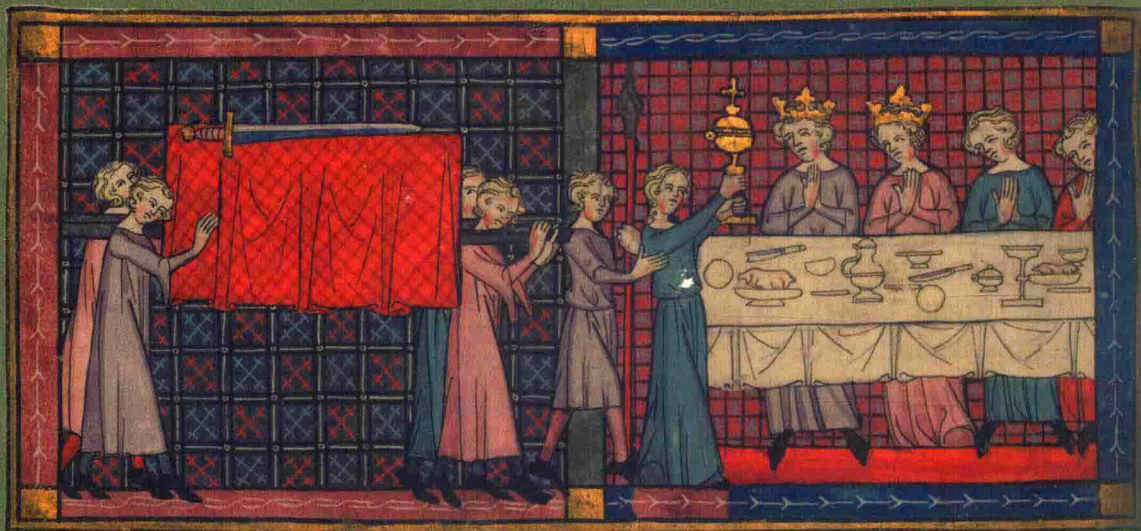


The Complete Story of the Grail



CHRÉTIEN DE TROYES' *PERCEVAL*
AND ITS CONTINUATIONS

Translated by Nigel Bryant

THE COMPLETE STORY OF THE GRAIL

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D. S. BREWER

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First published 2015
D. S. Brewer, Cambridge

ISBN 978 1 84384 400 6

D. S. Brewer is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Ltd
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk, IP12 3DF, UK
and of Boydell & Brewer Inc.
668 Mount Hope Ave, Rochester, NY 14620-2731, USA
website: www.boydellandbrewer.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

This publication is printed on acid-free paper

Typeset by

www.thewordservice.com

ARTHURIAN STUDIES LXXXII

THE COMPLETE STORY OF THE GRAIL

ARTHURIAN STUDIES

ISSN 0261-9814

General Editor: Norris J. Lacy

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Introduction

Chrétien de Troyes 'began the story of Perceval till death overtook him and prevented him completing it': so we are told by Gerbert.¹ Unfinished at his death – suspended almost in mid-sentence – Chrétien's last Arthurian romance, *Perceval: the Story of the Grail*, was evidently seen as too good and too intriguing to leave; not only did its tantalising theme inspire quite separate works, but his own incomplete poem was taken up, expanded and finally brought to a conclusion in four continuations.

This, *The Complete Story of the Grail*, is a translation of Chrétien's romance and all four of those continuations. Written throughout in verse, in rhyming couplets of eight-syllable lines, they have survived in fifteen manuscripts: some of these contain only Chrétien's poem; others contain Chrétien and one, two or three continuations; only two contain all four; and the First Continuation exists in three redactions which, although telling essentially the same stories in the same order, are of vastly differing lengths: the long redaction – translated here – is more than twice as long as the short. This apparently erratic copying of *The Story of the Grail* might suggest that it was held in less esteem than other Arthurian works. And indeed, the scholarly attention given to the *Perceval* Continuations has been considerably less than that devoted to the great Arthurian prose cycle, the *Lancelot-Grail*. There seems to have been a worry and preoccupation with assessing how far the Continuations consistently develop the strands introduced by Chrétien; and because in many respects they don't – they go their own sweet ways in massive digressions, introducing narratives that have nothing whatever to do with the Grail (or with Perceval, who barely features in the First Continuation) – they seem to have been deemed of little serious consequence, a relatively minor body of work, the more so since the last two Continuations in particular borrow numerous episodes from other existing romances.

This is very strange. To object to the lack of 'continuity' in the Continuations, or to their tendency to borrow, is to object to much of the development of Arthurian romance and indeed to most artistic endeavour in the Middle Ages.

