worldlier Gawain, the subject of the second half of this Romance epic?

Look at the Parzifal epic by the contemporary German poet, Wolfram von Eschenbach, and study its relation to the (earlier) work of Chretien. Each poet is concerned with both the adventurous and the spiritual quests of their heroes. Which hero seems to you the more complex and interesting? Which hero learns the most from his quest?

Excerpt <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/theme/perceval>

*For a noble beginning
A romance can begin worthily
With the most enjoyable tale there is:
That is, the [Story of the] Grail, whose
secret
No one should ever reveal or recount;
For the story might reveal so much
Before it's recited to the end
That someone could suffer for it
Who had not violated the secret;
The wise thing, then, is to leave it
And simply pass it by;
For, unless Master Bliu is lying,
No one should reveal the secret.
Now listen to me one and all
And you will hear a tale
That will be a delight to listen to,
For in it will be the seven guards,
Who throughout the world have charge
Of all the good stories that have ever been
told.
These writings will recount
What sort of people the seven guards are,
How [they act] and what end they will
come to;
For you have never heard the story
Told or recounted truthfully;
Yet how and why the powerful country
Of Logres was destroyed
Was noised and bruited widely;
Time was, it was much discussed.
The kingdom went to ruin,
The land was so dead and desolate
That it wasn't worth two bits;
They lost the voices of the wells
And the maidens who dwelled in them.
Indeed, the maidens served a very
important purpose:
No one who wandered the highways,
Whether at night or in the morning,
Ever needed to alter his route
In order to find food or drink;
He had only go to one of the wells.
He could ask for nothing
In the way of fine and pleasing food
That he would not have forthwith...*

