PERCEVAL

OR

THE STORY OF THE GRAIL
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In the preparation of this translation I am heavily indebted to the research and erudition of the great Arthurian scholars of the last 100 years. A translator is primarily concerned with what the author said and meant. In determining what Chrétien said, like all Old French readers since 1959, I am thankful for the existence of the Roach edition of B.N. Ms. Fr. 12576 of Chrétien de Troyes' *Conte du Graal*, with its clear text, extensive notes, and glossaries. I am indebted to the modern English and French prose translations listed in the bibliography for suggestions of felicitous modern renderings, but my ultimate source was always the Roach edition. Determining what Chrétien meant, literally and theoretically, was far more difficult. I was privileged to have the advice of William Roach of the University of Pennsylvania during the final stages of the preparation of this translation, and I thank him for his generosity in taking time to read the footnotes and guide me through the realms of studies on the *Conte du Graal*. As he advised, I have placed an emphasis on the classical scholarship of Alfons Hilka and Roger Sherman Loomis which is not intended to be limiting but to give modern readers enough information to attain a simple understanding of the *Conte du Graal*. Readers who are inspired to acquire a deeper understanding of the tale will find a wealth of material at their disposal; the extensive research and theoretical studies of recent years require the space of a library, not a bibliography.

The translation greatly benefitted from the encouragement and advice of other scholars. I am especially grateful to Julian Harris of the University of Wisconsin, Norris Lacy of the University of Kansas, and Edward Peters of the University of Pennsylvania for their careful readings of the translation and constructive criticism. Ruth Dean, Sally Fullman of Caldwell College, JoAnn Moran of Georgetown University, and Jo Radnor of American University gave me the benefit of their experience with Arthurian studies and the needs of their students. Sally Purcell of Oxford University was a skillful and knowledgable editor. Elizabeth Kennan of Mount Holyoke College deserves to be godmother to this verse translation because of her valiant efforts in bringing it to successful completion. I am deeply grateful to all of them, and, needless to say, the responsibility for any errors is exclusively my own.

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Story of the Grail requires an understanding of the human heart and Perceval's determination to persist in the pursuit of a goal pronounced unattainable, with the final realization that the key to the door of the inner room is the spirit of love and charity. I owe whatever appreciation of these qualities I possess to the persons to whom this translation is dedicated: my father, Burton H. Harwood, Jr. and my mother, Eleanor Cash Harwood.

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Washington, D.C.
INTRODUCTION

Chrétien de Troyes was the celebrated 12th-century poet who created the Arthurian romance as a literary genre. When Chrétien began to write his last and perhaps most influential romance, *Perceval; or, the Story of the Grail*, he was a mature writer with a widespread literary reputation. The accepted information about his career is based more upon deduction and conjecture than upon fact, but probably Chrétien was born at Troyes in Champagne around 1135, where he received a classical education as part of his clerical training. Early in his career he composed verse adaptations of Ovid's *Art of Love* and *Remedy for Love* and of two tales from the *Metamorphoses*, “The Shoulder Bite” and “Philomela.” He also wrote two love songs. Although Ovid was an enduring influence, Chrétien became fascinated with the Arthurian legends that were circulating in France. He composed a tale of King Mark and Iseut, which was lost, like all of his earlier works except the love songs and “Philomena.” Traditionally, it is thought that he wrote the first known Arthurian romance, *Erec and Enide*, between 1160 and 1170. He signed this romance “Chrétien of Troyes,” which implies that he was not living in Troyes at that time. Chrétien returned to Troyes sometime after 1164 and wrote at least three other romances under the patronage of the cultivated Countess Mary of Champagne, who was the wife of Count Henry of Champagne and the daughter of Louis VII and Eleanor of Aquitaine. *Cligès*, written around 1176, was strongly influenced by the Tristan legend, despite its Byzantine setting. *Lancelot; or, the Knight in the Cart* relates the love story of Lancelot and Queen Guinevere. Countess Mary suggested its adulterous theme, which appealed so little to the moral Chrétien that he lost interest in the romance and left the last verses to be finished by a fellow cleric. Chrétien turned to *Yvain; or, the Knight with the Lion*, a portrait of courtly love in marriage which is considered to be his finest completed work. Chrétien is believed to have written *Lancelot* and *Yvain* between 1177 and 1181. During this period there has been speculation, but no proof, that Chrétien traveled and was in holy orders. He may have written another romance, *William of England*, but his authorship of that work is disputed.