Even more glaringly, it is to object to our own inclinations in our own time. How we love soap operas, with their endless interlacing of story-lines and introduction of new strands and new people! How we love long-running television series, and the box sets of DVDs that preserve them in collections we can cherish like the finest Arthurian manuscripts! How we love movie sequels that turn into rambling franchises! And do we expect continuity? Up to a point, perhaps; but if there is inconsistency in character, relationship or narrative detail between one *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie and another, are we really that concerned? Do we even remember? We may well be watching them at an interval of months or years. And can we guarantee that we will see or hear every episode of a long-running television or radio series, which we may likewise be watching

¹ Below, p. 394.

or hearing with days or weeks in between? Do we not rather enjoy and value each episode for itself?

This surely applies also to the reception of these romances. Phrase after phrase suggests that they were predominantly heard, read aloud, rather than read in private silence – a notably vivid image is given in the First Continuation when the author suggests that ‘we should all say a *Pater Noster* for the deceased, and before I continue the story you will call for the wine’.² In such circumstances, an episode heard on a particular day (some previously having even been missed), while perhaps appreciated more in the context of a whole, essentially stood or fell on its own merits.

And so it does now. *The Story of the Grail* is a rich compendium of narratives which, as much as any other Arthurian cycle, was setting out to develop, following the example of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s inspirational *History of the Kings of Britain*,³ a whole past world; and though the theme which supposedly holds it all together is the Grail, it would be rash to expect a single-minded commitment to it. Rather, each day’s episode in this beguiling world should be enjoyed and understood for its own distinct quality, content and resonance.

Chrétien’s Intention

And resonate these stories did – and do. We cannot of course be sure how Chrétien intended to develop and conclude his last poem, but his intention in beginning it is resonantly clear. He was writing about what it is to be a knight – or, in broader terms, what it is to be a human being. With brilliant boldness, he creates for us in Perceval an emblematic Everyman. He introduces us at the outset to a boy who knows nothing of the world but what his mother has taught him – in piecemeal fashion, easily misunderstood; and she has brought him up in cushioned isolation, trying to protect him from all knowledge of life’s dangers. She has tried to keep him in particular from the world of knights; so that when he first encounters a knight he mistakes him for an angel and then for God, about which he knows just as little. But dazzled by the shining glamour of this grown-up world, the youth finds it – to his mother’s horror – irresistible, and his mother is now an irrelevance, rejected and abandoned. Every mother’s pain as this Everychild leaves home without a second backward glance is a scene that haunts the reader, and comes back to haunt the boy.

Then, as he ventures into the complicated outside world, everything he sees is new and a thing of wonder, so that, on first setting childlike eyes upon a castle, he naïvely ‘saw the castle’s towers being born – for in his eyes they were being born, emerging from the rock’.⁴ And his naïve misunderstanding of his mother’s advice leads – as in life it so often can – to comic and embarrassing error, especially in his first encounter with a girl; and his blundering, childlike single-mindedness to have the accoutrements that he wants makes him fearless: he will challenge and kill the Red Knight, of whom Arthur’s court are all in awe, without a second thought. Every youth is in a hurry.

But he’s discovered an innate talent, and when the noble Gorneman gives him instruction in horsemanship and the use of weapons, the boy takes to it like a fish to

² p. 214.

³ Geoffrey’s *Historia Regum Britannie* (c. 1135) created a history of Britain spanning nearly two thousand years, and was hugely influential in introducing the first major narratives of King Arthur.

⁴ p. 13.

water. He is duly knighted, taking on a role for which he was evidently born, and promptly meets his first great challenge and succeeds in it quite brilliantly, rescuing the maiden Blanche-flor from the terrible siege of Beaurepaire and restoring joy to her people. He is growing up quickly, and after this first great chivalrous deed and his first awakening to love, his growing maturity is reflected in the change in his style of speech: gone is the comic naivety of his responses, exploited with aplomb by Chrétien; now he starts to talk in adult fashion, and with an adult understanding of responsibility for past actions, as he addresses the monks and nuns on his departure from Beaurepaire.

But how far can Everyknight go before he realises there's more to life? Now he encounters things with which he is wholly unequipped to cope – things, that is, beyond the worldly and the everyday. He sees a man fishing from a boat on a river – in a profound and haunting image he's sitting dead still in midstream, dropping a line and hook beneath the visible surface; and this man takes one look at the young knight and says:

'You've need of lodging and more beside, I'd say.'⁵

And that night he does indeed take lodging in the hall of the fisherman, who proves to be a crippled king, and he does indeed see more beside. It's no ordinary hall: it 'was square, being as long as it was wide. In the middle of the hall ... was a great fire of seasoned logs, blazing brightly... Four hundred men could have sat around that fire and all would have had a good place... And in that hall was the brightest light that could ever be created by candles.'⁶ It is, then, huge, and a symmetrical centre of warmth and light. And what he sees in it is extraordinary: in the awesome glow of blazing candles appears a procession of mysterious objects including a grail – a serving dish, golden and bejewelled, at the appearance of which 'so radiant a light appeared in the hall that the candles lost their brightness like the stars at the rising of the moon or sun'⁷ – and a lance that, wondrously, sheds blood from its head in a never-ending flow.

