

Carroll College

The Perceval Bildungsroman:
The Evolution of the Spiritual Knight

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Introduction

I cannot remember the first time that I read the story of Perceval because it seems that I have always known him. However, I have only recently discovered that I have known him only in a very limited way. I had only been acquainted with him in select writings, and, therefore, I only knew certain facets of his character. Of course it follows that unless you read all there is to read about a character, you are not able to develop a full understanding of who he or she really is.

In the area of Arthurian literature, it is no small task for readers to create composites of who the characters are. In each, separate story they reveal a side of themselves that is not present in any other work. Needless to say, the task of reading every bit of information about those characters is likewise difficult. Worse yet, even at the end you are not guaranteed a full understanding of the characters. Perceval is one such character.

Because of his multi-faceted personality, Perceval represents no small challenge to the scholar who wishes understand his true nature. He is at once innocent and naive when he deals with knights in the Desolate Wood as well as competent and worldly when he defends the maiden Blanchefleur's castle. He is not the perfect knight, but because of his imperfection, he appeals more readily to the reader's imagination. Unlike Galahad, he is not preceded by religious

omens, nor is he privileged, like Arthur, to draw out mysterious swords out from stones mystically set in the woods. Yet of all the heroes gathered about the Round Table, he is the everyman of Arthurian literature, the mysterious anti-hero who has captured the imaginations of both readers and scholars alike throughout the ages.

To acquire a complete understanding of Perceval's development as a truly spiritual hero, it is necessary to recognize the Celtic and Welsh traditions that ushered in his creation, Chretien de Troyes' Conte del Graal that molded him into a credible character, and the later scholarly interpretations through which Perceval reaches his spiritual perfection.

Each of these stages is crucial in the evolution of Perceval's character. To ignore or overlook any one of them would rob us of a full appreciation of the Perceval myth and its centrality to the spiritual culture of medieval Europe, a culture which exhibits its first signs of disintegration with the advent of the Renaissance.

Chapter 1: Literary Precursors to Perceval

The first traces of Perceval's character can be found in the legends of the Welsh and Irish folk-heroes. Through the parallels to later works like Chretien's Conte del Graal, scholars have been able to reconstruct the evolutionary process that ultimately formed Perceval. Although some critics, like Helen Adolf, are reluctant to believe in that evolutionary process, they are inevitably drawn to the conclusion that one cannot separate these works in the final analysis. Adolf, in her "Studies in Chretien's Conte del Graal," initially refuses Chretien's bond with the ancient mythologies:

Scholars are now agreed on the fact that Chretien had no direct access to Irish mythology. . . .What he had before him was not the complex pattern of mythology, but mythology broken into pieces and rearranged according to universal laws of primitive fiction. (7)

That is not Adolf's final word on the matter, however, because only a few pages later, she affirms Chretien's use of mythology, noting that in "wanting to give the story a more knightly character, Chretien re-shaped it along the lines of the Bran legend" (13).

It is logical to assume, then, that in spite of some minor differences in opinion, most Perceval scholars agree upon that Perceval was at once both a Welshman and an Irishman. The three most prominent examples of this double heritage are the

Macgnimrada Conculainn and the Macgnimrada Finn of Ireland and the Peredur of Welsh fame.

Chronologically speaking, the Macgnimrada Conculainn is the first of these works because it has been dated in the early half of the eighth century. It offers the initial story and characteristics of a Perceval-like youth, and therefore it may be considered the forerunner of the Peredur and the Macgnimrada Finn. The next work in this trio is the Macgnimrada Finn because it appears in the twelfth century. It is more thorough in exploring the Perceval character's youth, and it establishes the boy as an Irish hero. The Peredur is the last work in the chronological order since it has been dated in the early half of the thirteenth century. It follows the basic plot of the Conculainn and Finn stories, but it gives the hero a Welsh name and origin, and thus it adapts him as a Welsh folkhero.

The Macgnimrada of Conculainn, or The Boyhood Exploits of Cuchulainn, is the first reference to Perceval's boyhood and quest to become a knight. The hero, like Perceval, was fantastic stories of Conchobar, the King of Ulster, whose castle is located at Emain Macha. Despite his mother's protests to turn away from the practice of chivalry, Conculainn sets out to the great king whom he later discovers is his uncle. Cuchulainn proves his worth for knighthood in feats of swiftness and strength and is later knighted by his uncle, the king.