In 1178 a change occurred in the political situation in France which had a direct effect upon Chrétien’s career by bringing him under the influence of a new patron. Louis VII, seriously ill and paralyzed, authorized the coronation of Philip-Augustus, his 13-year-old son by his third wife, Adele of Champagne. Philip-Augustus’s godfather, Philip of Al-
sace, Count of Flanders, was named first Councillor of the kingdom and tutor to the young prince, in which capacity Count Philip carried out the functions of regent from 1178 to 1181. During his period of authority Count Philip was on poor terms with the rival house of Blois-Champagne; in 1179 Count Henry of Champagne left France for the Holy Land and did not return to Troyes until 1181, one week before his death. At that time Chrétien's patroness, the widowed Countess Mary, retired from public life. Count Philip's period of authority also ended in 1181, when Philip-Augustus assumed control of his government. At that time Count Philip was officially reconciled with the members of the house of Blois-Champagne and joined a coalition with them against the young king. In 1182 Count Philip, recently widowed and residing in Troyes, sought a papal dispensation to marry Countess Mary, but the marriage never took place. In 1190 Count Philip left France during the Third Crusade and died of the plague in the Holy Land a year later, in June 1191. This is the latest possible date for the composition of the Story of the Grail, which Chrétien dedicated to him. It is not certain whether Chrétien composed the Story of the Grail between 1178 and 1181, when Count Philip was at the height of his influence and power at the royal court of Philip-Augustus, or between 1181 and 1183, when Count Philip had allied himself against the French king and was living in Troyes, or at a later date prior to Count Philip's death in 1191. According to Chrétien's prologue, Count Philip gave Chrétien a book containing a "Story of the Grail," which the poet called the best story told to entertain the royal courts. At Count Philip's request that he write the story in verse, Chrétien began his last and longest romance, which was never completed. The prologue implies that the story existed in oral and written form, but Chrétien de Troyes' Perceval; or, the Story of the Grail is the earliest known version of the tale of a young knight's visit to the mysterious grail castle. Chrétien de Troyes' romance is the source of the masterpieces of the subsequent generations of composers and writers who have taken up the theme of the quest of the grail.

Chrétien de Troyes' Perceval; or, the Story of the Grail begins after a brief prologue in praise of Count Philip of Flanders and the virtue of Christian charity. A noble Welsh youth who had been raised in ignorance of chivalry left his grief-stricken widowed mother for dead to go to King Arthur's court to be knighted. On the way to the court, he unwittingly insulted a maiden in a tent and incurred her jealous knight's wrath. King Arthur recognized the youth's worth, despite his rough manners and Kay's jeering, and granted him the arms of an enemy Red Knight. Kay slapped a maiden and abused a fool who predicted that the rustic youth would become the best knight in the world. An older knight, Gornemant of Gohort, regularized the youth's situation by teaching him to use
his new weapons. Gornemant gave the young man simple rules of behavior, one of which was not to talk too much, since his speech revealed his lack of education. The youth defended the besieged castle of Belrepeire and fell in love with its lady, Blancheflor. They spent a night together sleeping side by side. Despite his unconsummated love for Blancheflor, the youth left her to find his mother, if she was still alive.

At an impassable river, the youth saw a crippled nobleman fishing and was entertained magnificently at his manor. The Fisher King gave the youth a sword that would break in only one peril. During dinner the youth watched in silent amazement as a young man carrying a bleeding white lance, two young men with candelabra, a beautiful maiden bearing a gold, bejeweled grail (a large, somewhat deep, serving platter), and another maiden bearing a silver carving dish, passed in procession through the hall into an inner room. The youth longed to ask about the bleeding lance and the grail, but, mindful of Gornemant's admonition, remained silent. The next morning he awoke to a deserted castle and narrowly escaped injury when he left. Near the castle he met his cousin, who was mourning her slain lover, and who questioned him closely about his visit to the grail castle. She asked him his name, which he had never heard before, but he said intuitively was Perceval of Wales. His cousin informed him that his mother died of grief when he left, and that his sin against her prevented him from asking one of two questions: "Why does the lance bleed?" or "Whom are they serving with the grail?" which would have healed the crippled Fisher King and averted disaster.