And what is Everyknight's response to these mysteries? He's intrigued, certainly; but whereas, in his childhood, he couldn't stop asking questions of the knight he encountered in the forest ('He asks the name and use of everything he sees'),⁸ he has now, as part of his training as a grown-up knight, been conditioned not to enquire too far: 'he remembered the warning of the one who'd knighted him, who'd taught him to beware of talking too much; he was afraid it might be frowned upon, so he didn't ask at all'.⁹ Heeding the most banal – albeit well-meant – advice of a grown-up, courtly knight, the youth asks no questions whatever. He, like so many, is quite content not to enquire into wonders.

This surely has potent, timeless resonance. And it would have had a very specific one for Chrétien's own audience. The marvellously lit objects that process past the youth would have carried radiant significance. Brought into such a singular atmosphere, it is inconceivable that a lance shedding blood from its tip would not instantly have prompted thoughts of the most sensational of holy relics, famously, melodramatically and dubiously discovered at Antioch during the First Crusade: the Holy Lance that pierced Christ's side on the cross. Chrétien doesn't even hint at this connection because he doesn't need to: he is writing for an audience obsessed with relics – streams of them were returning to Northern Europe from the Holy Land, many of them ludicrous and their provenance

⁵ p. 27.

⁶ pp. 27–8.

⁷ p. 29.

⁸ p. 3.

⁹ p. 28.

lightly questioned – and listeners' imaginations would have been running riot at the serving dish and the trencher that follow the lance, the whole procession suffused with light. It's no surprise to discover in due course that the dish, the grail, carries something sacred: a host – communion bread. Nor is it at all surprising that another poet, Robert de Boron, was inspired to write a 'prequel' to Chrétien's poem, *Joseph of Arimathea (Le Roman de l'Estoire dou Graal)*, in which he created a provenance for the mysterious dish, identifying the grail as the vessel used by Christ at the Last Supper and by Joseph of Arimathea to gather Christ's blood at the crucifixion.¹⁰

If Chrétien was unspecific about the identity of the lance and the grail, he was anything but equivocal about the consequence of the young knight's failure to ask. It's calamitous. No sooner has he left the Fisher King's castle than he meets a girl – a cousin, it transpires – who tells him that it's 'a disaster that you failed to ask all this! You would have healed the good crippled king – he would have regained the use of his limbs and the rule of his land – and you would have profited greatly! But now, I tell you, many ills will beset both you and others.'¹¹ These ills are specified later by the ugly damsel who appears at Arthur's court and tells the young knight: 'Do you know what will happen, now that the king won't be healed and rule his land? Ladies will lose their husbands, lands will be laid waste, maidens will be left in distress and orphaned, and many knights will die: all these woes will strike because of you.'¹² By failing to ask questions, by failing to investigate wonders, Everyyouth creates a wasteland.

And Chrétien's audience would not have missed the implication of the other mishap that befalls the young knight after asking nothing: he breaks his sword with the very first blow he strikes. The significance of the broken sword is to be expanded upon later, in Gerbert's Continuation; but explication is barely necessary, when a sword is so central to a knight's function.

And what *is* a knight's function? The young knight – Perceval – realises how much he's missed the point about his function when, five years later, plodding forlornly across a wilderness, he meets his hermit uncle. For five years he's been 'seeking deeds of chivalry: he went in search of strange, daunting, gruelling adventures, and encountered so many that he tested himself well. In five years he sent sixty fine knights as prisoners to King Arthur's court.' But in all that time he's been 'without a thought for God'.¹³ He tells his hermit uncle:

'I was once at the house of the Fisher King and saw the lance with the head that assuredly bleeds, but asked nothing about the drop of blood I saw hang from the tip of that shining head. And truly, I've done nothing since to make amends. Nor do I know who was served from the grail I saw. Since then I've been in such a dismal state I wish I were dead! I've forgotten God because of it! Never since have I asked Him for mercy – and I don't think I've done anything to earn it!'¹⁴

This episode comes strikingly after Sir Gawain suspends his chivalrous gallivanting – embroiling himself in judicial combats and philandering himself into dire scrapes – to go and seek the Bleeding Lance. Chrétien, without crudely saying so, is making plain that there is much more to knighthood than the worldly and the martial. That this should be a crucial theme of his last romance is not surprising. He was writing it, his prologue

¹⁰ See Robert de Boron, *Merlin and the Grail*, trans. Bryant (Cambridge, 2003).