The parallels between Perceval's character and that of Cuchulainn are many, and Roger Sherman Loomis advocates this

point of view in his Arthurian Tradition and Chretien de Troyes when he discusses Chretien's use of the Macgnimrada:

He [Chretien] preserved the following features of the Irish original: The hero is brought up by his mother, hears of a royal court, announces to her his intention of going thither, obtains her reluctant consent, departs equipped with a javelin, arrives at the fortress of a prodon, and receives arms from him. Thanks to the cognate (though corrupt) version supplied by Peredur, we can feel assured of the descent of Perceval's enfances from the boyhood deeds of Cuchulainn. (337)

Loomis' statement clearly reinforces the idea that Perceval is a character which evolved out of older works. His character was not a spontaneous creation, but a slow formation out of the roots of earlier tales. Nevertheless, despite the obvious parallels between this work and Chretien's, there exist even greater ones in the Welsh tale, Peredur. However, there is also a great controversy surrounding this work as well, and it centers around the very etymology of the character's name.

"Peredur" comes from the Welsh words "Per," meaning "sword," and "Dur," meaning "water." Because of the etymology of the name, many scholars, like Helen Adolf, argue that the tale of Peredur is not the beginning of Perceval's tale at all but actually that of Lancelot. Her hypothesis is based solely on Lancelot's connection with the Lady of the Lake and his great ability in swordsmanship. However, her theory has no foundation

in fact, and her argument is too tenuous to believe. Adolf, in her "Studies in Chretien's Conte del Graal," also makes the assumption that Chretien ignored this significance and created Perceval anyway as a composite character with traits from legends surrounding Lancelot and a Perceval-like character. However, it is necessary to point out that in Lancelot's upbringing and that of Peredur for this claim to be substantiated. We must look at Peredur, then, as the true prototype of Perceval's character and begin to analyze him as the next step of Perceval's evolution.

The story of the hero in the Peredur holds many similarities to those of Cuchulainn and Perceval, but the Welsh author varies from the formula when he writes that the hero is brought up completely in the company of females and that Arthur is the famed king to whom Perceval travels. The boy proves his worth at the house of a maternal uncle who eventually knights him, but only after his uncle has taught him the use of arms and the practices of chivalry. Peredur then leaves to prove himself elsewhere in Arthur's kingdom, more from a need to redeem himself from the slanders of the other knights than for anything else.

His uncle's chivalric advice provides Peredur with his "knightly mannerisms" which he values above all else. This uncle, according to Brynley F. Roberts in The Arthurian Encyclopedia, is the one who "advises him never to inquire about the significance of what he sees" (424). Because, of this advice, Perceval fails to ask for the information he needs from

the Grail King when he sees the procession of the Bleeding Lance and a head placed upon a platter, instead of the Grail. Because of his failure, the castle is completely destroyed by supernatural forces, and Peredur barely escapes with his life. He returns to Arthur's court, only to be scorned by his fellow knights for his failure, and then determined to remedy his past mistakes by questing for the Grail.

These parallels and innovations make the Peredur character a template for the developing Perceval character. It elaborates on old ideas and it creates a new and varied point of view toward the hero. The Peredur signifies that the Perceval character is coming to the attention of certain medieval writers in their quest to re-create a human, yet holy knight. However, Perceval's formation does not end with the Peredur. Moreover, it extends out to one more work which we shall discuss now.

The Macgnimrada Finn is, just as the Macgnimrada Conculainn, translated into the Irish vernacular as The Boyhood Exploits of Finn. This tale is one of the great cycles in Irish folklore. It originated in the area of Leinster and then circulated throughout all of Ireland. Despite its failure to gain true recognition from the "filid," the narrators of folklore in Ireland, it became popular in the Irish highlands because of its keeping with the ancient, aristocratic traditions in the Irish culture. Nevertheless, it became very influential on Welsh literature and the Arthurian Romances, and thus developing into a popular recitation among the common folk.

