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
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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 bepuzzlement 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.

Université des Acadiens
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Qui petit seme petit quialt,
Et qui auques recoillir vialt,
An tel leu sa semance espaende
Que fruit a cent dobles 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
They say of Alexander,
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.
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
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
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
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,
Hypocritical and false.
And what does the right hand mean?
Charity, which never
Boasts, but conceals its goodness,
 Lets no one know except Him
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
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
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!
Chrétiens 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
His struggles. It’s the story of the Grail,*
From a book the count gave me:
And here’s how Chrétiens told it.
The season was spring, trees
Were sprouting leaves, meadows
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
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
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,
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.
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
So well, hurling some
Behind him, some in front,
Some high in the air,
Then down, and up, and down
Again—until he heard
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
Against the heavy metal.
Mail shirts clinked and clanked,
Spears banged on shields,
And in shields and armor wood
Creaked and iron rang.
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
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
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
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
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
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! —
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.
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
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
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!
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—
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
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.”
“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—
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?”
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:
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—
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!
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,
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?
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?
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!
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,
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."

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?"
"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 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. 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! 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, 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, 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 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  
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  
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?"

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?"

"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."

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  
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
The land, up there. And if
These people came by, they’d surely
Have seen them. They’ll tell you, if you ask.”
The knights agreed to follow
Behind, if he’d lead the way
And guide them to his mother’s plowmen.

So the boy fetched his horse
And took them where the plowmen were turning
Over the soil and sowing
His mother’s fields with oats.
And as soon as they saw their lady’s
Son, they trembled with fear.
Do you know what made them afraid?
They saw the knights who were with him,
Riding with weapons and armor,
And they knew the questions he’d asked them,
And all the things he’d been told,
And now he’d want to be
A knight, and his mother would go mad,
For they knew how hard she’d worked
To keep him from ever seeing
A knight, or learning about them.
Then the boy asked the workmen,
“Have any of you seen five knights
And three girls go riding by?”
“They spent the day going down
These passes,” the plowmen replied.
And the boy said to the knight
Who’d told him so many things:
“Sir, the knights and the girls
Came riding along this way.
But now, tell me about
The king who makes people knights,
And where I'm likely to find him."
"Fellow," said the knight, "I can tell you
The king's court is at Carlisle,
And just five days ago
That's where he was, because
I was there, and I saw him.
But if he's gone when you get there,
There'll be plenty of people to guide you.
No matter how far he's traveled,
They'll be glad to help you find him.
And now I ask you to tell me, please,
What name I should know you by?"
"Sir," was the answer, "I'll tell you.
I'm called Dear Son." "Dear Son?
Yes, but I'm sure you have
Another name." "Oh yes.
I'm called Dear Brother." "I believe you.
But if you'll tell me the truth
I'd like to know your real name."
"Sir," was the answer, "I'll tell you,
Of course. They call me Good Master."
"A really fine name, by God!
And you have no other?" "No,
I've never had any other."
"I'm hearing strange things, by God,
The strangest I've ever heard—
And I'll never hear any stranger!"
And then, anxious to catch
The others, who had gone ahead,
He galloped off like the wind.
And the boy went hurrying home
To the house he'd always lived in,
Where his mother was waiting, and worrying,
For her son had not returned
When he should. She felt immense joy
The moment she saw him, nor could she
Conceal her happiness: loving him
With a deep maternal passion,
She ran to greet him, crying
"Dear son, dear son," a hundred times
Over. "Dear son, how my heart
Hurt, when you didn't come home!
The pain was so sharp that only
A little more and I might have
Died. Where have you been?"
"Where, mother? I'll tell you
Everything, just as it happened,
For the things I saw today
Made me tremendously happy.
Mother, you've always told me
That the angels of our Lord in Heaven
Were so wonderfully lovely that nothing
In all of Nature, nothing
In the world, could be more beautiful."
"Dear son, I'll say it again,
Just as I've said it before,
For it's true." "Mother, don't say that—
For haven't I seen, in the Barren
Forest, just now, the most beautiful
Creatures—far more beautiful
Than God Himself or all
His angels." His mother embraced him,
And said, "Dear son, may God
Protect you, for you make me terribly
Afraid. What you've seen, I think,
Were angels that all men fear,
For they kill whoever they meet.”

“Oh no, mother, no!
They say they’re called ‘knights.’

The moment he pronounced this word
His mother fainted away.
And when she recovered her senses,
She spoke in sorrow and anger:
“Oh Lord, what misery I feel!
My dear sweet son, I've worked
So hard to keep you from all knowledge
Of knighthood, protect you from seeing
Such creatures or hearing the word.
You would have been a knight,
Dear son, had it pleased God
To keep your father and all
Your other friends alive.

No braver, more worthy knight
Ever existed, more famous
And more feared, anywhere in all
The Western Islands, than your father.

Dear son, you're entitled to boast
Of the highest, purest lineage
Both on his side and on mine,
For I, too, was born
Of knights, the best in this land.

Nowhere in the Islands is there
A family better than mine—
But now the best have fallen:
As everyone knows, noble
Men who uphold the highest Standards of courage and honor Are these days hard to find. Wicked, shameful, and lazy Men don’t die—never! It’s the good who are killed.
Your father, let me tell you, Was wounded between the legs* And his whole body was crippled.
All the lands, and the immense Treasure his bravery had won Began to fall away,
And he died terribly poor.
The best and bravest knights Were all impoverished and deserted And exiled, after the death Of Uther Pendragon, our king And father of Arthur. Their lands Were pillaged and ruined, and the poor People who worked them were beaten Down. All who were able Fled. Your father owned This house, here in the Barren Forest. He could not flee.
He was hurriedly carried here In a litter: there was no other refuge.
And you, who were still so tiny, Had two beautiful brothers. You were barely two years old, Still a babe at the breast.

"When your brothers were grown, at your father’s

* That is, “castrated”; some manuscripts offer alternative readings
Advice and with his help
They were sent to two royal courts
To earn armor and horses
And weapons. The oldest served
The king of Escavalon
Until he was made a knight.
And his younger brother went
To King Ban of Gomeret:
They were both made knights on the same
Day, and on that day
Both of them started back
To their father's home, here,
To celebrate with him
And with me, but they never came,
For both of them fell in combat.
Battle killed them both,
And left me in sorrow and pain.
A strange thing happened
To the oldest: ravens and crows
Pecked out his eyes. They found
His body lying like that.
Sorrow for his sons killed
Their father, and since their deaths
Life has been bitter for me.
You are all the comfort
I have, and all that's worthwhile;
There's no one else in my life.
God has left me nothing
Else that can give me pleasure."

But the boy barely heard
A word his mother said.
"Have them bring me food!"
He ordered. "What are you saying?
All I know is I'm going
As fast as I can to the king
Who makes knights, no matter what!"
His mother did all she could
To hold him back, getting
Everything ready—a shirt
Of coarse hemp and breeches
Cut according to Welsh
Fashion (in which, I believe,
Breeches and stockings are sewn
Together), and a deer-hide tunic
And a cape with a tight-fitting hood.

And thus his mother equipped him.
It took her roughly three days—
But she couldn't hold him a day
Longer. She spilled out tears
And kisses, weeping as she hugged him,
Saying, "How sad it makes me,
Dear son, to see you leaving!
You'll go to the king's court
And you'll ask him for armor and weapons.
No one will tell him not to:
He'll give you what you need, I know
He will. But when it comes
To using what you've gotten, what then?
How will you know what to do,
When you've never done it before,
And never seen it done?
You'll manage badly, I know it:
As poorly prepared as you are,
How can you not do badly?
How can one know what has never
Been learned? How can one not know
What has often been seen and heard?

