

WOLFRAM VON ESCHENBACH

ARZIVAL

A Romance of the Middle Ages



A new Translation, with an Introduction by
Helen M. Mustard and Charles E. Passage



A Vintage Book V-188 \$3.45

516.45

702

外语系

809

外文书库

PARZIVAL

B Y

Wolfram von Eschenbach



TRANSLATED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

Helen M. Mustard & Charles E. Passage



VINTAGE BOOKS

A Division of Random House

NEW YORK

VINTAGE BOOKS EDITION, March 1961

Copyright ©, 1961, by Helen M. Mustard and Charles E. Passage
All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright
Conventions. Published in the United States by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.,
New York, and Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously
in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 61-6849

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

8091741

3358

PARZIVAL

INTRODUCTION

1. WOLFRAM'S POEM

THE SCOPE OF *Parzival* is greater than that of any medieval literary work except Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and in his way Wolfram encompasses as much of human experience as does the Italian poet. His two spheres, the Arthurian circle and the Grail circle, include most of the important aspects of human existence, worldly and spiritual. So broad is the canvas Wolfram paints and so many and diverse are the highly individualized characters he portrays, that there is room for almost every possible human situation. We find the world of childhood in the young Parzival and in the charming Obilot and her playmate Clauditte; the man's world of battles and tournaments, strife against the enemy and unswerving loyalty to friends and kinsmen; the woman's world of joy and sorrow in the love for husband and children; a sense for cruelty and suffering in human life in such scenes as Sigune and the dead Schianatulander or in Herzeloyde's grief at the loss of Gahmuret; the quest for something beyond human existence in Parzival's long search for the Grail; and the whole concept of a dedicated society, serving the Grail and representing a sphere spiritually exalted above the normal realm of life.

Interestingly enough, Wolfram seems less medieval and more modern than Dante. He has his roots firmly in the medieval world, to be sure. In *Parzival* we truly see knight-

hood flowering and displaying its greatest ideals, the bravery and courtesy of the men, the gentleness and modesty of the women, the respect for Arthur's world of knightly virtues, and the reverence for the sphere of the Grail and all that it represents. But one also sees much that is almost modern in tone, and one marvels that this medieval poet could so transcend his own tradition. The inner development of the hero, the first story showing such a development in Western European literature, strikes a modern note. So too does the relationship between the sexes. In the traditional medieval romances, love was usually an extra-marital experience. In Wolfram love and marriage are synonymous, an almost unbelievable anomaly for the chivalric age. Where there is an extra-marital relationship, it is either deliberately light in tone, as in the Gawan-Antikonie episode, or it is associated with punishment and suffering, as in the relationship between Anfortas and Orgeluse. The ideal relationship, and one which Wolfram treats with great understanding and tenderness, is love in marriage. To be sure, Wolfram had a predecessor who was also interested in the problem of marriage, Hartmann von Aue, but whereas Hartmann is most interested in the effect which marriage may have on the man's pursuit of knighthood, Wolfram treats the theme much more profoundly in its meaning to both men and women.

Still another way in which Wolfram goes beyond the traditional medieval world is in his treatment of the Grail theme. There is here no trace of dualism or of asceticism. The Grail circle is set off, but not separated from Arthur's world. The Lord of the Grail may marry and have children. The knights of the Grail practice the calling of knighthood, and they may even leave the Grail castle for long periods to become lord of a land left without a ruler, and marry in that land, and have children. The women in the service of the Grail are always free to leave and marry, though their children are then expected to return to the Grail. Parzival is urged by Trevrizent to continue in the practice of knighthood even while searching for the Grail. The two worlds, the Grail world and the world of knighthood, are constantly

mingling. It is clear that Wolfram is affirming the goodness and meaningfulness of life in this world and that the Grail sphere is not set in opposition to life itself, but is simply the other side of the scales, another aspect of human existence.

Last but not least, Wolfram's portraits of children strike one as particularly modern. No other medieval author, indeed, perhaps no author before the nineteenth century, has shown such keen and sympathetic insight into the mind of a child. The boy Parzival, little Obilot, and the child Loherangrin are real and unforgettable children.

In spite of its scope Wolfram made his *Parzival* into a meticulously structured work, far more carefully and artistically patterned than any work from his contemporaries. It is divided into sixteen "Books," each of which is subdivided into units of thirty lines each. These divisions were very likely made by Wolfram himself, since most of the manuscripts agree in this respect. Each book is of course a unit, and even the small sections of thirty lines for long stretches form individual paragraph-like units. Professor Springer has shown in a recent article with what mathematical preciseness these units are arranged in relation to the core of the work, Book ix. Discounting the first 108 sections, the Gahmuret prelude (probably a late addition to the work), there are 324 sections (109-432) before and 324 sections (503-826) after Book ix, which itself numbers exactly 70 sections.