The Macgnimrada Finn does not, first of all, resemble the Peredur and the Macgnimrada Conculainn in its treatment of the young hero's upbringing. Unlike the Macgnimrada Conculainn, the boy was raised by a sister and a fellow woman warrior. However, it does resemble the other works in that the boy leaves home to seek the kingdom of the King of Bantry. But again, unlike the other works, he does not even attempt to prove himself or gain knighthood there. Instead he travels to his two uncles, Crimall and Fical mac Conchinn, but not before embarking on a series of great adventures.

All of these works make manifest the Perceval figure's primary characteristics, even down to the weapon that he used. Chretien, however, proved exceedingly eclectic in his choices of the personal traits of his story. The Finn Cycle lends to him the Celtic viewpoint of folkheroes, Peredur the hero's name and the connection with Arthur, and Conculainn the framework upon which the story of Perceval rests. However, all of these works bestow innocence as well to Perceval's character. This quality becomes synonymous with his name and personality. Because Perceval's innocence is integral in any discussion about his character or origin, scholars have tried to locate that trait in his sources. Roger Sherman Loomis illustrates this need to search for the beginnings of Perceval's innocence in his Arthurian Tradition and Chretien de Troyes:

Two points emerge from the consideration of this parallel:

(1) Peredur's naive ignorance is an inheritance from the

Cuchulainn tradition. (2) It receives greater emphasis and is given a humorous twist. This emphasis on Peredur's ignorance and its ludicrous results is something new; Cuchuliann's naive questions. . . .supplied the hint, but hardly more, and as for Finn, he was no simpleton but a lad of astounding precosity. It is probable, however, that Finn's upbringing by women lent itself to this interpretation of Perceval's character. . . .(399)

Loomis, therefore, is pointing out that the older Welsh and Irish tales do provide Perceval's roots of innocence. It is undeniable and obvious that they are indeed the forerunners of Perceval's character.

Perceval, then, represents no small challenge to the critics who read to understand his stories. His background, though traceable, leaves doubts as to how he evolved as the human, though holy, character in the Grail Quest. Considering the paucity of background that exists, it is therefore necessary to look to the Conte del Graal of Chretien and its later translations in order that it may be possible to completely understand the place of Perceval in the Arthurian Romances.

Chapter 2: Chretien's Conte del Graal

The clash of ancient mythology and medieval religiosity culminates in the creation of Chretien de Troyes' Conte del Graal. This work records the transformation of Perceval from the rustic, naive youth to the courtly, yet religious, knight of the Round Table. In it, Chretien has combined the best elements of the secular hero with the strict religious observances that marked the entirety of the Middle Ages.

Chretien de Troyes wrote the Conte del Graal in 1190 A.D. at the court Philip of Flanders. He received the book containing the story of Perceval and the Holy Grail from Philip and was commissioned by him to "re-write" it in the vernacular. Although the work itself is brilliant, the prologue, created entirely by Chretien, is fascinating as well. It manages to establish the glory of Philip by comparing him favorably to Alexander the Great, and it also establishes the glory of the hero, Perceval, by comparing him favorably with earlier heroes. It is this analogy which creates Perceval's superiority among heroes and his legitimacy as a literary character. David Staines, in his The Complete Romances of Chretien de Troyes, agrees with this premise and discusses the author's intentions for the prologue when he explains that it

sets up an opposition between the great Alexander of pre-Christian times and the worthier Philip of the present. . . .Just as Philip is worthier than Alexander,

so too will Perceval be worthier than the heroes of the earlier romances... (xxiv)

That being the case, Chretien set out to re-write the legend of Perceval, always mindful of his audience and the sensibilities of his times.

The Conte del Graal concerns itself with the journey of Perceval from boyhood to a manhood of religious actualization. Chretien's work is not content to simply relate the facts of Perceval's life, but it also to re-define him as a hero worthy of the religious people's emulation during the Middle Ages.

Like the previous legends, Perceval is brought up in the woods by his widowed mother, who shelters him from the outside world of adventure and chivalry. He discovers some knights in the woods one day, however, and much to the chagrin of his mother, he decides to seek out the great king who makes knights. The Conte del Graal now differs from the narrative formula of other versions in that it names Arthur as the much-sought-after king. At any rate, the young man enters the king's domain, and finds Arthur insulted and at odds over what to do about his enemies. Because of his lack of upbringing, Perceval mistakes Arthur's moroseness as rudeness and is not courteous to him. As a result he is thought a fool and, pushed on by the jests of Sir Kay, he rushes out into battle with the Red Knight in order to win his arms. Despite his complete lack of fighting experience, he defeats the knight, wins his armor, and leaves the court to search for adventures.