"Let me teach you something,
Dear son, you'd do well to remember—
And if you do, believe me,
It will bring you endless rewards.
My son, God willing, you'll soon
Be a knight. Congratulations.
Should you find a lady in need—
Anywhere, near or far—
Or a girl in need of protection,
Always offer your aid,
If they ask it, for there's no honor
That isn't built on that base.
A knight indifferent to a lady's
Honor has lost his own.
But serve ladies and girls
And honor will always be yours.
And if you court a woman,
Be careful you don't harass her:
Do nothing that might displease her.
A kiss means a lot to a girl,
So if she allows you a kiss
Don't ask for anything more:
Renounce it, I beg you, in my name.
But if there's a ring on her finger
Or an alms purse buckled to her belt,
And for the sake of love she gives you
Either, I think it good
To wear whatever she gives you.
It's proper to accept a ring—
Yes, and an alms purse, too.
But I've more to tell you, dear son.
When you're in lodgings or on
The road, don't wait too long
To ask your companions' names:
Learn their names, complete
And entire, for a name tells you
A man. Converse with the brave,
Dear son; ride with the brave;
For the brave never deceive
Those with whom they keep company.
And above all else, I beg you,
Go to monasteries
And churches and pray to our Lord
That you live this worldly life
Well, and are honored, until
You reach the right end to your days.”
“Mother,” he asked. “What's a church?”
“A place where one worships the Creator
Of heaven and earth, the Maker
Of all living things.”
“And a monastery?” “The same:
A beautiful, sacred building
That houses treasures and dead saints,
And where we consecrate
The sacrifice of Jesus,
Who suffered at the hands of the Jews—
Betrayed and falsely judged,
He suffered the anguish of death
For all men and women,
Whose souls would have gone to Hell
Once they left these earthly bodies,
But He saved them from the Devil.
They nailed His body to the cross,
First beaten, then crucified;
He wore a crown of thorns.
You'll go to a monastery
To hear the prayers and masses
With which we honor our Lord.”
“From the moment I leave you, I'll be very
Happy to go to churches
And monasteries,” said her son.
“Mother, I promise you that.”

He could not wait any longer,
But said farewell. And his mother
Wept, as he sat in his saddle.
His clothes were those the Welsh
Peasants usually wear
(Including their clumsy leather
Shoes); wherever he went
He carried three sharp wooden sticks,
And would have taken them with him,
Now, but his mother took away
Two, saying he looked
Too Welsh. She'd infinitely rather
Have taken all three, if she could.
His right hand held a willow
Switch, for hurrying his horse.
Weeping bitterly, his mother
Kissed him (for she loved him dearly),
And prayed that God would guide him.
“Dear son,” she said, “may the Lord
Grant you more joy, wherever
You go, than you leave behind you.”
He hadn't gone as far
As a pebble could be thrown, when he looked
Back and saw that his mother,
On the other side of the bridge,
Had fallen to the ground, unconscious,
And lay as if stone dead,
But he bent and whipped his horse,
Hard, with his willow stick,
And the animal stretched his legs
And carried him, at a rapid gallop,
Into the dark forest.
And then he rode straight on,
From dawn till the day was over.
He slept on the forest floor,
That night, and woke with the light.
He rose as the birds began
To sing, and mounted his horse,
Then rode without stopping until
He saw a tent pitched
In a beautiful meadow, near
Where a brook bubbled from the ground.
The tent was gorgeously made,
Half bright red, half
Embroidered with golden stripes,
And a gold eagle at the top.
The eagle glittered, clear
And bright and red, in the sun's
Hot rays, reflections from which
Went splashing across the meadow
And the rest of the tent (more beautiful
Than any in the world), which was carefully
Encircled, in the Welsh style,
With structures built of branches
And leaves. He hurried toward that tent,
Exclaiming, even before
He reached it, “God, I see
Your dwelling! How wrong I would be
Not to stop and adore You!
And how right my mother was,
Telling me monasteries
And churches were the loveliest things
In this world, instructing me always
To go out of my way, when I found one,
To worship my God and creator.
I'll stop here and offer Him prayers,
And perhaps, since that's what I need,
He'll give me something to eat.”
He reached the tent, which was open.
And right in the middle he saw
A bed, covered with a silken
Cloth, and on it, all
Alone, a girl was sleeping,
With no one to keep her company,
For the girls who served her had gone
To pick fresh new flowers
To scatter around the tent.
That was their usual custom.
As the boy entered the tent
His horse stumbled so badly
That the girl heard and, waking
Suddenly, was astonished to see him.
And the boy, innocent fool
That he was, said, “Girl, I greet you,
As my mother taught me I should.
That's what she taught me: always
Greet a girl, no matter
Where you happen to find her."

The girl shook with fear,
Convinced he was out of his head,
And sure she'd proven herself
A fool, to be found all alone.
"Fellow," she said, "Be gone,
Leave, before my friend
Finds you." "But first I'll kiss you,"
Said the boy, "no matter what,
Just as my mother taught me."
"Oh no, you won't, by God!"
Said the girl, "Not if I
Can help it! Leave, before
He finds you, or you're good as dead."
Awkwardly (not knowing
Any better), the boy
Clasped her in his strong arms,
And lay full length above her,
While she struggled as hard as she could,
Trying to get away.
But her best defense was useless,
Because—as the story tells us—
He kissed her twenty times,
Or even more, until
He suddenly saw the ring
On her finger, the emerald glowing.
"And my mother told me," he said,
"You'd be wearing a precious ring,
And that's all you'd give me, nothing
Else. I'd like that ring."
"You'll never have my ring,"
Said the girl. "Never, never,
Unless you take it by force."
The boy grasped her hand
And forced it open, then took
The ring off her finger
And put it on his own.
"Ah, that's fine!" he said.
"Now I can leave, well paid.
And your kisses, you know,
Are better than any I ever
Had from my mother's chamber
Maids: your mouth tastes better."
The girl was weeping as she answered:
"Don't carry off my ring!
You'll leave me in terrible trouble
And, sooner or later, I swear it,
You'll pay with your life. Please listen."
Nothing she said, not a single
Word, touched his heart,
But since he still hadn't eaten
He felt himself dying of hunger.
He found a flask, full
Of wine, and a silver cup,
And saw, on a woven mat,
A shining new white napkin,
And found, when he raised it, three fresh-baked
Venison pies—a meal
That, because of the pangs of hunger
Gnawing inside him, he couldn't
Find unpleasing. Breaking
One of the pies, he gulped it
Down, then drank clear
Good wine from the silver cup,
Again, and again, and deeply,
Then said, "Girl, I won't
Be gobbling all these pies:
Come eat, they're very good.
There's one apiece for us,
And a whole one left on the plate."
But the girl never stopped crying,
In spite of his invitation;
Not only didn't she answer,
But she cried even harder,
Twisting her hands in fury.
But the boy went on eating
And drinking, till he'd had enough.
Then he covered the pies that were left,
And quickly took his leave,
Commending her, like it
Or not, to the care of God
"God be with you, good friend!"
He said. "And don't be angry
Because I've taken your ring:
Before it's my time to die
I plan to pay you back.
And now I bid you farewell."
But the girl went on weeping
And said she couldn't commend him
To God, for on his account
She'd suffer more shame and sorrow
Than any slave ever knew.
As long as she lived, she'd never
Accept help from him:
"Believe me, you've betrayed me!"
And so she stayed there, weeping.
But she hadn't long to wait:
Her lover came home from the forest.
He saw the horse's hoofprints,
Leading to the house, and was worried,
Especially finding the girl
In tears: "Young lady, judging
By these signs I see, you've had
A knight in the house, while I
Was away." "Oh no, I swear it,
Only a Welsh boy,
A vulgar pest, and a fool,
Who drank as much of your wine
As he wanted, and more, and tasted
Your three venison pies."
"And that, pretty lady, is why
You're crying? He could have eaten
And drunk everything and not bothered
Me." "But there's more, my lord.
My ring is the problem, as well:
He took it, and carried it off.
I'd rather have died, indeed
I would, than let him take it!"
Now this disturbed the knight;
And jealousy bit at his heart.
"By God," he said, "this
Is too much! But since he's got it,
Let him keep it. But I think there's more.
Whatever it is, don't hide it."
"My lord," she said. "He kissed me."
"Kissed you?" "Yes, as I said,
But completely against my will."

