

Perceval

The Story of the Grail



Chrétien de Troyes ♦ *Translated by Burton Raffel*



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Chrétien de Troyes

Translated from the Old French

by Burton Raffel

Afterword by Joseph J. Duggan

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*For Joe Duggan—
devoted scholar,
sensitive reader,
friend*



Translator's Note

This is the fifth and last of Chrétien's great narratives I have translated. All have been published by Yale University Press, the first, *Yvain*, in 1987; the second, *Erec and Enide*, in 1996; the third and fourth, *Cligès* and *Lancelot*, in 1997. This version of *Perceval* concludes the enterprise.

Most of what needs to be explained about the technical aspects of the translation has long since been set out, in my Translator's Preface to *Yvain*. And as I also said there, "I will be content if this translation allows the modern English reader some reasonably clear view of Chrétien's swift, clear style, his wonderfully inventive story-telling, his perceptive characterizations and sure-handed dialogue, his racy wit and sly irony, and the vividness with which he evokes, for us his twentieth-century audiences, the emotions and values of a flourishing, vibrant world." I need only add that the longer I work with Chrétien, the more "modern" he seems to me, in many of his essential characteristics—which may help to explain why, as I said in concluding that prior Translator's Preface, "Chrétien is a delight to read—and to translate." Not easy, but definitely a delight.

Because, however, Chrétien apparently did not live to complete *Perceval*, and probably did not have the opportunity to

make whatever final revisions might otherwise have been made, the structure and at times even the intent of this, the longest (and stylistically the richest and most far-ranging) of any of his *romans*, remains bafflingly unclear. What seems uncertain to the reader, let me affirm, is uncertain not only to the translator but also to the editor of the text, the late Daniel Poirion. The frequent befuddlement and befuddlement of M. Poirion's commentary is eloquent testimony to how little, as yet, we understand what Chrétien was up to—or whether, in fact, he was fully up to the task he appears to have set himself, in this his last poem. The final eight hundred lines or so, in my judgment, show a consistent and significant decline in Chrétien's *poetic* skills, his ability fully to focus on what he was creating. Aged or ill, he was still immensely superior, as a poet, to the “learned cleric” who finished *Lancelot*. But he was not entirely himself, and I have tried to allow the translation (like the last portion of *Lancelot*) to reflect this diminution in verse quality.

I have had constantly before me, in all the translations subsequent to *Yvain*, the two most recent editions of the Old French original, the 1994 *Oeuvres complètes*, edited for Gallimard's deservedly famous Pléiade series by M. Poirion and five collaborating scholars, and the 1994 complete *Romans*, edited for the Le Livre de Poche series, once again, by a team of scholars. Although I remain convinced of the general superiority of the Poirion texts (that for *Perceval* having been edited, once again, by M. Poirion himself), and have as before largely relied thereon, in a few places I have thought it better to follow the text edited for Le Livre de Poche by Charles Méla. Indeed, I have found Méla's modern French translation to be notably more accurate than that of Poirion, which editorializes and interprets, in my judgment, far too freely.

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Contents

Translator's Preface, ix

by Burton Raffel

Perceval: The Story of the Grail, 1

by Chrétien de Troyes

Afterword, 293

by Joseph J. Duggan

Recommended for

Further Reading, 309



*Qui petit seme petit quialt,
Et qui auques recoillir vialt,
An tel leu sa semance espanse
Que fruit a cent doubles li rande,
Car an terre qui rien ne vaut
Bone semance i seche et faut.*

If you sow lightly, you reap
Lightly. And a good crop
Requires the kind of soil
Where seeds sprout a hundred-
Fold, for even good seed
Dies in dried-up ground.
What Chrétien sows—the seeds
He scatters—are the start of a story,
And he plants his words in such
Fine soil that he's bound to do well,
Because he's telling his tale
For the noblest man in the Holy
Roman Empire, Philip
Of Flanders—since despite the good things

5

10

They say of Alexander, 15
Count Philip is better, and I
Can prove it, for Alexander
Acquired all the evils
And vices of which the count
Was either free or innocent. 20
The count permits no vulgar
Joking, no wicked words,
And is pained by malicious prattle
Of anyone, no matter who.
He's fond of even-tempered 25
Justice, and good faith, and the Church,
And despises everything immoral.
His giving reaches in every
Direction, but no one knows
How far, for he gives without guile 30
Or greed, as Matthew said,
The left hand unaware
What the right hand does, hidden
Except from those who receive it
And from God, who sees our secrets 35
And can read our hearts and our bellies.
Why else does the Gospel say:
"Hide your good deeds from your left hand"?
The left hand, according to this
Tradition, is pompous pride, 40
Hypocritical and false.
And what does the right hand mean?
Charity, which never
Boasts, but conceals its goodness,
Lets no one know except Him 45
We call both God and Charity.