Adventures come easily enough to Perceval because he is signed to undergo them. By that, I mean that he is followed by portents and a natural naivete that makes it impossible for anything not to be an adventure. Every event in his life becomes a learning experience. For example, when Perceval intends on leaving the court, he comes upon a laughing maiden who proclaims him to be the finest knight in the whole world. Regardless of the fact that she is then insulted by Kay, she represents the first "sign" that Perceval is meant to be more than a mere heroic figure.

Next, there is Gornemant of Gohort who acts as Perceval's master in arms. He is an honorable man who instructs Perceval in the virtue of silence and other practices of chivalry. However, even in this case Perceval does not act plainly, for he has a natural propensity for abilities of arms and he learns his lessons well. It is not long after his instruction, then, that Perceval leaves on a quest for adventures. The supreme indication of Perceval's difference from other heroes arrives while he is searching for his mother. He happens upon a raging stream and is greeted by a man in a boat. Finding out that the river is impassable, Perceval hastens to the fisherman's house to find lodging for the night. However, upon reaching the abode, he finds it to be nothing short of a castle. His curiosity overwhelming him, Perceval enters the castle only to find a wounded man lying on a couch in the middle of the room. The old man then gives Perceval a sword and orders him to recline

at table with him. Perceval agrees, and at that very moment, he sees two maidens, one with a bowl and the other with a platter, preceded by many servants bearing candelabras. Perceval desperately desires to ask who is served by the bowl and platter but, remembering Gornemant's teaching, does not do so. Three times the bowl and platter enter the room and three times Perceval sees them, yet each time he refuses to ask the questions. The old man then retires to bed and Perceval follows suit. The next morning when Perceval rises, there is no one present in the castle, and after he leaves, the castle seems to disappear from behind him.

Then, going a short way into the woods, he happens upon a maiden wailing over the dead body of her lover. Seeing him, she reveals herself as his cousin and, having asked about the visions that he had witnessed, she admonishes him for having refused to ask the questions. She then makes it known to him that he could have saved the old man, her lover, and the kingdom from devastation if only he had spoken. Most of all, she reports to Perceval that, because of his insolence, his mother had died. Hearing all of this, Perceval rides off in anguish to face other adventures. However, once he returns to Arthur's court, he finds himself censured by an old woman who rebukes him for his failures. Perceval then vows to right his wrongs and he sets out again for the Grail castle. The tale breaks off at this point for Perceval and continues on with Gawain. However, when we do rejoin Perceval, we find that he has been wandering without

faith for five years. It is only when he meets his uncle, the hermit, on Good Friday and confesses his grievous sins and failures that he once again renews his faith in God and becomes a spiritual being.

Chretien's tale is considered the definitive work on Perceval because it exemplifies his humanity as well as his growth as a spiritual being. It does not treat him as two separate entities but as one, whole servant of God. For years, scholars like Sister M. Amelia Klenke have examined Chretien's treating of Perceval's character, and they have centered upon that very human concept of sin and its impact on the rest of his grail adventures. In her "The Spiritual Ascent of Perceval," Klenke discusses Perceval's humanity as he sins and is redeemed from it in Chretien's work:

Perceval has many faults. He is disrespectful to his mother, he is disobedient, headstrong, and more interested in food for the body than that of the soul. He is uncouth to the point of naivete...But not once through the tale will his courage ever waiver. (10)

Perceval's redemption, then, lies in his unflagging courage and strength. Even though he sins, he is still more noble than others because he refuses to act with cowardice. Therefore, it is almost allowable for Perceval to sin because he seems to compensate for his weaknesses in his chivalric behavior. Perceval's character in the Conte del Graal is flawed and sinful, but at the same time, he is blessed with certain

noble and virtuous qualities. It seems then, that Chretien has created a "dual" character, one that is both human and holy. This "dual" character marks the next stage in Perceval's evolution, and it signals the start of Perceval's spiritual journey which will see its fruition in later redactions of the Perceval myth.