"No: with your knowledge—and you liked it. I see no signs that you fought him,"

He declared, bitten by jealousy.

"Do you think I don't know you? Oh yes—how well I know you! My eyes aren't so weak That I can't see you're lying. You're on a dangerous road, Full of pain and unpleasantness; Your horse won't swallow a grain Of oats or sleep in a barn Till I've been avenged—and when He throws a shoe, by God! He can limp along without it. If he dies, you'll follow along Behind me on foot, and you'll never Get to change your clothes— No! you'll follow on foot, And naked, till I cut off his head: That's the only justice I want." Then he sat himself down and ate.

And the boy went galloping on Till he saw a charcoal-maker Pushing a donkey down the road. "You there," he said, "pushing A donkey down the road: Tell me the way to Carlisle. I want to visit King Arthur And be made a knight: they say He does that." "My boy, over there's A castle built on the shore.
Good friend, you'll find King Arthur
In that castle, happy and sad,
If that's where you go looking."
"But tell me, please, why
King Arthur is happy and sad."
"I'll tell you the whole story.
King Arthur and all his men
Have been fighting with King Ryan.
That king of the Islands was defeated,
And that's why Arthur is happy.
Then all his barons went home,
Back to their own castles,
Where they live a better life,
And he doesn't know what they're up to,
And that's why the king is sad."
The boy paid no attention
To anything the fellow said,
Except to follow the road
To the king, in the direction shown him,
And coming to the sea he saw
A well-built, beautiful castle,
And riding out from its gate
Was a knight in armor, carrying
A golden cup in his hand:
The knight's lance, and his reins,
And his shield, were all in his left hand;
The golden cup in his right,
And his armor suited him beautifully,
All of it colored bright red.
And seeing this lovely armor,
Gleaming completely new,
The boy was delighted: "Oh Lord,
That's what I'll ask the king
To give me! How happy I'll be,
If he does; I'll never seek
Another!" He was hurrying to the castle,
Anxious to reach Arthur's court,
And was riding by the knight
In red, when that knight stopped him:
"Where are you hurrying, boy?"
"I'm heading to court," was the answer,
"To ask the king for armor
And weapons." "Go quickly, and come back,
And be sure to tell that worthless
King he'll hold his lands
Subject to me, or else
He'll either give them to me
Or send someone to defend them
Against me, for I declare
They all belong to me.
And tell him, so he knows you're telling
The truth, that I took this cup
Out of his hand, just now,
As he was drinking his wine."
He should have sought another
Messenger, for nothing he said
Got through. The boy rode straight
To the court, where the king and all
His knights were sitting at table.
The hall was at ground-floor level,
As long as it was wide
And paved with stone, so the boy
Came riding right in on his horse.
Seated at the head of a table,
King Arthur was deep in thought;
His knights were chattering away,
Laughing and amusing themselves,
While he sat lost and mute.
The boy went clopping along,
Not knowing where to find
The king, or whom to address,
Till he happened on a page named Yonet,
Standing with a knife in his hand.
"Young fellow," said the boy. "You—
With the knife in your hand—show me
Which of these men is the king."
And Yonet, who was always polite,
Answered, "My friend, over there."
So the boy rode to the king,
Whom he greeted in his usual way.
But the king said nothing, sat silent
And still. And the boy spoke
Once more, but the king stayed silent.
"By God!" the boy exclaimed,
"This king hasn’t made any knights!
How could he create knights
If he never says a word?"
So he started to make his way back,
Swinging his horse’s head
Around, but like a clumsy
Oaf let the animal
Come too close— it’s the truth! —
And knocked the king’s silk hat
Onto the table. The king
Lifted his lowered head
And looking up at the boy
Put aside his thoughts
And said, "Welcome, good sir.
Forgive me: don't take it as rudeness,
Please, that I failed to acknowledge
Your greeting. Sadness kept me
From speaking, for my very worst enemy,
The man I hate and fear
The most, came here and claimed
My lands, and he's wild enough
To try to take them away.
He's called the Red Knight,
And he comes from the Forest of Quincroy.
And the queen was sitting across
From me, right at this table,
Comforting wounded knights
With kind words and her royal presence.
I wouldn't have minded this knight,
Regardless of what he said,
But he grabbed the cup from in front of me
And raised it with so sudden a motion
That he spilled it—it was filled to the brim—
All over the queen, which was such
A shameful, disgusting insult
That the queen immediately left,
Angry and upset enough
To kill herself, and she's locked
In her room, and whether she'll emerge
Alive, as God is my witness,
I don't know." The king's story
Couldn't have meant less to the boy,
And the queen's sorrow and shame
Meant exactly as much. "My lord
King," he said, "make me
A knight, for I'm anxious to leave."
The young savage's eyes
Were exceedingly merry and clear;
No one watching could think him
Polite, but all could see
He was handsome and of noble birth.
"My friend," said the king, "dismount,
And let this page hold
Your horse; he'll care for it well,
And I swear, as God is my witness,
I'll do as you wish, as both
My honor and yours require."
But the boy replied, "The knights
I met, back home, never
Came down from their horses, and yet
You want me to dismount! No,
By God, I won't dismount:
Just get it done, and I'll leave!"
"Ah!" said the king. "Dear friend,
I'll gladly do as you wish,
As the honor of us both requires."
"My lord the king," said the boy,
"By the faith I owe to my Maker,
I won't be a knight at all
If I can't be a knight in red.
Give me the weapons and armor
Of the knight I met at your door,
With your golden cup in his hand."
Sir Kay, deeply offended
By all he'd heard, grew angry
And said, "You're right, my friend."
Hurry: go take those weapons
And that armor. They belong to you.
You've done exactly right,
Coming here to claim them."
"Kay," said the king, "by God,
You speak hurtful words
And never worry who's hurt!
That's the very worst vice, in a knight.
This boy is foolish and untaught,
But he may have been born to a noble
Family, and if education's
The problem, perhaps he's had
A bad teacher, and can still improve.
It's sinful to mock and make fun,
And promise what isn't yours
To give. No honest knight
Should ever promise anything
He can't or won't want to give,
For he'll end by making enemies
Of the friends to whom he's made promises:
They'll want what he's said they can have
And are angry not to have it.
Let this teach you: it's better
To refuse a man from the start
Than lead him on with promises.
To tell the simple truth,
The man who says he will—
But won't—is only deceiving
Himself, for he loses a friend."