Perceval avenged the death of his cousin's lover by overcoming his slayer. The defeated knight was the vengeful Proud Knight who had forced his maiden to follow him in rags since the day Perceval insulted her in the tent. Emissaries from King Arthur's court found Perceval in a forest clearing, contemplating three drops of blood on the snow and thinking of Blancheflor's glowing complexion. Perceval injured Kay, avenging Kay's churlish behavior, but the courteous Gawain persuaded him to appear before the king. Amidst their festivities an ugly maiden arrived at court and upbraided Perceval for his silence at the grail castle. She challenged King Arthur's knights to depart on many adventurous quests. Perceval chose a quest which the ugly maiden called impossible: to return to the Fisher King's castle and ask the correct questions about the lance and grail.

The story turns to the adventures of Gawain, King Arthur's nephew and the best knight in the world. Gawain was summoned to Escavalon to defend himself against the charge of unlawfully slaying its late king. Stopping at Tintagel, Gawain championed a child, the Maid with Little Sleeves. At Escavalon Gawain was warmly welcomed by the young king and his sister, who were unaware of his identity until they were enlight-
ened by a rioting mob. To resolve his conflicting obligations toward a
guest and his father’s slayer, the king sent Gawain away to find the bleed-
ing lance, which was revealed as the lance destined to destroy the realm
of Logres (England).

Interrupting Gawain’s adventures, the story returns to Perceval. For
five years Perceval had been wandering, unmindful of God, until he met
his Hermit Uncle in a forest on Good Friday. The hermit explained that
Perceval’s sin against his mother caused his silence at the grail castle,
and that Perceval was closely related to the Fisher King. The man being
served with the grail in the inner room was the Fisher King’s father, a
man so spiritual that he had been sustained for years by mass wafers
brought to him in the grail, which the hermit declared to be a holy ob-
ject. Perceval repented and received communion.

The story returns to Gawain. After a series of misadventures with a
beautiful but evil maiden and a treacherous knight Greoreas, Gawain was
ferried across a river to a splendid castle. Within this castle, a white-
haired queen, her daughter, her granddaughter Clarissant, and five
hundred youths and maidens were awaiting a perfect knight to free them
from a spell. Gawain survived the perils of the Wondrous Bed and arose
as their lord and deliverer. Challenged by the evil maiden, Gawain leaped
the Perilous Ford and was informed by an enemy knight, the Guirome-
lant, that the ladies of the castle were Gawain’s grandmother, Queen
Ygerne (also King Arthur’s mother), Gawain’s mother, and Gawain’s sis-
ter. After accepting the Guiromelant’s challenge, Gawain returned to
the castle and sent to King Arthur’s court for witnesses to their combat.
The text breaks off abruptly as Gawain’s messenger arrived at court, and
Gerbert de Montreuil explained why, in his continuation of the Story of
the Grail: “Chrétien de Troyes, who began the story of Perceval, told all
this, but death overtook him and did not let him bring it to an end.”

How Chrétien would have ended the romance is a fascinating ques-
tion since, whatever the traditional ending of the “Story of the Grail”
may have been, his version is the earliest one that has survived. It would
be consistent with Chrétien’s earlier romances for King Arthur to hasten
with his court to witness his beloved nephew’s combat with the Guirome-
lant and for Gawain to be victorious. The Guiromelant’s love for the in-
accessible Clarissant, symbolized by the emerald ring, brings to mind
the emerald ring that the Proud Knight gave to the Maiden in the Tent.
Perhaps these lovers also would have overcome the obstacles that separate
them. Some scholars believe that Gawain’s adventures are a counterpoint
to Perceval’s adventures, and when the text breaks off, King Arthur’s
court has assembled once again and seems about to displace itself to
meet a triumphant hero who has visited an Otherworld castle. Perhaps
the story would have returned to Perceval, who had become spiritually
prepared to seek the grail. William Nitze speculates that Chrétien would have ended the story with an episode in which Perceval breaks the treacherous sword he received from the Fisher King, after which Perceval would return to the grail castle to ask the liberating questions and marry Blancheflor.