¹¹ Below, p. 32.

¹² p. 41.

¹³ p. 54.

¹⁴ p. 55.

tells us, for Count Philip of Flanders, and although the precise date of composition is uncertain, it must have been before Philip's departure on the Third Crusade, for during it he died at Acre in 1191. That a knight should be thinking about God would have been at the forefront of Chrétien's crusading patron's mind – as would holy relics, under serious threat in the Holy Land, where the True Cross itself was lost to Saladin in 1187 at the catastrophic battle of Hattin. To this crusading theme we shall return.

But to it Chrétien does *not* return. Instead he turns for the rest of his unfinished romance to the adventures of Sir Gawain. And although he has supposedly set out to seek the Bleeding Lance, Gawain's adventures have nothing to do with the grail and its attendant mysteries. But they do reflect on knighthood. In contrast to the young knight Perceval, at the start of his career, we are shown an accomplished, experienced, mightily admired knight in Gawain. And to what do his adventures and his attitudes lead him, if not into endless difficulty?

Firstly, Gawain's promise to fight a judicial combat to defend himself against a charge of treachery prevents him taking part in a tournament for fear of being injured (and thus unable to honour his promise); this leads to a volley of embarrassing mockery: 'He must be a pacifist!' ... 'He's a tradesman!' ... 'He's a money changer!' ... 'He may look like a knight but he's not: he's disguised himself as one to dodge duties and tolls!' Gawain resists the provocation – until tempted by a pretty face who begs him to fight as her knight next day; he duly wins the tournament, but has been willing, for a pretty girl, to risk much greater dishonour than mockery.¹⁵

In the next episode, after his horse – with evident symbolism – has lost a shoe and begun to hobble, he rapidly responds to another pretty face, the sister of the lord of Escavalon. Within moments of being left without a chaperone 'they talked of love'; and it is tempting to read as sardonic Chrétien's following comment: 'had they talked of anything else, what a waste of time it would have been!' In no time this leads him into even greater trouble: he ends up besieged in a tower by a mob.¹⁶

How quickly, too, in his next adventure, he spurs his horse and goes to flirt with the 'Haughty Maiden', whose endlessly scornful words deter him not in the least. Despite repeated warnings, he sets off with her on a journey that leads to him losing his horse and having to ride a humiliatingly wretched nag – provoking the Haughty Maiden's delighted derision; and she later lies to him in the hope of drowning him in the Perilous Ford. And why has she become so haughty, scornful, cold and malicious? It's because of her treatment at the hands of another accomplished, experienced knight, Guiromelant, who had killed the one she truly loved so that he could woo her himself, and "'ever since Death robbed me of my first love,'" she says, "'I've been mad and spoken haughtily and acted wickedly and crazily, not caring who I crossed – [every knight who sought my company] I deliberately tormented, hoping to find one whose temper was such that I could drive him wild with rage so he'd cut me to pieces!'"¹⁷

At every turn the actions and attitudes of accomplished knights lead to trouble and pointless strife. At every turn it's possible to see or to sense doubt and irony in Chrétien's view of the courtly knight and of knightly endeavours.¹⁸

¹⁵ pp. 44–9.

¹⁶ pp. 49–54.

¹⁷ p. 76.

¹⁸ Similarly, thinking back to Perceval's childlike perceptions at the beginning, and to his misunderstanding of what the shining, ironclad figures in the forest may be, Matilda Bruckner observes that 'we can laugh at Perceval's naïveté because we know that knights are neither devils

But the question is: did his continuators see and sense it? The answer is: not necessarily. Each continuator had his own response to the unfinished poem, and his own purpose in carrying it on.

The First Continuation: the Unimportance of the Holy Grail

The anonymous author¹⁹ of the First Continuation, unlike Chrétien, shows no misgivings whatever about conventional chivalry. Directly continuing the unfinished last episode of Chrétien's romance, the first continuator has Gawain almost instantly acclaimed as 'the finest knight who ever rode horse or bore lance and shield... He's free and clear of all baseness – he hasn't the slightest blemish... He's the model of all good qualities.'²⁰ There is no apparent irony in this lack of reservation. The eulogies for Gawain come thick and fast. We are well aware, in Chrétien, that his impending combat with Guiromelant has been sparked by past knightly havoc, Gawain having previously killed Guiromelant's cousin and Gawain's father having killed Guiromelant's; but as his combat with Guiromelant approaches, the first continuator unreservedly assures us that 'Gawain's custom was that, if he knew he was in the wrong, he would admit it even if he was being challenged by the feeblest of men, which only enhanced his reputation as one who deplored wrongdoing: he was humble and kind towards the worthy; but he was full of fierce courage when confronting the wicked, the oppressive, the proud.'²¹ He leaves us in no doubt, in fact, that Gawain is nothing short of flawless: 'Gawain more than anyone despised wickedness and sin and crime and vice, and avarice and spite; he more than anyone was devoted to courtesy and placed his faith in God.'²²