And as the king was speaking
The boy was about to leave,
But saw a beautiful, noble
Girl, and stopped to greet her;
Returning his greeting, she began
To laugh and, laughing, said,
“If you live long enough, boy,
I think, and my heart believes,
There’ll be no better knight
In this world than you: no one
Will ever see or know
A better one. And that’s what I think.”
And this was a girl who hadn’t
Laughed for more than six years,
And she spoke so loud and clear
That everyone heard her. But her words
Angered Kay, who jumped up
And, slapping her tender face
Hard, with his open palm,
Stretched her out on the ground.
And then, returning to his seat,
He saw a court fool
Standing beside a fireplace
And furiously kicked him into
The blazing flames, for this fool
Had often declared, like a prophet,
“Don’t ever expect
This girl to laugh until
She sees the man fated
To become the knight of all knights.”
The girl wept, and the fool
Cried, but the boy wouldn’t stop,
Asking no one’s leave
As he chased the Red Knight.
And Yonet, master of the roads
In all directions, anxious
To carry news to the court,
Left his friends and ran
Across the orchard outside
The hall and through a back gate
Till he reached the road the Red Knight
Had taken, awaiting whatever
Noble adventure might come
His way. And the boy came galloping
Toward the knight whose armor
And weapons he wanted, and the knight
 Awaited him (having set the golden
cup on a slab of gray rock).
As soon as the boy was close
Enough to be heard, he shouted,
“Set that nice red armor
On the ground; it's no longer yours.
This is King Arthur's order!”
And the knight inquired, “Fellow,
Is there anyone here who dares
Uphold the king? If there is,
Just say so: don’t try to hide it.”
“The devil! What’s this? Are you mocking
Me, Sir Knight, not taking
Off my armor? Now hurry
Up and do it. That’s an order!”
“Fellow,” said the knight, “I asked you
If anyone here wanted
To fight me in the king's name.”
“Knight, take off that armor
At once, or I'll take it off you
Myself. I won't wait all day.
Understand me. I'll hit you,
By God, if you keep on gabbing.”
At this the knight grew angry
And, raising his lance in both hands,
Hit the boy across
The shoulder with the wooden part,
Striking as hard as he could
And knocking the boy flat
Against his horse's neck.
And the boy, feeling himself
Wounded by the savage blow
He'd received, was furious. Aiming
Straight for the other's eye,
He threw his sharpened stick,
And before the Red Knight knew
What was happening, the stick went through
His eye to his brain, and blood
And brains poured down his neck.
The shock stopped his heart
And he fell backward, dead.
And the boy dismounted, set
The lance aside and lifted
The shield from the dead man's neck,
But couldn't get the helmet
Off, not knowing how
It was fastened on. And he would have been
Happy to take the dead knight's
Sword, but had no idea
How to draw it out,
And stood there, pulling at the scabbard.
And seeing how clumsy he was,
Yonet began to laugh:
"What's going on, my friend? What are you doing?" "I don't know. I thought your king gave me all these weapons and armor, but I'd have to slice this corpse into bite-size bits before I could get at anything he's got: inside and out, all of it sticks to him so hard it's as if this knight and his armor were all one solid piece."

"You're all upset about nothing," said Yonet. "I can easily take it off, if you like." "Then do it and do it quickly," said the boy, "I can't wait any longer!"

Yonet promptly stripped the corpse from head to toe. The body was left with no mail shirt or stockings, no helmet on its head—nothing. But the boy refused to give up his own clothing, and nothing Yonet could say would make him accept a silk coat, beautifully padded to absorb blows (the knight had worn it under his mail shirt), or remove the clumsy rawhide shoes from his feet. "Damn it!"

Said the boy. "You've got to be joking. You think I'll exchange the good clothes my mother made me.
For the stuff this knight was wearing?
Give up my good strong hempen
Shirt for that flimsy thing
He wore under his armor?
Trade my coat that keeps out
The rain for that one, which couldn't
Stop a drop? Damn
The man who'll trade good clothes
For bad! He deserves to rot!"
But how do you teach a fool?
All he'd take was the weapons
And armor; no words could move him.
So Yonet laced up the leggings
And fitted the spurs over
His thick rawhide shoes,
Then took the mail shirt, the best
Ever made, and put it
On him, and set the helmet
On his head (it fitted perfectly),
Then showed him how to hang
The sword loosely on his belt.
Then he put the boy's foot
In the stirrup and helped him mount
The war horse, for the boy had never
In his life used stirrups or spurs,
But only whips and switches.
Then Yonet brought the shield
And spear, and handed them over.
But before he rode off, the boy
Declared, "My friend, take
My horse, lead him away.
He's very good, and now
I don’t need him, so I give him to you.
And bring this cup to the king
And greet him in my name. And tell
The girl—the one that Kay
Slapped in the face—that before
I die, if I can, I’ll cook up
Something to make him dance
And give her a decent revenge.”
Yonet replied that he’d carry
The cup to the king and carefully
Transmit the message he’d been given.

They went their separate ways.
Yonet returned to the great
Hall where the barons were
And gave the king his cup,
Saying, “Rejoice, my lord,
For your knight, who was here just now,
Has sent you back your cup.”
“What knight are you talking about?”
Demanded the king, still burning
With anger. “In the name of God,
My lord, the boy who came
And left not long ago.”
“Do you mean that Welsh fellow,”
The king replied, “who wanted
The bright red armor worn
By that knight who brings me shame
As often and as badly as he can?”
“My lord, yes, it’s him.”
“And how did he get my cup?
Is the Red Knight such a good friend
That he lovingly handed it over?”
"Ah, no. The boy made him
Pay with his life. He killed him."
"My friend: how did he do it?"
"I don’t know, my lord, but I saw it:
The knight hit him with his spear
And hurt him badly, and the boy
Returned the favor, hurling
One of his wooden sticks
Through the knight’s eye, so blood
And brains spilled from the back
Of his head, and he fell to the ground,
Dead.” “Oh steward!” said the king
To Sir Kay, “You’ve done me a terrible
Wrong! Your bitter tongue—
The cause of so much trouble—
Has now deprived me of this young
Man, who’s helped me so much!”
“My lord,” Yonet went on,
“He also ordered me
To tell the queen’s young maid,
The one Kay hurt—
Slapping her for pure spite—
That if he lived he’d revenge her
If he ever had the chance.”
Hearing this, the delighted
Fool (who was near the fire)
Came jumping and running to the king,
Leaping and dancing for joy:
“Great king, as God is my Savior
Now we’ll have adventures!
They’re going to be savage and hard,
As you’ll soon see for yourself,
And I promise you this: Kay
Is going to be sorry for what
His hands and his feet and his foolish,
Villainous tongue have done,
And before a week's gone by
That knight will take revenge
For the kick I got from Kay's foot
And the violent slap in the face
He gave the queen's young maid—
Ah, how your steward will pay!
He's going to break his right arm
Between the elbow and the armpit,
And he'll carry it around in a sling
For half a year—oh yes
He will, it's as certain as death!

These words were so painful to Kay
That he felt as if he would burst
With anger, so furious that he almost—
Right in front of them all—
Struck the fool dead
On the spot. But knowing he'd displease
The king, he stopped himself
In time. And the king said, "Ah!
Sir Kay, what trouble you've caused me!
If only we'd taken this boy
In hand, and helped him learn
What weapons and armor were for—
The proper use of spears
And shields—he'd already be a knight,
And a good one. But he knows nothing
Of knighthood, or anything else,
And couldn't so much as unsheathe
His sword, if he had to. And there
He is, armed and mounted
On a war horse, and he’ll meet some rascal
Who wants that horse and will handle him
Roughly to get it. Indeed,
Unable to defend himself,
Foolish, completely untaught,
He’ll soon be wounded, or dead.
You’ll see, it won’t take long!”

Thus the king lamented,
His face showing his sadness,
But knowing how helpless he was
He said nothing more.
Meanwhile, the boy was spurring
His horse straight through the forest,
Emerging at the edge of a plain
Bordered by a river swelled
By water from all around,
And broader across than a crossbow
Could shoot over. He rode down
To the bank of this mighty stream,
But was careful not to ride
Into the water, for he saw
It was deeper and blacker and ran
Even faster than the Loire.
So he rode along the bank,
Where the swift-flowing water beat
Against the base of a massive
Cliff. And just at the point
Where the rock sloped to the river,
Stood a rich and powerful castle.
Where the water went pouring into
A bay, the boy turned left
And saw the castle towers
(Or so it seemed to him)
Springing directly out
Of the rock as he watched. And right
In the center of the castle soared
The tallest tower of all.
A strongly built gate
Faced the bay, completely
Barring the path up
From the water, which lapped at its feet.
In the four corners of the surrounding
Wall (fashioned of quarried
Rocks) were four low
Towers, beautifully shaped
And strong. The location was perfect,
The whole castle built
For comfort. In front of the round
Gatehouse, the moat was spanned
By a bridge of cemented stone,
Tall and strong, with battle
Stations set along
Its length, and a tower in the middle,
With a drawbridge in front, well
Constructed to serve its purpose—
A bridge for daytime hours,
But a gate at night. The boy
Proceeded to the bridge, on which
A distinguished man in ermine
Robes had been walking; he was waiting,
Now, for the horseman coming
Toward him. As a sign of his stature
And importance, he held a baton
In his hand; two pages (in simple
Garments, not wearing their cloaks)
Were standing close behind him.
Keeping his mother’s lessons
In mind, the boy called out,
Politely, as he came closer,
“Good sir, as my mother taught me
To say, God’s blessings on you,
Brother.” And the nobleman addressed him,
Seeing what a simpleton he was:
“Brother, where have you come from?”
“Where? King Arthur’s court.”
“And why?” “The king, may he have
Good fortune, made me a knight.”
“A knight? May God protect me,
I wouldn’t have thought he had time,
Right now, to give to such things.
It seemed to me he’d have
Too much else on his mind.
But tell me, please, good brother,
Where did you get your armor?”
“I got it as a gift from the king.”
“A gift? Tell me about it.”
And the boy told the story
You’ve been hearing. To tell it
Again would be stupid and boring:
Who wants a twice-told tale?
Then the nobleman asked him if he knew
How to manage his horse.
“I can make him run up and down,
Just like the hunting horse
I used to have, the one
I took from my mother's house."