Chrétien's *Story of the Grail* is a controversial literary work, and one of many debates about the romance is whether its present form is authentic. The *Story of the Grail* has come down as a two-part romance featuring Perceval's adventures in the first half and Gawain's adventures in the second, which are briefly interrupted by Perceval's visit to his hermit uncle. This duality of action in itself is not atypical of Chrétien's works. The unfinished *Story of the Grail*, however, is one-third longer than Chrétien's other completed romances and contains numerous discrepancies in its time sequence. These irregularities made certain scholars question whether Chrétien had written the entire *Story of the Grail* in its present form. The prevailing opinion is that the entire text is authentic, and that any discrepancies may be attributed to the fact that Chrétien died before he had a chance to put the finishing touches to his romance.

The greatest controversies about the *Story of the Grail* are centered on the matière, or source material; the conjointure, or organization and plot construction; and the sens, or overall meaning of the romance. Interest in Chrétien's romance is so intense, because its influence on European literature is so important, that new discoveries or theories are continuously appearing. Volumes have been written about the *Story of the Grail*, and it is impossible to cover the material adequately in the space of an introduction.

Before a specific discussion of the *Story of the Grail*, it may be helpful to recall that the three major sources of medieval literary material, including Chrétien's romances, were Rome, France, and Britain. From Rome, through his clerical training, Chrétien became familiar with the Bible and the teachings of the Christian church, and also with Greek and Roman mythology and the legends of the Trojan war. He was greatly influenced by Ovid and sometimes imitated his literary style. From France, Chrétien was familiar with the *Roman de Thèbes*, *Roman d'Alexandre*, *Roman de Troie*, and *Roman d'Enéas*, and he was one of the first to use this long romance form to write about King Arthur. Chrétien was also familiar with the French heroic epic traditions embodied in the *Chanson de Roland*. Chrétien seems to have been a critical listener when Breton storytellers, descendants of Britons who emigrated to Brittany in the 6th century, entertained the sophisticated Champagne court with tales of Celtic gods and heroes like King Arthur, Tristan, and Finn. Chrétien was also familiar with written versions of stories about King Arthur through Wace's *Roman de Brut*, a French verse version of Geoffrey of Monmouth's
Latin History of the Kings of Britain. Troyes was an important city on several major trade routes, and Chrétien might have been acquainted with certain Byzantine legends and tales of the Holy Land which were transmitted to France during the early Crusades. To a limited extent Chrétien drew upon his earlier romances for material. Proximity and probability are the surest tests of source material, and speculation about other sources of the Story of the Grail should be based on a review of these well-proven sources of literary material before searching further afield.

In essence, Chrétien's Story of the Grail is a tale of a young knight named Perceval who visited the grail castle and failed to ask the right question. It is difficult to tell whether Chrétien was familiar with an earlier lost version of the story, or whether he was the first to compose the tale as we know it today. Certainly Chrétien was familiar with the name "Perceval of Wales," for he listed him among King Arthur's knights in Erec and Enide, but he did not indicate that the name "Perceval" was connected with any particular story. The prologue shows that Chrétien was also familiar with an oral and a written version of a "Story of the Grail," which was probably a tale of a young knight's visit to the grail castle. Chrétien may have been the first to combine the name "Perceval" with the grail story. Alternatively, there has been unprovable speculation that Chrétien might have known some lost English or Welsh version of the story. There has also been speculation that the elements of Perceval's visit to the grail castle had been combined in some lost Provençal source. The facts are simply that Chrétien's Perceval; or, the Story of the Grail is the earliest known version in existence.

In the absence of a more immediate source for the Story of the Grail, some scholars have sought its sources in mythology. At the beginning of the 20th century the grail castle episode was believed to be based upon a Greek or Oriental vegetation or fertility rite. The prototype of the Fisher King was thought to be a fertility god, and the lance and grail were thought to be sexual symbols. Perceval's visit to the grail castle was interpreted as a failed initiation into a fertility rite, in which a new young king would replace a maimed fertility god whose impairment had brought sterility upon the land. This myth is essentially about the coming of spring, and it can be found in virtually every part of the world. Perceval's visit to the grail castle also bears certain resemblance to other tales which, in Albert Pauphilet's words, express mankind's hope of overcoming death by recounting a mortal's visit to the realm of the dead and failure to do some trifling thing which would have restored their world to life. Further research in the middle of the 20th century showed that many elements of the Story of the Grail were much more obviously present in Celtic myths and legends, which were transmitted to the French courts by professional Breton storytellers.