This careful external structure is paralleled by an inner structure just as meaningful. Space does not permit a detailed analysis here, but the thoughtful reader will discover for himself the nice balance which Wolfram keeps between Grail circle and Arthurian circle, between their two chief representatives, Parzival and Gawan; will note how the main thread of work is never completely forgotten even when Gawan is in the foreground, how significant brief scenes can be for the structure of the work as a whole—for example, the scenes with Sigune—and how many interesting parallels between Grail and Arthurian worlds are woven into the poem—for instance, the Castle of Wonders as a parallel to Munsalvaesche.

2. GENERAL BACKGROUND

The heroic oral poetry of the ancient Germanic peoples, which survived in Iceland and was there committed to writing, disappeared gradually from among the continental Germans in the course of the Middle Ages, and for a long time no adequate substitute took its place. Heathen gods and heathen manners were honored in those poems, and the Church could not approve of either, much less foster their preservation in writing. Thus the numerous German dialects came to be represented during their "old" period, roughly from 500 A.D. to 1000 A.D., almost exclusively by utilitarian and devotional works, and no secular literature worthy of the name was created.

In adjacent France, however, the rapidly emerging French language had already become the vehicle of the remarkable *Song of Roland* by approximately the year 1100, and a large quantity of heroic poetry, the "chansons de geste," used the same literary idiom throughout the twelfth century, always with ecclesiastical approval because of the Christian subject matter. In Germany the eleventh century witnessed those extensive linguistic changes that transformed the German dialects from their "old" into their "middle" forms, which are delimited, roughly speaking, by the dates 1000 to 1500. It was in the Rhine valley and in the southern or "high" area of the country, and in a cluster of dialects often, though not quite correctly, referred to collectively as Middle High German, that poets around the mid-twelfth century began to translate and adapt recent French works, thereby preparing the way for a significant secular literature in Germany.

Around 1150 also, French poets, in addition to topics of the "chansons de geste," turned to subjects drawn from classical antiquity, such as the unknown Norman poet's *Roman d'Eneas*, or to themes drawn from a Celtic source, such as the lost version of a Tristan narrative known as the *Estoire*. By 1180 German poets, with a marked advance in sophistication over their prior efforts, worked from these newer models. From this decade we have Eilhart von

Oberg's *Tristrant und Isalde* and Heinrich von Veldeke's *Eneit*. By this time French poetry had witnessed a fresh development, for since perhaps 1160 the celebrated innovator, Chrétien de Troyes, had been producing narrative poems of the type known as Arthurian romances. Again the German poets followed suit, and in the 1190's Hartmann von Aue translated, or, more properly speaking, adapted Chrétien's *Erec* in a poetic idiom which his contemporaries found a marvel of lucidity and charm. Probably just at the turn of the century he similarly adapted Chrétien's *Yvain* (German: *Iwein*), while in the interval between he had added two works on quasi-religious themes: *Gregorius*, adapted from a French poem called *La Vie du Pape Grégoire*, and *Poor Henry* (*Der arme Heinrich*), from more complex sources. These four narratives, together with his lyric poems, established Hartmann as a fine poet in his own right, equal to the best the French could offer, and as the harbinger of German poets who were about to surpass the French altogether. The order of the day was now Arthurian romance and Chrétien was the admired master of that genre. The German version of his semi-Arthurian *Cligès* is lost. If his pious non-Arthurian *Guillaume d'Angleterre* (of disputed authorship) was not translated, and if his Lancelot poem was neglected in favor of the paler, independently derived Swiss *Lanzelet*, his 9234-line fragment of a romance of Perceval, *Li Contes del Graal*, engaged the attention of Wolfram von Eschenbach, a younger contemporary of Hartmann's. On this theme Wolfram composed his *Parzival*, a chivalric romance of 24,810 lines in rhymed couplets, which may stand as the noblest literary achievement of the Middle Ages, with the sole exception of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Two other works flank it on either side. First, the great version of *Tristan* by Gottfried von Strassburg, and second, the fine compendium in which an unknown Austrian poet brought together the ancient Germanic stories about Siegfried and Kriemhild and made of them the continuous verse narrative called *The Song of the Nibelungs*. Still other poems, of a second magnitude, cluster around these major works, while contemporaneous with all of them stand the

great numbers of lyric poems of those German troubadours who in their own language were termed *Minnesinger* and whose prince was Walther von der Vogelweide.