"And your armor, good friend: tell me
If you know how it works?" "I know
How to put it on, and take it
Off, as a page showed me,
Because I watched him taking it
Off the dead knight who'd worn it,
And believe me it's all so light
It isn't hard to wear."

"I'm pleased to hear it," said the nobleman,
"Truly delighted. But tell me,
Please, if you have no objection,
What has brought you here?"

"Sir, my mother taught me
To look for brave and noble
Men who could give me good
Advice, and to listen to their words,
For belief in them is well placed."

And the nobleman answered, "Friend,
May your mother be blessed, for the counsel
She gave you is splendid. But isn't there
Anything else you want?"

"Yes." "What?" "Only
This: to give me lodging
Tonight." "Gladly," said the nobleman,
"But grant me, first, a request
Which will do you a world of good."

"What is it you want?" "Follow
Your mother's advice, and trust me."

"By God," said the boy, "I'll do that."

"Then dismount from your horse." And he did.
One of the pages who'd come
With the nobleman took the boy's horse,
And the other took off his armor.
And there he stood, in the stupid
Garments he'd had from his mother,
Clodhopper boots and rawhide
Coat, clumsily sewn.
And then the nobleman put on
The sharp steel spurs that the boy
Had brought with him, and mounted
The boy's horse, and hung
The shield by its strap around
His neck, and took up the spear,
And said, "My friend, it's time
To learn how these weapons are managed.
Observe how this spear is held
And the horse is spurred forward, then checked."
He untied the banner wrapped
Around the spear, then taught
The boy how the shield was used.
He lowered it down until
It almost touched the horse's
Neck, then set the spear
At rest, then spurred the splendid
Horse, which responded at once,
Obeying every command.
And the nobleman had profound knowledge
Of horses and shields and spears;
He'd studied these arts from his childhood.
The boy was thrilled, watching
What the nobleman could do. And when
The dazzling performance was finished
(The boy hanging on every
Move), the nobleman came riding
Back, the spear held high
In the air, and asked the boy,
“My friend, would you care to take
A turn, handling spear
And shield and working the horse?”
And the boy’s eager answer
Assured him he’d rather not live
A single day longer, or own
An acre of land, until
He could do as much. “My friend,
One can learn what one does not know,
Provided one works at learning.
Every craft requires
Clear eyes, and effort, and heart:
These three conditions are all
One needs. But since you know
Nothing, and have seen nothing,
Decide, if you will, to learn
Nothing, and no one will blame you.”
Then the nobleman had him mount
And, the moment he started, the boy
Began to handle shield
And spear as if he’d spent
His life winning tournaments
And wars, traveling all over
The world, seeking adventure—
For to him the arts of battle
Were second nature, and when
The teacher is Nature, and the student’s
Heart is at home, learning’s
Not hard, for Nature and heart
Work together. With this double help
He did wonderfully well, and the happy
Nobleman said to himself
That had the boy been working
Since birth he'd now be exactly
The master he'd suddenly become.
Having completed his practice,
The boy came riding back,
Lance held high (as he'd seen
The nobleman hold it), and asked,
"Sir, did I do it right?
Do you think I'd have a chance
Of succeeding, if I tried very hard?
In all my life I've never
Seen a thing I wanted
So much. I long to master
These arts as you have done."
"My friend," was the answer, "if you have
The heart you'll learn what you need to:
Don't torture yourself with doubt."

Three times the nobleman mounted
The horse, and showed the boy
The things he needed to know,
And then three times the boy
Took his turn in the saddle.
And after the third time the nobleman
Asked, "My friend, if you meet
A knight, what will you do
If he strikes you?" "I'll strike him back."
"And what if your spear shatters?"
"What else could I do? I'll hit
Him hard, with both my fists."
"And that will accomplish nothing."
"Then what should I do?" "You'll need
To attack him, sword in hand."
The nobleman planted his spear
Straight up and down in the ground,
Deeply concerned to teach
The boy all that a man
Should know about using his sword,
When the time came, either
Defending himself or attacking.
So he took his sword in hand:
"My friend, if you're attacked,
Here's the way to defend
Yourself." "God save me!" said the boy.
"I know all that as well
As anyone. I practiced until
I dropped, on pillows and padded
Shields, at my mother's house."
"Then come take lodgings with me,"
Said his host. "There's nothing more
To do. No matter what anyone
Thinks, tonight we'll lodge
You well." They walked together,
Side by side. "Sir,"
Said the boy, "my mother taught me
Never to spend much time
With any man unless
I knew his name. This seems
To me exactly right,
So I'd like to know your name."
"Good friend," the nobleman said,
“I’m Gornemant de Goort.”
And so they came to the house,
Walking hand in hand.
And as they ascended the steps
A page came running up,
Carrying a short cloak,
And hurriedly draped it around
The boy, to keep him from catching Cold, all heated from exertion
As he was. The house was large,
Beautiful, and rich, the servants
Excellent, and the food they’d prepared
Was fine and perfectly served.
The knights first washed their hands,
Then seated themselves at table,
The nobleman sitting next
To the boy, and eating with him
From the very same bowl. No one
Needs to know just what
They ate, exactly what dishes:
They dined, and they drank, till they stopped,
And that’s all I’ll say on the subject.
And when they rose from the table
The careful, courteous host
Asked the boy who’d been sitting
Beside him to be his guest
For a month. Or a year, if he cared to,
For by keeping him there the host
Could continue teaching him things—
If he thought them pleasant to learn—
He’d some day be glad he knew.
But the boy answered, “Sir,
Whether I'm near my mother's House I have no idea, But I hope that God on high Will lead me there and let me See her again, for I saw her Faint near the bridge at her door. Is she living? Is she dead? I don't know. She fainted from sadness, because I was leaving, I know she did, And so I find it impossible To linger long anywhere Else, until I know How she is. I'll be leaving at dawn."
The nobleman knew that nothing Would change his mind, and said Nothing. Their beds were made, And without a word they went to them.

Next morning, the nobleman rose And came to the boy's bed (In which he found him still lying) Carrying, as farewell gifts, A linen shirt and pants, And shoes dyed fiery red, And a coat made in India And sewn of Indian silk. These were presents he meant The boy to wear, so he said, "My friend, if you trust my words, Put on these clothes." And the boy Replied, "Good sir, you could Have spoken kinder words. Aren't the clothes my mother
Made me better than these?
But you want me to put these on!"
"Young man," said the host, "I swear
You promised you'd take my advice
And do whatever I said
You should do. You did, my friend,
You did. So do as I ask you."
"Gladly," was the answer, "for I've no
"Desire to disobey you
In any way whatever."
And with no further delay
He dressed in the new clothes and abandoned
The old. And then the nobleman
Bent and affixed a spur
To the boy's right foot: a knight
Creating another knight
Is expected to attach this spur.
And then a host of pages
Set themselves to properly
Arming the new young knight.
Then the nobleman took up the sword,
Belted it on the boy,
And kissed him, saying that thus
He conferred the highest distinction
God had ever created,
The order of knighthood; knights,
He declared, were sworn to honor.
And he added, "Brother, remember:
Whenever you engage in combat
With another knight, do
Exactly as I now instruct you.
If you gain the upper hand,
And the other cannot defend  
Himself or continue the battle,  
And is forced to beg for mercy,  
Don't deliberately kill him.  
Nor should you let yourself  
Talk too much, or gossip.  
Whoever talks too much  
Is sure to say something  
That someone will find offensive.  
Wise men declare, over  
And over, 'Too much talking  
Is sinful.' And so, good brother,  
I warn you, be careful. And I urge you,  
If you find a girl or a woman,  
Unmarried or married, deprived  
Of assistance and counsel, provide it:  
Women deserve our help,  
If we know what ought to be done  
And are able, ourselves, to do it.  