Chapter 3: Later Translations and Interpretations of Perceval's Character

The Conte del Graal of Chretien was translated into Middle Dutch in the first half of the thirteenth century in a work called Perchevael. Since this work is a direct translation of Chretien's creation, it is safe to assume that there is no differences in the role of the title character, nor in the events of his childhood. The translator of this work is unknown, and there are only fragments that exist of it. However, French medieval authors considered it important enough to include it among their works such as the Lancelot-Compilatie, which has been dated in the early thirteenth century, and the French First Continuation of Chretien's romance. This work is also important because it suggests that Chretien's work was being validated by other writers. This suggestion is credible because not every legend of the medieval age was translated and accepted by the scholars of the age. They saw Perceval and his quest for the Grail as a topic worth pursuing. It would therefore follow that the translators of the age wanted the legend translated into the vernacular language so everyone could learn to appreciate it.

The next manuscript is actually a compilation of works called the Vulgate Cycle which, according to E. Jane Burns in The Arthurian Encyclopedia, is also called, The Lancelot-Grail Cycle or the Pseudo-Map Cycle (609). The works that accompany

this compilation are in prose, and they have an emphasis more on the religious than on the secular account of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table. Because of this characteristic, the Vulgate Cycle tries to recount the history of the Grail and all those who search for it from the time of the Christ's Crucifixion to the era of King Arthur's court.

The five works that are contained in this cycle are the Lancelot propre, La Queste del Saint Graal, Mort Artu, Estoire del Saint Graal, and Estoire de Merlin. However, only La Queste del Saint Graal is relevant to the study of Perceval's character since it is the only one that writes about him in any great detail.

La Queste del Saint Graal has been dated in the thirteenth century, and it has no authenticated author. However, it had been credited to Walter Map, a scribe at the court of Henry II, who died before the work was supposedly written. In spite of this discrepancy, the Queste remains a valuable work for understanding how the Arthurian tales evolved throughout the ages.

The text of the Queste itself is extremely enjoyable in that it reads more like history book than a literary fable. It exhibits an extremely different point of view, however, when it comes to treating the character of Perceval. In P.M. Matarasso's translation of the Queste, Perceval seems more like an innocent going to a coming-of-age quest. He really has no sensibility about who he is or what the quest is about, but

he does have a faith in God that guides him. He is always ready to trust all to God, and that is what eventually brings him into the worthiness of sharing the company of Galahad in the presence of the Holy Grail.

Perceval, however, does not enjoy that privilege so readily. To be considered by God worthy enough for the Holy Grail, he undergoes temptations of every sort and challenged in every facet of his faith. However, Perceval succeeds in these tests and is carried off by the power of God to join his companions in the quest, Bors and Galahad. His godly nature has survived his human nature, but he has not lost that human vulnerability which makes him so necessary to the quest. I say necessary because, unlike Galahad, he is not perfect, and he needs to be tested and purified to see the mysteries of God. He is human, and thus he must choose between the paths of Good or Evil. He is vulnerable, and thus those choices have every power to either crush him or save him.

In her introduction to The Quest for the Holy Grail Matarasso clarifies and exemplifies Perceval's role in the quest and comments on his very humanness saying that

If Galahad seems to rarefied a figure, Perceval is altogether human. He has a child-like simplicity and directness. This simplicity indeed is double-edged. On the one hand it engenders a total self-abandonment to God; on the other it leads him to gross imprudence and in the early part of his trials to excessive and childish despair

when things go wrong. . . .Despite his failings, or more probably because of them, he is a most endearing character and his charm is nowise lessened. . . .(18)

It is that charm which reaches out to the reader and portrays Perceval as a real character with real weaknesses. Matarasso touches upon those human vulnerabilities that so endear Perceval even to modern readers. We read his story with interest because it seems to mirror mankind's struggle against worldly temptations to secure God's graces. It symbolizes man's ever-present need to better himself and to show that, even under the most trying of circumstances, human nobility shall rise to the surface.

