

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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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 call 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 worldier 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 Bliis 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...*