"And let me also teach you  
This: listen well;  
These words are worth your attention.  
Remember to go to church  
And pray to the Maker of us all  
To bless your soul with His mercy  
And, here in this worldly life,  
Protect you as the Christian you are."  
To which the boy answered,  
"May you be blessed, good sir,  
By all the apostles of Rome,  
For you say what my mother said."
"Please, good brother," the nobleman
Said, “don’t explain
That your mother told you this
Or that. I’m not offended,
Hearing such things. But others,
If you keep announcing the fact
(Which is why I beg you never
To say it again!), are sure
To take you for an absolute fool.
Please: do try to be careful.”
“What then should I say, good sir?”
“You can always say that the man
Who gave you your spur told you
These things, and taught you well.”
And the boy promised he’d never
Say a single word,
The rest of his life, of the lessons
He’d learned, except to declare
That his host had been his best teacher.
And the nobleman raised his hand
Above the boy’s head, and blessed him,
Saying, “Good sir, God save you!
As long as you won’t stay here,
Go with God, who will lead you.”
So the new-made knight left
His host, worried he’d taken
Too long to return to his mother
And assure himself she was well
And alive. He rode through the lonely
Forests, feeling more at home
In the woods than the flat plains,
Riding until he came
To a great castle, well
Located but surrounded by the sea
And the waves and desolate fields.
He rode rapidly toward
The castle and soon reached the gate,
But saw he’d first need to cross
A bridge so weak and worn
He had some doubt it would hold him.
He started across, and it neither
Did him harm nor caused him
Shame, but took him safely
Over. He went right to the gate,
And found it closed and locked,
So he knocked and called for admittance
(Not afraid to raise his voice
And demand that someone come)
Until a wan and wasted-
Looking girl appeared
At a window: “Who’s that out there?”
She said. He looked up at the window,
Saw her, and said, “My lovely
Friend, I’m a knight who’s come here
To ask that you let me in
And offer me lodging for the night.”
“Good sir,” she replied, “you shall have it,
But you won’t be pleased that you did.
Yet nevertheless we’ll give you
What hospitality we can.”

When the girl had gone away
The knight, watching and waiting
At the gate, was afraid he’d be staying there
And began to bang once more,
And soon four soldiers came,
Great axes hung from their necks  
And each with a sword at his belt,  
And they quickly opened the gate,  
Saying, “Sir, come in.”

They might have been first-rate soldiers,  
Once, but had suffered so much  
Privation, both in youth and in age,  
That seeing their state no one  
Could help but marvel. Everything  
Outside was ruined and wasted,  
Bare and stark, but inside  
Nothing was any better,  
And everywhere one went  
Were empty, deserted streets  
And abandoned houses, falling  
To pieces, no men, no women  
To be seen. The town had had  
Two churches, housing two  
Religious orders, but the monks  
Had been frightened away, and the nuns  
Had fled. Those churches were neither  
Rich nor lovely, their walls  
Full of cracks and falling  
Apart, their towers roofless,  
Their doors hanging open  
And unlocked both night and day.

Nowhere in all the town  
Was a mill grinding or an oven  
Lit—no bread and no biscuits,  
Nor nothing worth so much  
As a penny anywhere for sale.

The town had become a wasteland,
With nothing to eat, no wine
Or cider or beer to drink.
Taking their visitor to a slate-roofed hall, the four soldiers
Helped him dismount and take off
His armor. And then a page
Came down the stairs, bearing
A cloak trimmed with gray fur;
He draped it around the knight’s neck,
While others led his horse
To a stable that offered little
Fodder or grain, having
Almost none to give.
And others conducted the visitor
Up the stairs and into
The main hall, which was lovely,
And where two noble knights
And a girl were waiting to receive him.
Both knights were gray-haired, though their heads
Were not yet totally silvered.
They would have been in the prime
Of life, had they not been oppressed
And wearied by troubles and cares.
But the girl walked more lightly,
Obviously elegant, more graceful
Than a singing bird or a hawk.
Her cloak and her gown were a deep,
Rich black silk studded
With gold, and both were bordered
With thick, perfect ermine.
Her cloak was hemmed with black
And silver sable, neither
Particularly long nor wide.
Whatever descriptions I've given
Of a beautiful woman's face
And body, blessed by God,
I'd like to attempt again,
And this once in perfect truth.
Her head was bare, and her hair—
Hard as it is to believe—
Glowed so clear and bright
It almost seemed to be spun
Of the finest gold. Her forehead
Was high, pale and smooth
As if polished by the careful hand
Of a sculptor, who'd carved her face
In marble or ivory. Her eyebrows
Were brown, set well apart,
And her eyes, brilliant, piercing,
Were wide and clear and gay.
Her nose was straight, but not short,
And tints of crimson and white
Showed better, across her face,
Than bright red cloth laid
On silver. God made her surpassingly
Lovely to disorder men's minds
And hearts, and having shaped
One such marvel never
Made another like her.
She and the knights who were with her
Greeted the knight, and he them,
And then the young woman cheerfully
Took him by the hand, and said,
"Good brother, I'm afraid your lodgings,
Tonight, won't be as good  
As noble knights are used to.  
But if I tell you, now, 
Exactly how we live,  
You're likely to think we told you  
Only for wicked reasons, 
To be rid of your presence. But please,  
Accept the hospitality 
We're able to offer: tomorrow  
May God provide you with better!"  
Still holding him by the hand 
She led him to a secret room,  
Long and broad and beautiful,  
And seated herself beside him  
On a silk-covered feather-quilt 
Laid out across a bed. 
Groups of knights, four  
And five and six at a time,  
Came in and silently seated  
Themselves, watching the new  
Young knight sitting next 
To their lady, and equally silent,  
Remembering the warning his noble  
Teacher had given him. But among  
Themselves, in whispers, the lady's  
Knights had a great deal to say:  
"Good lord," they said, "I wonder  
If this knight can talk at all.  
What a shame that would be: no better-  
Looking knight has ever  
Been born. He looks good with our lady,  
And she looks good with him.
He's so handsome and she
So lovely that, if only they weren't
So silent, no girl and no knight
Could go better, one with the other,
Than these two, side by side—
As if God had expressly made them
So He could join them together."
And everyone there had something
To say on this subject, while the girl
Waited patiently for him
To begin their conversation,
And finally saw quite clearly
That nothing could make him open
His mouth until she had spoken,
So she said, with perfect courtesy,
“My lord, where have you come from?”
“Young lady,” he said, “my lodgings
Last night were at a nobleman's
Castle, and they were good ones.
The castle had five strong towers—
One big one, and four that were small.
I can’t describe it fully,
Nor even tell you its name,
But I know quite well the nobleman's
Name is Gornemant of Goort.”
“Ah, my friend!” said the girl,
“How well you've spoken—exactly
The words of a courteous knight.
Our Lord in Heaven must be pleased
At what you've said of Gornemant.
You couldn't have spoken more truly,
For by Saint Riquier he's noble
Indeed, as I can bear witness:
I haven’t seen him in a very
Long time, but I’m his niece,
So I know that since you left him
You can’t have met with a man
More noble. And I’m also sure
He rejoiced to find himself
Your host, for he welcomes guests
As a courteous nobleman should,
Secure in his wealth and power.
But here we’ve only six loaves
Of bread, sent me, along
With a cask of reheated wine,
By another of my uncles, a saintly
Priest, to have something for supper.
We’ve nothing else to eat
Except a deer that one
Of my men killed with an arrow.”
And then she ordered tables
Set up, and they were, and they all
Sat down to eat their meal.