Chrétien, bringing young Perceval to confront Clamadeus at the siege of Beurepaire, says 'I could tell you all about [the battle] if I wanted to go down that road, but I'm not going to spend my energies on that – one word's as good as twenty!'²³ How different this is from the first continuator, who revels in chivalrous combat, lavishing many lines in recounting the duel between Gawain and Guiromelant in vivid detail. The combat later fought between Carados and Alardin is so admirable in the continuator's eyes, so engrossing, that it borders on fun: 'no one,' he assures us, 'who'd seen that fight would have wanted to leave!'²⁴ And fun is the predominant tone of the mighty tournament that follows this; as King Cadoalan and King Ris and their forces batter and hew (despite the fact that they deal 'cleaving blows that left some crippled and others lacking arms'²⁵), the overall sense is of a boisterous romp:

you'd have seen the earth shake, lances smashed, shields pierced, great blows struck with whetted blades, men crashing down and leaping up, the strong battering the weak, knights laid out on the ground and empty horses running wild: it must be said, it wasn't the prettiest sight! Anyone who

nor angels, but that comic polarisation introduces more searching questions about what knights really are and do'. Bruckner, *Chrétien Continued* (Oxford, 2009), p. 124.

¹⁹ Or authors: there may well have been more than one; there were certainly a number of redactors influencing its content. But for convenience I shall refer to 'the first continuator'.

²⁰ Below, pp. 79–80.

²¹ p. 90.

²² p. 91.

²³ p. 24.

²⁴ p. 140.

²⁵ p. 145.

couldn't defend himself was soon forced to dismount – and not with any decorum! Those who weren't up to it really came a cropper, and I can assure you the cowardly didn't dare go near!²⁶

In his brilliant description of a twelfth-century *mêlée*, it is clear that the first continuator has bought fully into the values and customs of the tournament, qualmlessly observing that 'family loyalty and friendship don't stop knights dealing blows!'²⁷

If the author of the First Continuation does not pick up the questioning tone of Chrétien's poem, what *does* he pick up? He doesn't even pick up the first protagonist: the Welsh boy-turned-knight, Perceval, and his failure to ask all-important questions, are not of the slightest consequence. Perceval, in fact, appears in the First Continuation only once, and briefly, as a participant in a tournament. Instead, the continuator devotes two huge sections of his work to virtually independent stories – the splendid tale of Carados, his mother and the enchanter Eliavret, and the tale of Gawain's brother Guerrehés and his adventure with the Little Knight. These have nothing whatever to do with the grail. 'Nevertheless,' writes William Roach in the introduction to his edition, 'every manuscript which contains the First Continuation places it immediately after Chrétien's *Perceval*. It seems certain, therefore, that to the men who rewrote and copied the First Continuation, it was a Grail poem.'²⁸ With all respect to the outstanding editor of the Continuations, this is missing the point. To the author and redactor-copyists of the First Continuation, the grail was quite clearly just another adventure – albeit a particularly good one ('God save me, sirs,' the first continuator says as Gawain's visit to the grail castle draws near, 'there's been a long digression in the story; but now you'll hear what you've long been waiting for.').²⁹ In our present times, when the Holy Grail has become a cherished journalistic cliché³⁰ and, in the bizarre belief that it really exists, the object of actual quests by fantasists, we may assume that it must be at the heart of any romance with 'grail' in the title; but the apparently 'independent', grail-free Carados and Guerrehés stories are just as entitled as the holy vessel to inclusion in the work – for the simple reason that they involve Arthur's court. Carados is not only a member of Arthur's court but related to Arthur, his mother being Arthur's niece Ysave. Guerrehés likewise is a member of the court and Arthur's own nephew.

Arthur, exemplary king, and his court of exemplary knights are the heart and focus of the work, not the grail. The author of the First Continuation is working with narratives, regardless of any grail connection, that illuminate knighthood – or, more broadly, worthy human behaviour, as in the marvellous story of Carados, which centres on the selfless love of Guinier who risks herself for the knight horribly stricken by the enchanter. Just as Chrétien had the hermit uncle give Perceval 'spiritual' guidance, so the first continuator impresses chivalrous qualities upon his audience. When Arthur knights Carados,

the good King Arthur told Carados to have prowess as his watchword; sense and moderation as his motto; if he did so it would be much to his advantage,

²⁶ p. 146.

²⁷ p. 152.