For God is Charity, and all
 Who give with good hearts (Saint Paul
 Has written, and I've read his words)
 Live in God and God is 50
 In them. The truth is plain:
 Count Philip's good deeds amount
 To the purest of pure charity,
 For no one knows what he's given,
 Or to whom, except his noble 55
 Heart, which prompts his giving.
 Would it be better to act
 Like Alexander, indifferent
 To charity, closed to goodness?
 But no one believes such nonsense! 60
 Chrétien's labors, the pains
 He's taken, at the count's express
 Command, to properly tell
 This story (the best ever told
 At the king's great court), will be worth 65
 His struggles. It's the story of the Grail,*
 From a book the count gave me:
 And here's how Chrétien told it.
 The season was spring, trees
 Were sprouting leaves, meadows 70
 Were green, every morning
 Birds sang in their own
 Sweet language, and the world was joyful.
 And the son of the widowed lady
 Living alone in the Barren 75
 Forest rose, and quickly

* A dish or plate, of the sort in which one might serve, say, a fish; see
 lines 6421-22

Saddled his hunting horse
For himself, took three wooden
Spears and, thus equipped,
Rode away from his mother's 80
House, intending to check
On the plowmen sowing oats
In his mother's fields, a dozen
Oxen pulling six
Great plows. He entered the forest, 85
And the heart deep inside him
Leapt with joy at the sweet
Season and the happy sound
Of birds singing from trees
All around. Everything pleased him. 90
To savor this peaceful moment
He slipped the bridle from his horse's
Head, letting him graze
In the fresh green grass, then played
With the wooden spears he could throw 95
So well, hurling some
Behind him, some in front,
Some high in the air,
Then down, and up, and down
Again — until he heard 100
Five knights, all fully armed,
Riding through the forest
And making an immense racket
As, over and over, branches
Of oak trees and elms clattered 105
Against the heavy metal.
Mail shirts clinked and clanked,
Spears banged on shields,

And in shields and armor wood
 Creaked and iron rang. 110
 The boy could hear but could
 Not see who was coming so quickly.
 Stunned, he said to himself,
 "By my soul, my mother was right,
 Saying that in all the world 115
 There was nothing so fearsome as devils!
 And to teach me how to behave
 She told me to cross myself
 When I see them. But that's too much
 To ask: instead of crossing 120
 Myself I'll stick the biggest
 And strongest with one of these wooden
 Spears, and none of the others
 Will come anywhere near me!"
 That's what he said to himself 125
 Before he could see them. But once
 They came into view, emerging
 From the forest that hid them, and he saw
 Their gleaming mail shirts and bright,
 Shining helmets, and such shields 130
 And spears as he'd never seen
 In all his life, with their gleaming
 Colors, green and purple,
 Gold and blue and silver,
 Lit by the sun, they seemed to him 135
 Wonderfully handsome and good.
 And he said, "O God, forgive me!
 I see angels here
 In front of me! I sinned against You—
 What wickedness I spoke! — 140

When I called them devils. Those weren't
Fairy tales my mother
Told me, saying that except
For God Himself angels
Were the loveliest creatures in existence. 145
But that one, I think, who seems
So lovely that none of the others
Boasts a tenth of his beauty,
That one must be God.
And hasn't my mother told me 150
That God must be loved and adored,
Honored and implored, bowed down to?
I will adore that one,
And all the angels with him."
 So he threw himself down 155
On the ground, and knelt, chanting
Every prayer he knew
(Taught him by his mother). And seeing
How he prayed, the leader of the knights
Called out: "Stop! Wait! 160
This boy, seeing us coming,
Has fallen to the ground in fright.
Should we come riding at him,
All together, I think
He's likely to die of fear — 165
And a corpse won't be able
To answer a thing I ask."
So the others stopped, and their leader
Hurried forward, greeting
The boy with reassuring 170
Words: "Don't be afraid,
Fellow!" "By the God I believe in,"