It did not take them long,
But they relished whatever there was.
And then those who’d been
On watch, the night before,
Stayed in the hall to sleep,
And those who were standing guard
That night went out and assumed
Their posts. Fifty knights
And pages kept the watch,
While those who remained labored
To make their guest comfortable.
Those in charge of his bed
Made it with beautiful linen
And costly coverlets and pillows,
And everything else they could think of
To make their guest as happy
As possible that night, excepting
Only the pleasure a pretty
Girl might have supplied,
Or a lady, if he'd let them provide one.
But the boy knew nothing of such things
And fell asleep, I can tell you,
As soon as he lay himself down,
For his mind was completely untroubled.
But his hostess, shut in her room,
Could neither rest nor sleep.
He slept like a log, but she lay there
Thinking, unable to defend
Herself in the battle she was fighting.
She turned this way and that,
Too tormented to sleep.
Then draping a short cloak
Of bright red silk over
Her nightshirt, she ventured out
Like the brave and spirited girl
She was—but not on some silly,
Selfish quest, but intending
To seek out her guest and tell him
Some part of the problems she faced.
Still, when she'd left her bed
And ventured out of her room
She shook in every limb,
And fear pounded in her heart.
She passed through the door in tears, And when she reached his bed She stood there, weeping and sighing. And then she knelt, bending Over him, the tears flowing So freely that they covered his face: She could manage nothing more.

The flood of tears woke him, Startled, wondering why His face was covered with water. And then he saw her kneeling Next to his bed, and felt her Clutching him round the neck. Politely wrapping his arms Around her, he gently drew her Down, saying, as he did so,

"What is it you wish, beautiful Lady? Why are you here?"

"Oh noble knight, have mercy! I pray you by God and His son, Don't change your opinion of me Because I've come to your bed. Don't think me wild and foolish And wicked because I'm wearing Only my nightshirt, for in all This world there's no one afflicted With misery and sadness whose pain And suffering can equal mine. I no longer want anything; Despair is all my days Bring me. I'm so lost in sadness That this will be the final
Night of my life and tomorrow
My very last day, for I mean
To kill myself. Once
This castle was guarded by more
Than three hundred knights. Fifty
Are left: the rest—two hundred
Men and more—have been taken
Away, imprisoned or killed
By Anguinguerron, steward
Of Clamadeu of the Islands,
And the very worst man alive.
The fate of those he's imprisoned
Hurts me as sorely as those
He's killed: they're as good as dead,
They'll never be seen again.
With so many brave men dead
For me, no wonder I'm distraught!

"They besieged this castle all winter
Long, and all summer long:
Anguinguerron wouldn't budge.
His army grew larger and larger,
While ours kept getting smaller,
And our stores of food kept shrinking,
Until we had'nt enough
To feed a hungry bee!
We've sunk so low that nothing
Less than God Himself
Can save us: tomorrow this castle,
Which can't be defended, will fall,
And I'd be a prisoner, too—
If I let them take me alive,
Which I won't. I'll kill myself first,
And then I don't care if they take me. Clamadeu wants me, and thinks He'll have me—but never living— 2030
Only dead in both body
And soul. I've hidden a knife
Of the finest steel in my jewel box
And I'll plunge it into my heart.
And that's what I had to tell you. 2035
So now I'll go away
And let you go back to sleep."

Ah, what an opportunity
For glory, if he's brave enough
To seize it. And that's what she came for,
Dropping her tears on his face,
In spite of the story she'd told him.
She'd come for that and nothing Else, hoping, if he had
The courage, he'd decide to fight
For her castle, and her lands, and for her.
And he said, "My dear sweet friend,
Let yourself smile, be comforted
Now. And no more crying:
Just lie down here with me,
And wipe those tears from your eyes.
God in His goodness may bring you Better tidings, tomorrow.
Stretch out here on this bed:
There's plenty of room for us both.
I promise not to forsake you."
"If that's what you want," she said,
"That's what I'll do." And as
He held her in his arms, he kissed her.
With infinite care he covered her
With his blanket, as gently as he could,
And she let him kiss her again,
Nor did his kisses displease her.
And then they spent the night
Lying together, mouth
To mouth, till morning came.

That night she knew the pleasures
Of sleeping in each other’s arms,
Mouth to mouth, until dawn.
And when morning came the girl
Went back to her room, walking
Alone, and dressed herself,
That day, with no chambermaid’s help,
Careful to awaken no one.
And when those who’d spent the night
On guard saw daylight breaking
They woke up those who’d slept,
And the sleepers quickly rose
From their beds and made themselves ready.
And then the girl hurried
Back to her knight and gave him
A gracious greeting, “Good sir,
May God bless you on your way!
I’m well aware you won’t
Be staying here long. You’ve nothing
To gain by lingering here.
You’ll leave us, and I won’t be angry
Or show the slightest displeasure:
That would be rude, for we’ve
Not given you the kind
Of comfort you should have had.
But I trust Our Lord will bring you
Better accommodations
And more bread and wine and salt
Than we've been able to offer."

He answered, "Lady, I won't
Be looking for other lodgings
Today, until I've made
Your lands peaceful, if I can.
I won't let your enemy linger,
If I meet him out there. Let nothing
Torment you, now. But if
I succeed in battle, and kill him,
All I'll want from you
Is your love and affection—I need
No other repayment." To which
She responded, slyly, "Sir,
What you've requested is almost
Worthless, a thing of no value.
But if I refused it you'd think me
Proud and haughty, so I've no
Desire to refuse. But don't
Ask me to become your love
Simply because—either
By agreement or law—you then
Can go and die for my sake!
Oh what a waste that would be!
For I see quite plainly that neither
Your age nor your courage are such
That you could possibly stand
Against so famous a knight,
So fierce and strong, as now
Awaits you, outside, for man
To man you're bound to lose."
“Just wait and see,” he said,
“For I'm certainly going to fight him,
And nothing you say will stop me.”
She'd spoken as if to hold him
Back, though this was a battle
She longed for. How often we hide
What we want, knowing that negative
Words will push a determined
Mind to do even better
What it's long since decided to do.
She played her part wisely,
Making him think she was strongly
Opposed to what he was doing.
And then he called for his weapons
And armor, and they brought them out,
And made him ready, and helped him
Mount on a horse waiting
In the middle of the courtyard, fully
Equipped. Then they opened the gate.
All of them wore the grimmest
Looks, and warned him, "Good sir,
May God be with you, today,
And bring the very worst luck
To Anguiguerron, the steward,
Who's burned and ruined these lands."
They stood there weeping, both women
And men. And then they led him
To the gate, and watched him go out,
Shouting after him, all
Together, "In the name of the one
True Cross, on which God let His Son
Be killed, may you be kept
From danger and death and imprisonment!
May you come back in safety
And pleasure to whatever place
Best pleases and most delights you!"