Because the Queste only deals with the search for the Holy Grail, there is hardly any mention whatever about Perceval's upbringing, his training for knighthood, or his worldly affairs. In point of fact, this manuscript shares very few of the biographical details found in earlier works. More importantly, there are only slight reports of Perceval's interaction with the Maimed King, and even in those accounts, Perceval is never really meant to ask questions. He never even talks to the wounded man let alone question him about the Holy Grail. He ends up healing the king through the blood of his sister, and therefore he undergoes none of the torments of having failed the first time on his mission, as opposed to say, The Conte del Graal.

As different as this work is from Chretien's original, it is nonetheless an interesting variation and one that bears

several implications as to the progression of Perceval's character. For example, he seems to have come into adulthood as a spiritual being who has undergone various trials to gain his hard-won virtues. He has chosen the path to God, and by doing so, has made himself whole.

The French, however, were not to monopolize the translations of Arthurian text. Other nations were looking at Perceval, too, and they were creating their own interpretations of his character and his relation to God. At the same time that the Perchevael was being written, a Bavarian peasant by the name of Wolfram von Eschenbach was writing his Parzival, a personal and more philosophical work about the young hero's courtly adventures. The Parzival is indeed a work of art which contains 25,000 lines, written in rhymed couplets, and the creation of a truly inspired writer.

Wolfram was very careful and almost reverent in his treatment of Perceval and the Grail story. This is evident as we discover that Wolfram was much more extensive than previous authors in his treatment of Perceval, Perceval's lineage, and his adventures with the Holy Grail. Because of this extensive sensibility to the details of Perceval's life, it is easy to understand why Wolfram's work is indeed one of the most intriguing of the Perceval translations.

Wolfram makes the innocence and religious aspects of Perceval more central to his story than Chretien did. His Perceval is one that is a thoroughly human being who is spurred

on in battle not because it is in his heart and soul to gain glory for God, but because he feels that fighting is the only thing which gives him worth. M.F. Richey makes this point evident in his translation of Parzival which he contributed to Richard Barber's The Arthurian Legends: An Illustrated Anthology. In it Perceval woefully bewails his plight to the hermit in the woods on the occasion of his confession:

I have cared for nought else but fighting. Yes, and I bear great enmity towards God, for he has fathered my sorrows and made them mighty. My joy is buried alive....If my hope is wounded past help, or if it survives the scar wherewith sorrow's sharp crown has branded my knightly prowess, each way I maintain, it is a shame of Him Who has power to help, if all they say of His help be true, that He helps not me! (102)

The Parzival's webegotten state and his belief that God has forsaken him pervades the entire translation. Wolfram wanted not so much to center on Perceval's knightly prowess, but upon that quality of religious indecisiveness that makes him so credible and attractive to readers. As Johnson points out, he was more in touch with the human condition than others, and therefore his emphasis radiates from that human cause.

Wolfram's translation of Chretien's work is thus important because it is one of the first times that we see an author delving deeply into Perceval's character. He makes Perceval a case study for people more concerned with their quest for

religious stability than for their courtly behavior. Like Chretien, Wolfram is careful to point out that Perceval is indeed a good knight. He possesses nobility and honor, and is inborn with a sense of chivalric duty.

Unlike Chretien, however, Wolfram goes a step farther in making Perceval seem a fool, but not in a disparaging sense. He sends Perceval out to King Arthur's court dressed in fool's clothes that he might be ridiculed by the other knights. He does this to point out that nobility is not easily recognizable but must be sought for in unusual ways. The differences between the two writings do not, however, stop there.

One more difference that creates a gap between the two authors is the way the two dealt with Perceval's love affairs. Wolfram, in his need to portray Perceval as a knight who is inherently good and holy even though he is following a path from God, presents Perceval as one who is serious in his affair with his mistress. In Wolfram's tale, Perceval falls in love with and marries the maid Condwiramurs. They have a perfect marriage and live a long happy life. According to Chretien, however, Perceval falls in love with the maid Blanchefleur whose castle is being besieged and has an affair with her. However, as soon as Perceval realizes his destiny for knighthood, he leaves Blanchefleur to go on a quest for the Holy Grail. For Chretien, the emphasis on the telling of Perceval's tale needs not lie in Perceval's holiness but more in his chivalric

pursuits. After all, they bring glory to Perceval's courtly reputation, not his religious life.