Walther outlived all his famous poet-contemporaries and with his death, in approximately 1230, the glorious summertime of medieval German literature closed. It had been a great age, and personalities and events in Germany, as in Western Europe generally, had matched these artistic accomplishments. The sequence of rulers of the Hohenstauffen family, who since 1138 had commanded the German world as Holy Roman Emperors, had themselves been poets, warriors, crusaders, visionaries. Frederick Barbarossa had, in fact, perished in 1190 while on a Crusade in the Near East. The fabulous Frederick II, temporarily deprived of his heritage, was crowned King of Sicily as a four-year-old boy in 1198, at just about the time *Parzival* was begun. The years 1211-1212, when *Parzival* must have been finished or very nearly finished, saw Frederick's election as Emperor and his adventurous return to his fatherland to claim his patrimony against enemies. His coronation in 1215 at Charlemagne's capital of Aix-la-Chapelle (Aachen) occurred very near the end of Wolfram's life. Frederick's "conquest" of Jerusalem was to follow. His vision of a restored secular empire of the Caesars had meanwhile been countered by the vision of Pope Innocent III, who desired a religious empire with the Popes as the new Caesars, and Innocent III was possibly the ablest and keenest of all Popes. His Papacy from 1198 to 1216 almost exactly coincided with Wolfram's poetic career. In the same period Saint Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) was already engaged in that life and teaching which still touch men's hearts. France was being ruled by the capable hand of Philip Augustus (1180-1223); his successor was to be Saint Louis. England had the romantic Richard the Lion-Heart for its king from 1189 to 1199, and thereafter witnessed the troubled reign of King John, from whom rebellious nobles wrested the Magna Charta of rights in 1215. In town after town across Western Europe the great cathedrals were being built, and everywhere the fervor of the Crusades could be felt.

By the time of the death of Walther von der Vogelweide, sinister political portents were beginning to be observed for the German Empire. Fortune still smiled on Frederick II in 1230, though he was already deeply committed to his fateful clash with the Papacy. By 1240 fortune began to avert her face from him. He died in 1250, personally betrayed by trusted friends and with his grand Caesarian vision unrealized. The Empire then plunged into the dismal interregnum from which the Hapsburgs were ultimately to restore it and give it a different orientation. Even before Frederick's death the Pope had fled Rome lest the Emperor's armies should take the city and make him prisoner, and had found refuge in the Papal enclave city of Lyons, an unwelcome guest amid surrounding French territory. The action foreshadowed the grim Papal schism to come and the "Babylonian captivity" in Avignon. Interregnum and Avignon together spelled the end of the high Middle Ages. To say that medieval German literature died in 1230 with Walther, or even in 1250 with Frederick, would be unfair. But it declined ever more rapidly, and by 1300 it was a withered forest in which few or no birds sang.

During those years of decline more than one minor poet derived inspiration from Wolfram's works and from *Parzival* in particular. The preservation of seventeen complete manuscripts of his major poem and of more than fifty others in fragmentary form indicates how widely known it was. In 1477, when the art of printing was still in its infancy, *Parzival* was republished in printed form. With the Reformation forty years thereafter, however, it passed into eclipse along with all other medieval German books. For the next three centuries it was to be known only to scholars, though it was never to be totally forgotten as *The Song of the Nibelungs* was. To North German Protestant intellectuals, all those monuments to the Catholic era were unwelcome, while South German Catholics, as a bulwark against heretical content, chose most often to confine themselves to Latin. The protracted religious strife in Central Europe was hostile to literature in any case, and throughout Western Europe the new Renaissance spirit indiscriminately scorned

everything that was medieval. But the compelling reason for the neglect was social in nature. That older literature had been almost exclusively composed by knights, about knights and ladies, for knights and ladies. And knighthood, once admirable, was now an anachronism and an absurdity, as *Don Quixote* testified.

The latter eighteenth century saw the exhumation of these books by antiquarians motivated by curiosity and by incipient nationalism. The men of the Age of Enlightenment saw nothing of value in them, but the Romanticists around 1800 were to espouse their cause with enthusiasm. The enthusiasm led to gross misinterpretations, but it also led to textual study and investigation of the historical background, and the sober scholarship of nineteenth-century critics cannot fail to command admiration and gratitude. The less sober public, on the other hand, too frequently forced these works to stand as patriotic monuments or as monuments of edification chaste and unmarred by the crass problems of the day. Thus Wagner's *Parsifal*, splendid as it may be musically, is, as a literary work, a pretentiously moralizing opera libretto, wholly alien in spirit to the work it professes to dramatize.