²⁸ *The Continuations of the Old French Perceval of Chrétien de Troyes*, Vol. I, ed. W. Roach (Philadelphia, 1949), p. xiii.

²⁹ Below, p. 214.

³⁰ See Appendix 4 of Richard Barber's *The Holy Grail – Imagination and Belief* (London, 2004), detailing the astonishing number of uses of the term 'Holy Grail' in major newspapers between 1978 and 2002.

for excess and presumption were incompatible with honour and valour, but if he were courteous and civilised he would win honour and praise indeed and all, of every degree, would love him.³¹

The stories are a constant illustration of what it means to be 'courteous and civilised', of how to win 'honour and praise'. The lengthy story of Gawain and the Rich Soldier of the Proud Castle, apart from being richly entertaining, is most striking as a moral tale of courtesy and sympathy towards a defeated foe; Gawain is willing to feign defeat out of pity for his adversary's plight, and the author concludes: 'I'm going to leave them now; but I must say this: Gawain should be admired and loved and honoured indeed, for vanquishing the knight in combat and then treating him with such great courtesy.'³² Time and again the first continuator shows and tells us what is expected of knights, in terms of courage and mercy – and the importance, quite simply, of *doing*. In the chivalric world vision, *deeds* are at the centre of life: 'Carados, endowed as he was with all fine qualities, said he had no need of rest: he wanted to be involved in deeds of arms – and rightly so: no knight wishing to earn praise can afford to do otherwise; no knight wins a reputation by being idle.'³³

Deeds and correct behaviour are especially important, these stories show, in relation to women. In the First Continuation the first maiden to be rescued by Gawain, the Maiden of the Ivory Horn, establishes women as creatures to be protected and revered: when Gawain recovers her horn, stolen by the 'wicked and treacherous Macarot of Pantelion' who is guilty of 'outrageous wrongs' and 'overweening pride', she tells Gawain that 'I cherish and treasure [this horn]... Its power is such that anyone possessing it will be free of cold and thirst and hunger, even in the wildest land.'³⁴ With such a cornucopia, her status as a near-goddess is plain. And all maidens should be treated with such respect. The author makes an immediate, startling juxtaposition between the good Maiden of the Ivory Horn and a wicked damsel who has induced a knight to kill or capture any other who enters her castle; but her wickedness is less a reflection on her than on *knights*, for it is prompted solely by a desire to avenge her rape by another knight, Greoreas. The behaviour of knights towards women, the author shows, can have disastrous consequences. Gawain treats this raped damsel with understanding and courtesy, and as he liberates the girls imprisoned by her he shows them every possible care, 'concerned above all that the girls should be properly served'.³⁵

And what of the behaviour of an ideal king? King Arthur in these stories *does* very little; but he presides as the exemplary epitome of mercy: he repeatedly pardons the knights sent to him as prisoners and retains them in his household, and shows pity to the people starving as he lays siege to Branlant. And – vital, at a time when a king was the source and repository of so much wealth – he shows outstanding largesse: 'The court lasted three days. Then the king gave the knights so much gold and silver and so many horses and Eastern silks and costly brooches and fine rings and belts and hounds and birds that they returned to their lands in the highest spirits.'³⁶

All the same, the grail episodes are, the continuator recognises, 'what you've long

³¹ Below, p. 133.

³² p. 209.

³³ p. 138.

³⁴ p. 98.

³⁵ p. 106.

³⁶ p. 177.

been waiting for'. So how does he continue Chrétien's intriguing theme? Many critical observations have been made about inconsistency of detail between Chrétien and his continuators in relation to the grail; but it should be noted in fairness that anyone continuing his poem had a problem: in terms of the grail and the other mysteries of the Fisher King's castle, there was actually little mystery left. One question – who was served from the grail? – had already been answered in Chrétien's own poem by the hermit uncle; and for many in the audience the grail's identity had been clearly established – a 'spoiler' if ever there was one! – by Robert de Boron in his *Joseph of Arimathea*. It's true that Perceval had been told that if he'd asked questions about the 'mysteries' he'd witnessed, then all would have been well – the Fisher King would have been healed and other calamities set right – and we surely want to see that happen; but to resolve this suspended narrative, all a continuator had to do was bring an experienced knight like Gawain (never slow to come forward, forthright and bold in giving his name to anyone who asks and surely bound to pose the required questions) into the presence of the grail and lance. He would ask the questions, and hey presto! But knowing the size, shape and colour of the rabbit that will come from the hat is not very thrilling. The 'mystery' of the grail is not in fact the greatest gift to a story-teller. And sure enough, the first continuator has Gawain find the grail quite early and he duly asks the questions... but our anonymous author ingeniously – though of necessity, if he wants the story to have further mileage – introduces a new element: a broken sword. The Fisher King

took it and handed it to Gawain who was so eager to fathom the mysteries; but all he would say was this: that if he could join the sword and fuse one part of the blade to the other to make it whole again, 'then you can learn the truth and meaning of the bier and the grail and the lance, and why the maiden weeps'.