Wolfram's work indicates that Perceval is becoming a more complex character in the minds of Medieval scholars. He is no longer simply a knight who simply experiences trials and miracles on the quest. Rather, he is beginning to represent the human being in his struggle for a better state of spiritual growth. In Wolfram's case, that better state centers upon a complete religious awakening. Wolfram makes it known that Perceval is a character who must not be thought of simply on the human level but on the divine as well. He is a "clutch-character" because he is a human being that must undergo purification if he is to have a divine dimension to his character. He is not, then, the perfect knight, but he serves the best example of the potentiality of man. Because of this potentiality, many authors after Wolfram would certainly not be able to resist exploring Perceval's character.

The French, not to be outdone, also created their own version of the Grail romance which was called Perlesvaus. According to Keith Busby in *The Arthurian Encyclopedia*, "it was written in Old French and has been dated from the beginning of the thirteenth century. . . . It has survived down to the present day only in a few manuscripts and fragments" (425). This work parallels Chretien's in the issue of Perceval's upbringing, pilgrimage to King Arthur, and experiences with the Holy Grail and the Fisher King. However, it differs from

Chretien's work in that has a more religious voice rather than a secular one. Keith Busby, in The Arthurian Encyclopedia, supports this assessment:

the Perlesvaus. . . , and in particular the quest for the Grail, is interpreted in a religious spirit. . . .The religious spirit is mixed with a large dose of the supernatural and savage bloodshed, which gives the whole romance a wild and anarchic feeling. (425)

Because this work combines so well the earthly motif of mortal combat and the heavenly aspect of the Grail search and the supernatural, we can look upon it as another progression from Chretien's creation of simply the chivalric knight. Just as in Wolfram, the author here sees the need to extend the idea of Perceval and the Grail quest in order to reach a clearer understanding of the story and character of Perceval. We know that the manuscript rests its influence on Chretien's work because of its initial dating and because, as Busby explains "...the author seems to have known Chretien de Troyes's Perceval, its early Continuations, and the work of Robert de Boron, but the romance certainly predates the Vulgate del Saint Graal" (425). We may then consider this work as yet another installment of the scholars of the Middle Ages in their attempt to understand and find meaning in the Perceval of Chretien.

However, no examination of Perceval's spiritual evolution would be complete without discussing the two foremost works offered forth by the English. The first, which the English called

Sir Perceval of Galles, is the lesser known of the two.

Nevertheless, it is still an indication that Perceval was active in the minds of the English. Indeed, it has its own history and must be appreciated for it. James P. Carley, for example, observes in The Arthurian Encyclopedia that "Sir Perceval of Galles is an anonymous short English romance of 2,288 lines, composed ca. 1300-1340 and extant only in the Thornton Manuscript..." (512). This creation does not hold to the traditional outline of the Perceval story, but scholars do believe that this work is based upon the framework provided by Chretien.

The second, and perhaps the most important Arthurian work of all Medieval English literature is Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur. It is a work indeed unparalleled in its unique narration of the Arthurian legends. Peter J.C. Field supports this assessment in The Arthurian Encyclopedia when he writes of Malory's distinct use of the Arthurian tales:

. . . . Malory thought of what he had written as a comprehensive and authoritative collection of Arthurian stories. The comprehensiveness lay in including everything important, not literally everything. As narrator, Malory often speaks of stories that he has not included, a feature of the Morte D'Arthur that helps to give it a kind of solidity, as a part of a greater quasi-historical whole.
. . . (354)

Field, therefore, admits that while Malory's work may not be all-encompassing, it is, at least, honest. Because of that rare distinction, it is truly worthy of notice. However, though the work is credible enough, it deserves more attention for what it strives for and eventually achieves than for what stories it contains.

Le Morte D'Arthur is indeed the apex of the Arthurian legends. It signals the last, true scholarly effort to resurrect the glories of the medieval age just as the Renaissance is first showing its light upon the whole of Europe. According to Keith Banes in the preface to his translation of Le Morte D'Arthur, "it was first published on July 31, 1485 by Caxton. . . .[who] believed that the gallant and virtuous deeds of the Round Table knights deserved permanent record" (xi). However, in writing that record, Malory has become extremely noteworthy, especially in his treatment of Perceval's character. For Malory completely modifies the character of his young knight from what it had earlier been in the Conte del Graal and its later translations.