The language embodying this admirable literature continues to be a barrier to appreciation and understanding, and even native Germans find themselves dependent upon translations into the modern idiom. Where a speaker of modern English may, with a little effort and good will, read Chaucer's latter fourteenth-century English, which is the lineal ancestor of his own speech, Wolfram's Middle High German is a century and a half further removed in time and only a collateral ancestor of contemporary German. Yet those twelfth- and thirteenth-century dialects of South Germany—Alemannic, Franconian, Austro-Bavarian, etc.—are not insuperable obstacles. *The Song of the Nibelungs* yields its meaning after very brief study; with a little effort Gottfried and Hartmann may be read for pleasure, though not parsed in each detail; the charm of the lyric poets may be felt even if occasional passages remain obscure. But then the confident reader takes up *Parzival* and is plunged into

dismay. He follows the external action more or less, but the copious vocabulary and the uncommonly difficult grammar ultimately defeat him and he abandons the book. The difficulty may be approximately described as a combination of Chaucerian archaism with Robert Browning's complexity of diction.

Over and above the work itself there are still the normal and legitimate questions any interested reader will ask: How does it happen that the "Grail" is neither "Holy" nor a chalice, but a kind of green stone? Who was this "Kyot" by whom the author repeatedly asserts that he heard the story of Parzival told? How much of the story was Wolfram's invention? Where did the original story come from? Where, geographically, is the action supposed to take place? What of these outlandish names of persons and places in which the author takes such delight? Some readers will surely wonder what the author meant by his statement that "he didn't know a single alphabet letter," and still others will puzzle at the insistence upon "Anjou" in a German poet's work, especially in connection with the Grail.

To none of these questions, alas, can brief and certain answers be supplied. Tantalizing mystery besets every side of this poem, and the literature of proposed solutions is vast indeed—and mutually contradictory. The problems themselves are fascinating. In fact, there is a real danger of becoming so involved in them that the work of art itself becomes obscured. Yet a summary of the principal problems and of their known or hypothetical solutions is indispensable, although the poem itself will warm the heart and delight the fancy well enough whether or not these problems are ever solved.

3. THE AUTHOR

Specific information about the author is scarce and arrived at chiefly from inference. He must have been born around 1170 and must have begun *Parzival* around 1197 or 1198. The first six books of the poem patently constitute a unit

and at the end of Book vi the author speaks as though he were winded from prolonged effort. Continuation of his narrative is made contingent upon the approval of an unnamed lady. Presumably an interval ensued before he resumed his story, and quite probably the first six books were circulated among readers as a more or less self-contained work. An imitator named Wirnt von Grafenberg has a poem entitled *Wigalois* which shows the distinct influence of *Parzival*, but only from Books i through vi. The puzzling Introduction, perhaps as far as 3,25, may well have been added at a later time to parry hostile critics; likewise the oddly intrusive "self-defense" at the end of Book ii.

In Book vii (379,18-19) there is mention of the fact that "Erfurt vineyards *still* show the marks of the same disaster," namely of being trampled down by horses; the reference must be to the siege of Erfurt by King Philip in 1203. The Margravine of Heitstein referred to, in past tense, in Book viii (404,1-2) must be Elizabeth von Vohburg, a sister of King Ludwig I of Wittelsbach; she died in 1204. Allusion to the conquest of Constantinople by the Crusaders in 1204 seems to be the basis for the remark in Book xi (563,8-9): "When Greece was the way it was when they found the treasures there." Beyond these *points d'appui* there are no definitely ascertainable dates. The opening lines of Book xv may suggest another interval between periods of composition. As for the conclusion, all that can be said is that *Parzival* was completed before the author began work on his poem *Willehalm*, since lines 4,20-24, of the latter speak of the mixed reception accorded to *Parzival*, and the ensuing text repeatedly alludes to characters and situations in the previous poem.

The nine extant books of *Willehalm* deal with legends surrounding an actual personage, Count William of Toulouse, who, after heroic battle against the Saracens in 793 and valiant support of Charlemagne's son, Louis the Pious, retired to a monastery and ended his days as a saintly monk. At 393,30 there is mention of the splendor of Emperor Otto's coronation in Rome in 1209; at another point there is mention of a siege weapon called a *dribock*, first known to

have been used in Germany in 1212. If, as has been suggested, the theme was appropriate only for a time when a Crusade was being preached, the only suitable event would be the Crusade proclaimed by Frederick II at the moment of his coronation in Aix in 1215. Somewhere, then, between 1209 and 1215 lie the termination of *Parzival* and the undertaking of *Willehalm*.