Without more ado Gawain took the pieces and joined them. They fitted together as one, and everyone who saw it thought it was whole again. Then the lord said:

'Take the blade by the point and pull. If you don't pull it apart, then you will learn the whole and perfect truth about the mystery of the grail and the lance and the bier.'

So Gawain took the sword and pulled; and at the very first tug he parted one piece of the blade from the other.

'You have not yet achieved enough as a knight,' said the lord, 'to know the truth about this mystery. The one who comes to know it will be deemed the finest knight in the world, I promise you. But you may yet come to know, and by your chivalry win esteem and pre-eminence over all the world.'³⁷

The mending of the broken sword – the full significance of which is to be suggested in due course by Gerbert, as we shall see – is a new and vital motif, far more important to the ongoing story than the grail itself.³⁸

So unimportant, relatively speaking, is the grail that its very nature can change. When, later in the First Continuation, Gawain makes a second visit to the Fisher King's castle,

³⁷ p. 109.

³⁸ Note that the broken sword takes up a full half of the manuscript illumination reproduced on the cover.

the grail turns into a kind of magic feeding vessel, zipping around the tables serving food and drink all by itself 'with perfect, brisk and wondrous ease'. And the terms and conditions of the story change, too; the continuator moves the goalposts yet again: Gawain again fails to repair the broken sword, but despite this, he *is* this time given answers to all his questions about the lance and the grail, the Fisher King telling him of their identity and provenance in accordance with Robert de Boron's *Joseph of Arimathea* – they are the lance, he says, with which Longinus stabbed Christ in the side and the vessel used by Christ at the Last Supper and by Joseph of Arimathea to gather Christ's blood at the foot of the cross. Instead of keeping him from the truth (already known to many of the audience thanks to Robert de Boron), Gawain's failure to mend the sword now keeps him from completing the mission he's undertaken on behalf of a knight mysteriously killed at Queen Guinevere's pavilion. And, splendidly, we don't yet know what the mission is. Just as splendidly, Gawain falls asleep before we can hear the story of the blow that caused the sword to be broken – a blow so devastating that 'the whole land and realm of Logres, which had been held in such high regard, was laid waste'.³⁹ The story-teller's bobbing and weaving here is very nimble, very deft. If we really imagine the Holy Grail to be important we should maybe think again: it has already, with three continuations yet to come, revealed all its mysteries and become nothing more than a catalyst for adventures. But what great adventures they are. This series can run and run.

The Second Continuation: Wandering Astray

While the first continuator almost wholly overlooked Chrétien's first protagonist, the second continuator returns the focus to Perceval, reintroducing him at the exact point where Chrétien had left him with his hermit uncle. There is initially a sense that this new author – usually identified as Wauchier de Denain⁴⁰ and for convenience I shall call him this – is going to be attentive to the premises of Chrétien's work, as in his opening passage he repeats almost verbatim two memorable sentences from Chrétien's poem: 'Perceval, so the story says, had lost his memory to such a degree that he'd quite forgotten God. April and May passed by five times – that's five whole years – without him setting foot inside a church or worshipping God or His cross.' So what was his understanding of the premises of Chrétien's work, and how deep are his reflections upon them?

Bearing always in mind the caveat already given – that each episode in this long-running series is first and foremost to be enjoyed and understood for itself and on its own merits – it is possible to detect an overall purpose behind the work attributed to Wauchier. A frequently recurring motif is Perceval's tendency to stray from a given path. Having established him at the very start of the Second Continuation, merely by the blast he blows on a horn, as 'the finest of all knights living in the world... This one will vanquish every foe he meets!', Wauchier brings him almost immediately to a river beyond which, he is convinced, is

the place where he'd first met the Fisher King... He was instantly reminded of that noble man who'd given him lodging, and of the lance and the grail

³⁹ p. 219.

⁴⁰ But see footnote 37, below, p. 328.

he'd seen pass before him but had failed to ask anyone about, which since had caused him so much grief. He longed to cross the river and go again to that king's court... He prayed to God to help him find some crossing-place, some ford or bridge.

He promptly meets 'a girl sitting beneath an almond tree, combing her hair' who immediately offers to ferry him across, and 'Perceval, distracted by the sight of her and his eagerness to cross the river, asked her nothing' – an interesting variation on the theme of his failure to ask questions – and is about to board her boat when

his horse baulked, snorting and whinnying in alarm: it wouldn't board the boat for anything... And then, from further off, a ferryman cried at the top of his voice: "Stay off that boat, sir knight! The girl means to drown you! It's all she ever does! If you board that boat you're a dead man!"