For example, Malory no longer employs Perceval as the only knight who receives the Grail. Rather, he appoints Perceval and Bors, with Galahad the Good Knight as their leader, as witnesses to the cup of Christ. Second, Malory places greater emphasis on the religious aspect of Perceval's makeup than on his courtly endeavors. Perceval, therefore, is no longer the worldly-wise knight entering upon romantic trysts. As a matter of fact, Malory creates Perceval more as a complete and holy

innocent than as a knight learned in the ways of chivalry. Third, as the holy innocent, yet human person, he was subjected to extraordinary trials as if Malory is at pains to redefine him in the presence of the perfect Galahad.

This treatment of Perceval's character is, then, quite different from that of previous authors. However, it is also in this work that Perceval truly becomes a holy and spiritual being. Still, he triumphs over his sins in his trials and is allowed, with his companions, to enter into the holy city of Sarras to behold the cup of Christ. Never before in previous works has Perceval been portrayed with such honor and purity. It seems that Malory saw something holy and worthy of the Grail in Perceval, but he knew that the spiritual potential could only be realized through trial and temptation. Only after he had survived the test could he obtain the graces of God. The tests, then, exemplify Perceval's essence of humanness. For it is through these trials that Perceval's character is redefined as the human, yet holy knight fighting to remain steadfast in the face of opposition.

Malory creates Perceval as the archetype of humankind's struggle to overcome evil, a Middle Ages everyman struggling to maintain faith in an increasingly faithless world. Malory, however, also seems to envision Perceval as his own alter-ego. For Malory, in one way or another, was seeking redemption from his sordid past when he created this great work. And Perceval, although he is not running from sin, is trying to find his

identity as a holy knight. He is trying to prove himself worthy of the secrets of the Grail. Robert Graves in his introduction to Keith Banes' Le Morte D'Arthur shares this same opinion when he observes, "Malory's own life may, therefore, have been consistent with the ethics of Le Morte D'Arthur. . . ." (xv). Graves, then, is assenting to the fact that Malory did indeed identify himself very closely with this work. Therefore, it would be logical that re-create Perceval's character. For, in a way, he was re-creating himself.

Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur is, finally, the culmination of Perceval's evolution as a spiritual being. In it Perceval becomes actualized as a true and holy knight, one who proves himself worthy of God's graces. Although Perceval is not, perhaps, the center of attention in this work, his mere innocent presence speaks volumes. In Perceval Malory has personified the spiritual hope for the Middle Ages. Through him, all people come to realize that, even in harsh and bloody times, it is still possible to achieve grace from the transcendent cup of Christ's covenant.

Conclusion

Perceval's evolution was not a mistake. The early Celtic and Welsh authors, Chretien de Troyes, and the later Medieval scholars saw in his character elements worthy of exploration. They knew that, through him, it would be possible to test the limitations of human spirituality, through him, they could create a character that would be the human voice in tales otherwise predisposed to the supernatural. Above all, through him, they could bring about a perfect, spiritual being to serve as an example for all mankind.

Perceval represents the consummate image of a faithful, yet human servant for the Middle Ages. He lives to serve God and trusts in Him to protect. However, at the same time, he wrestles with purely human questions. Should he continue his affair with Blanchefleur? Should he violate the laws of chivalry and ask the crucial questions? Moreover, should he have faith only in the aid of God when his foes press in on him from all sides? Consequently, it is through these choices and his spiritual disposition that he arrives unto a higher state of grace and a more complete understanding of who he is in relation to the divine will of God.

Perceval is indeed intriguing because of his spiritual evolution, but he also draws our attention because of his ability to remain a spiritual being throughout a wide variety of tales that are constantly strewn with bloodshed and vice. Throughout

his trials, combats, and adventures, he has faith in the succor of God that it will offer to him protection and the grace of the Holy Grail. Doubtless there are many other knights, aside from Galahad, who have remained true to their faith in times of trouble as well as Perceval. Through his tribulations, we discover Perceval to be a character truly worthy of our emulation and respect. For he dared to be the human knight when everyone else was working toward being divine. Because of his humanity, he makes us better for having read about him and learned from his adventures.

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