Eight or nine lyric poems are also recorded under Wolfram's name. Two fragments of another romance have been preserved under the title of *Titurel*, simply because that proper name occurs in the opening line, though a more appropriate title would be *Schianatulander and Sigune*. The subject matter is closely meshed with *Parzival*, while the complex stanza pattern allies the work with the lyric poems. Scholars are divided as to whether the work should be seen as a forestudy to *Parzival* or as a sequel to it.

Willehalm, which was undertaken at the desire of Landgrave Hermann of Thuringia, was never finished. The Landgrave is mentioned in an aside, at 417,22-26; he died in 1217, but his death is not implied in the poem. (Stanza 82a of *Titurel*, which does refer to his death, is spurious.) The conclusion is, therefore, that Wolfram either discontinued his poem upon the death of his patron or that he himself died at about the same time. In any case, there is small likelihood of Wolfram's having lived beyond 1220.

Of several towns named Eschenbach, the one associated with the poet was unquestionably the little hamlet near Ansbach which since 1918 has been officially designated "Wolfram's Eschenbach." Located in 1200 within the fluctuating borders of the Duchy of Swabia, it was on the very edge of Bavarian territory, and early in Book III of *Parzival* (121,7) the poet says "we Bavarians," probably because of family origins. At least three references are made in the course of the poem to features that could come only from intimate acquaintance with the locality: the doughnuts of Trühendingen (modern Wassertrüdningen, just south of Eschenbach), Abenberg Castle just east of the town, and the Mardi Gras battles staged by merchants' wives in Tolnstein (modern Dollnstein) also near Eschenbach.

That Wolfram was a knight and extremely proud of his status, however poor he may have been money-wise, is evident to any reader of his poem. Incidental references to place names throughout his works indicate a familiarity with Bavaria and the central German province of Thuringia; place names beyond these limits are probably from hearsay, such as Aachen, the Rhone river, the painters of Cologne and Maastricht, and the like. Trevrizent's itinerary in Book ix may duplicate a journey of the author's as far as Cilli in modern Yugoslavia, though the point is dubious. Poor knight that he was, it was natural that Wolfram should take service with one nobleman or another. The reference in Book iv (184,4) to "my lord the Count of Wertheim" may indicate an actual master; or again, it may indicate nothing more than that such a nobleman was host or guest at a recitation of Book iv. In the course of the first Grail scene (230,12) the poet says that "such huge fires no one has ever seen before or since here in Wildenberg." The location is in dispute, but it may well have been the great manor house of the Lords of Durne in the Odenwald south of Frankfurt-am-Main. Elusive as these identifications may be, it is certain that Wolfram spent considerable time at the court of Landgrave Hermann at the famous Wartburg near Erfurt. There he enjoyed the patronage of that Maecenas-like nobleman, who later furnished him with the French source for *Willehalm*. There he encountered a mixed array of courtiers and met Walther von der Vogelweide, as 297,16-25 indicates. There, too, legend was to make him compete in the singing contest which Wagner makes the subject of the second act of *Tannhäuser*. It is dubious that Wolfram ever met Tannhäuser, who was a real person, but it is sure that he was in real life very little like the pious baritone named Wolfram who sings the aria to the Evening Star. Melancholy resignation to celibacy like that baritone's goes quite contrary to the impression we receive from the personal allusions made in *Parzival*.

4. "INE KAN DECHEINEN BUOCHSTAP"

With the question of Wolfram's learning we come to a crucial, unsolved, and probably unsolvable question. The language used in the often-cited passage at the end of Book II seems plain enough:

"... if anyone requests me to do so [continue the story], let him not consider it as a book. I don't know a single letter of the alphabet."

The latter sentence: "*ine kan decheinen buochstap*," would seem to mean, very plainly, "I don't know how to read or write." One school of critics denies emphatically that an illiterate could have composed *Parzival*, and they explain the words by saying either that Wolfram meant he knew no Latin, or that, tongue in cheek, he was scoffing at the pretentiousness of Hartmann von Aue, whose *Poor Henry* begins:

*"Ein ritter sô gelêret was,
daz er an den buochen las
swaz er dar an geschriben vant:
der was Hartman genant,
dienstman was er zOuwe."*¹

It is true that Hartmann was learned, and that Wolfram seems to evince a certain antagonism toward him in more than one reference; it is true that Gottfried von Strassburg was learned, that he was a disciple of Hartmann's, and that in *Tristan* he makes disparaging remarks about an unnamed poet who can be no other than Wolfram. All of which tends to support interpretation of that sentence as a comic overstatement of "small French and less Latin," or as a rhetorical declaration, for comic effect, of the opposite of the obvious truth. On the other hand, all the numerous references to the source work involve expressions like "as

¹ "There was a knight so learned that he read in books whatever he found written in them. His name was Hartmann and he was a vassal at Aue."