It is interesting to note that the drama of the situation is barely exploited – we are simply told that the ferryman 'kept appealing to Perceval to flee, and said he'd come and fetch him; and so he did, and ferried him across, telling him the dreadful truth about the girl'. This may seem anti-dramatic, but Wauchier's emphasis falls not on the rescue but on what follows – or at least, it does if delivered with insightful stress by one skilled at reading aloud – as the ferryman then 'showed him the exact, clear way that would take him straight to the court of the Fisher King. But truly, Perceval wandered off it, because there beside the river he saw the pretty little castle he'd spotted before. He found the wide, handsome gates unlocked, and decided to go inside and explore its beauties.'⁴¹

How easily Perceval is distracted! How easily led astray! He's proving himself to be 'the finest of all knights living in the world', he's heard and understood the guidance of his hermit uncle, he's been shown 'the exact, clear way that would take him straight' to what he seeks, but a 'pretty little castle' and 'its beauties' are all it takes to lead him off it and into new adventures. And in these adventures he is constantly and chaotically changing direction. After he has been comprehensively outplayed by a magic chessboard, a damsel (who, we are told, is 'good at turning the heads of fools') sends him with her dog to hunt a white stag.⁴² He is robbed of both dog and the captured stag's head and then tricked by a knight in a tomb.⁴³ He then meets a huntsman who 'told him to take the path to the right if he wanted to get out of the forest... [But] as he followed the huntsman's directions and was about to turn to the right, he heard a cry away to his left and headed off towards it.'⁴⁴ Responding to the cry, he avenges the brutal murder of a boy, and then meets 'a very aged knight... mounted on a handsome and perfectly white mule'. The information he's given by this image of experience and rectitude is worth considering at length. He tells him:

'I know you're looking for the lance that bleeds at the Fisher King's court, and due to suffer much before you find it. So it may have been you the other night who found his daughter, a comely damsel, at a castle up ahead. I met her on

⁴¹ pp. 240–1.

⁴² pp. 242–3.

⁴³ p. 244.

⁴⁴ p. 246.

her way to his court; and she mentioned a little dog that she'd arranged for a girl to carry off, along with a stag's head, because she wanted to test and trouble a much-praised knight who'd been to the court of the Fisher King but failed to ask the question he should: who was served from the grail. So while he was dealing with the stag he'd killed, this girl robbed him of the dog. He asked her to return it, but she gave it back only when he agreed to go to a vaulted tomb where a knight would fight anyone the moment he was called. But while he was embroiled in combat with him, he laid the dog and the stag's head on the ground there in the field, and another knight, passing by, carried off both dog and head! All this was the damsel's doing!... I heard all about it from the damsel herself, who made it clear that if it hadn't been for the business with the grail she'd have given the knight no trouble or grief.⁴⁵

It is, then, the Fisher King's own daughter who is putting all these obstacles and distractions in Perceval's way, because of 'the business with the grail': it is, in a sense, a penance imposed for the failures of his youth.⁴⁶ He accepts this willingly and indeed with delight, but still he doesn't learn from past mistakes:

Perceval was so delighted at hearing this that he failed to ask anything about the one who'd killed the boy – the knight he'd slain with his own hands: either which land he came from, or where he'd been or where he was going. So he was none the wiser.⁴⁷

And then, when the wise old knight tells him the way back to the Fisher King's daughter, lo and behold...

Perceval rode on alone along the good, broad, well-made road that the knight had shown him, but... then, most unfortunately, he became so distracted, so deep in thought about his quest and all he'd been told, that he wandered off the path...⁴⁸

These endless strayings can of course be seen merely as a convenient way for the writer to make the series ever more long-running; but it may be seen also as a return to the Everyman quality of Chrétien's protagonist, giving a potent image of us all, too busy with life and immediate challenges to learn from the past or to make sense of anything in particular. Similarly, the routine regularity with which Wauchier describes the reception of the knight for lodging, his disarming and dressing, the stabling of his horse, the washing of hands, the serving of a meal, the preparation of beds, the going-to-sleep and the waking next morning, might be seen as pedestrian, unimaginative and even unnecessary punctuation of a story; but it may be seen also as an image of Everylife, punctuated as it is by routine needs before the wonders and adventures of each succeeding day.

⁴⁵ p. 248.

⁴⁶ Significantly, the aged knight is none other than the brother of the Red Knight slain by Perceval with his javelin early in Chrétien's poem. Perceval expresses his sorrow for the deed, and the knight forgives him 'since you've admitted it'. With penitence, the author implies, forgiveness is possible.

⁴⁷ Below, p. 248.

⁴⁸ p. 248.