Said the boy, "I'm not. Are you
 God?" "Hardly, by my faith."
 "Then what *are* you?" "A knight." 175
 "I've never met a knight,"
 Said the boy, "and I've never seen one,
 Or spoken with one, or heard one —
 But you're more beautiful than God.
 I wish I could be like you — 180
 Shining, just like you!"
 At this, the knight came closer
 To the boy, and asked, "Have you seen
 Five knights and three young girls
 Today, anywhere near here?" 185
 But the boy had other things
 On his mind, and other questions
 To ask. Grasping the knight's
 Spear, he said, "Your beautiful
 Lordship, known as a knight: 190
 What's this you're carrying here?"
 "I'm not learning much
 From this fellow," said the knight. "That's clear.
 My dear young friend, I'm seeking
 Information from you — 195
 And you're asking the questions!
 All right, I'll tell you. It's my spear."
 "You mean," said the boy, "you spear things
 With this, as I do with my sticks?"
 "Good lord, what a fool you are! 200
 It isn't for throwing, but striking."
 "Then any one of my sticks —
 See them, right there? — is better
 Than this. When I want to kill

A bird, or maybe an animal, 205
I do it from as far away
As a crossbow arrow can carry.”
“I really don’t care,” said the knight.
“Now answer the question I asked you:
Do you know where those knights have gone? 210
Have you seen the girls I’m seeking?”
Taking hold of the shield,
The boy asked, bluntly,
“What do you use this for?”
“What kind of game is this? 215
You set me all sorts of questions
And never answer mine!
In the name of God, I expected
Answers from you, not questions:
You act as if I’m your teacher! 220
Well, no matter, I’ll tell you
Anyway: I want you to be pleased.
This thing I’m carrying is a shield.”
“It’s called a shield?” “Exactly.
And it’s not to be despised, 225
Believe me: it’s been a faithful
Friend, stopping any
Arrow or spear that tries
To hurt me. It stops them all—
And that’s why I carry this shield.” 230
Then those who’d been hanging back,
Waiting for their chief, came hurrying
Up the road, asking him
Anxiously, “My lord, what
On earth is this Welshman telling you?” 235
“As God is my witness, his wits

Are distinctly scattered. Whatever
 I ask him, point blank, he answers
 Sideways, and off the mark,
 Asking the names of things 240
 And how they're used." "My lord,
 Believe me, the Welsh can't help it:
 They're all born like that,
 Crazy as cows in a pasture.
 And this one's dumb as an ox. 245
 It's silly to stop for him,
 Letting him babble away
 And wasting precious time."
 "I'm not so sure," said their chief.
 "May God look down on me, now! 250
 Before we ride on our way
 I'll tell him whatever he wants,
 And I won't ride on till I do."
 He turned to the boy once more:
 "Fellow," he said, "please, 255
 Just tell me: did you meet those five knights,
 And the girls I asked you about?
 Did you see them riding by?"
 The boy took hold of his mail shirt
 And gave it a tug. "Tell me, 260
 Good sir," he said, "what's this
 You're wearing?" "You really don't know?"
 "Not at all." "This is my mail shirt:
 It's just as heavy as iron."
 "Is it made of iron?" "See 265
 For yourself." "I really don't know.
 But how lovely it is, God save me!
 Why do you wear it? What

Does it do?" "That's easy enough:
If you tried to pierce me with one 270
Of your sticks, or an arrow, you couldn't
Do me a bit of harm."
"In that case, Sir Knight, may stags
And does never get
These mail shirts, or I'll never kill 275
Another; I'll give up hunting!"
The knight said, yet again,
"In the name of God, fellow,
Can't you give me news
Of those knights, and the girls who were with them?" 280
And the boy, who didn't know
Very much, answered, "Were you born
With this shirt?" "Good lord, no.
No one could be born like this!"
"Then how do you come to have it?" 285
"I could tell you the whole story."
"Please do." "Gladly. King Arthur
Made me a knight, just five
Days ago, and gave me
All my armor and weapons. 290
Now tell me what became
Of those knights who rode past here,
Leading three girls behind them.
Were they jogging along, or hurrying?"
Said the boy, "Sir, just look 295
At that wood, way up high,
Around that mountain. The Valdonne
Pass cuts through, up there."
"What are you telling me, friend?"
"My mother's plowmen are working 300