Thus everyone prayed. And when those
In the army outside saw him
Coming, they called to their leader,
Who was waiting in front of his tent,
Sure that before night fell
The castle would be his, even
If one of its weary defenders
Tried to face him in combat.
His leg armor was laced; his troops
Were already rejoicing, convinced
The castle was theirs and they'd conquered
The entire country. The moment
Anguinguerron saw him, he took up
His weapons and hurried to meet him,
Riding hard on a huge
And powerful horse, crying,
“Fellow, who sent you here?
Tell me why you've come:
Is it peace you're after, or a fight?”
“And what are you doing here?”
Was the answer. “First tell me that.
Why have you killed good knights
And ruined this whole land?”
And then the steward replied
With infinite arrogance and pride,
“I want everyone out of
This castle, and the tower surrendered:
I’ve wasted too much time.
And I want the girl for my lord.”
“Damn such stupid words,”
Said the boy, “and whoever speaks them!
There’ll be no conquest: you’ll have to
Give up your claims, instead.”
“Keep your dreams to yourself,”
Said Anguenguerron. “Ah me!
How often the helpless and innocent
Must pay for other people’s
Misdeeds!” This arrogance angered
The boy, who set his lance—
And without a challenge or any
More words they charged at each other.
Both had sturdy lances
With sharpened metal points;
Their powerful horses ran hard,
And the knights were strong and angry,
Anxious to kill. As they crashed
Together, their shields and lances
Chipped and cracked, and each
Swept the other to the ground.
But without a word they leapt
Back in their saddles and attacked
More fiercely than a pair of wild boars,
Smashing blows at shields
And iron-linked mail shirts as fast
As their horses could bring them together.
Their arms were so strong, their hearts
So filled with fury, that this time
The lances completely shattered,
Splintered down the middle.
But only Anguinguerron
Fell from his horse, so badly
Wounded that his arm and side
Were extremely painful. Not knowing
How he could fight, now,
Seated high on his horse,
The boy came down to the ground,
Drew his sword, and attacked.
How can I tell you how many
Blows were struck, back
And forth? But the battle lasted
A very long time, and they fought it
Fiercely, until at last
Anguinguerron fell to the ground
And the boy came at him so hard
That he begged for mercy. The boy
Informed him, at once, that mercy
Was completely out of the question.
But then he remembered what his noble
Instructor had taught him: he was not
To deliberately kill in cold blood
Any knight, once the battle
Was over and the man had been conquered.
And Anguinguerron said, “My good friend,
Don’t treat me so harshly. I’ve begged you
For mercy. Grant it. You’ve taught me
That you’re the better knight:
I hereby affirm that fact
And declare you a man of great valor—
But not so well known that anyone
Unfamiliar with your powers
And knowing anything of me
Would believe that, all by yourself,
You could have killed me in battle.
Leave me alive and I'll bear you
Witness that you beat me in combat,
Here in front of my tent
As my army watched, and the world
Will accept my word, and award you
More honor than has ever been known.
And remember: if you serve a lord
For whom you desire a gift
Or to whom you owe a debt,
Just send me to him, and I'll go
As you instruct and say
Precisely how you beat me
In combat, and took me prisoner,
And bound me to do as he
May command."

"Damned right you will!
And where do you think I'll send you?
Into this castle—and you'll tell
The beautiful girl I love
You'll never bother her
Again, as long as you live,
But place yourself, both body
And soul, completely at her mercy."
The steward answered, "Then kill me,
Because that's just what she'll do.
There's nothing she wants so badly
As torment and death for me:
When her father died, I was there,
And all this past year I drove her
To despair, killing and capturing
So many of her knights. Making me her captive is simply condemning your prisoner to death. There's nothing worse you could do. Isn't there someone else to whom you could send me, someone not so certain to harm me? There's not a doubt in the world this girl will kill me."

So then the boy declared he'd send his prisoner to a nobleman's castle, and told him the nobleman's name and—better than any mason—described exactly how that castle was made, in complete detail: the moat, the bridge, and every turret and tower, and the great walls set around it, until the steward knew that the place he'd go as a captive was precisely where he was hated the most.

"Nothing will save me, good sir, if you send me there. As God is my savior, that too is a certain route to death. In the course of this war I killed one of that lord's own brothers. Good friend, before you send me there, I'd rather you killed me yourself. Don't send me to my death."
"By God," said the boy, "you'll go
And be King Arthur's captive,
And greet the king in my name,
And tell him, on my behalf,
To show you the girl that Kay,
His steward, struck, when she laughed
At the sight of me, and make
Yourself that girl's prisoner,
And tell her, as soon as you can,
That nothing could possibly make me
Set foot in any court
Held by King Arthur until
I've finally avenged that blow."
And Anguinguerron assured him
He'd do it, and do it well.
Then the victorious knight
Headed back to the castle,
And he who'd been defeated
Rode toward King Arthur's court,
Lifting the siege, lowering
His flags, and leaving no one
Behind him. And the knights of the castle
Rode out to greet their champion,
Their hearts saddened because,
Having conquered the steward,
He hadn't cut off his head
And brought it back in triumph.
But their greeting was joyful. They led him
To a platform and helped him out
Of his armor, saying, "Lord,
Why didn't you cut off his head,
Since you hadn't taken him captive?"
And he replied, "My friends,
That wouldn't have been right, for he'd
Been guilty of killing your kinfolk.
I'd given him my word
And you would have killed him at once.
And what would I be worth
As a knight, refusing him mercy
When I had him down on the ground?
Nor do you know what terms
I gave him: he's pledged himself
A prisoner at King Arthur's court."
Then the mistress of the castle came,
Wonderfully pleased, and led him
Away to her private apartment
To rest and relax. And there
She gave him hugs and kisses,
And denied him nothing at all.
Instead of eating and drinking
They played at hugging and kissing
And murmuring words of endearment.
   But Clamadeu was insanely
Determined. He rode rapidly
Toward the castle, thinking
It conquered. One of his men,
Sad-faced and sorrowing, met him
Along the road, and gave him
The miserable news of his steward.
"By God, it's all gone badly,
My lord!" Half distraught,
He was pulling the hair from his head.
"Just what's gone wrong?" said his lord.
And the man told him, "Your steward's
Been beaten in single combat,
And taken captive, and dispatched
As a prisoner to King Arthur's court.”
“But who was able to do this,
And how was it done? Where
On earth could they have found
A knight capable of defeating
So brave, so valiant a man?”
“My beloved lord,” was the answer,
“I don’t know where he came from,
I can only tell you that I saw him
Riding out of Castle
Beaurepaire, all
In red.”
“And what’s to be done?”
Demanded his lord, half out
Of his mind. “What else? Turn
And go home. There’s nothing more
To be done. This war is over.”
Hearing these words, a grizzled
Knight came forward. This
Was Clamadeu’s master of arms.
“What stupid advice!” he said.
“Our lord requires better
Counsel than this. Following
Your advice would be folly.
Go forward, I say. Go forward!”
And then he went on: “My lord,
Shall I tell you the way to conquer
Both this knight and this castle?
I’ll tell you a first-rate plan,
Quick and easy to accomplish.
No one inside this castle's
Walls has eaten or drunk
Very much. They’ve got to be weak.
But we, we’re healthy and strong,
Suffering neither from hunger
Nor thirst. We could fight all day,
If they dared come out against us,
Risk combat hand to hand.
Send twenty knights to their gate
And tempt them into battle.
And the knight, so busy amusing
Himself with Blanchefleur,
His lady, will try to be more
Of a knight than he knows how to be.
Those others are far too feeble
To be of much help, so we’ll either
Take him captive or kill him.
But really, all our twenty
Knights need do is keep them
Confused and fighting, while we
Come sneaking through this valley
And fall on them from behind.”
“What a grand idea, by God!”
Said Clamadeu. “You’re right!
We’ve got our very best troops—
Five hundred mail-clad knights
And a thousand well-equipped soldiers—
So our enemies are as good as dead.”
Then Clamadeu sent twenty
Knights to the castle gate,
In front of which they unfurled
A host of flags and banners,
Fluttering bright in the wind.
And when those in the castle saw them
They flung the gates wide open,
As their new lord had commanded,
And out he came, riding
At their head, to attack their enemies.
Proud and fierce and strong,
He attacked them all at once,
And whoever he struck had no
Illusions about fighting with some weakling
Apprentice. His iron spear
Pierced more than one body!
He struck their guts, and their chests,
He broke their arms and their necks,
Smashing some down, killing
Others. The knights and horses
He captured were handed over
To those on his own side
Who wanted them. Then he saw
A great army approaching,
Five hundred knights coming up
The valley, and a thousand soldiers,
A horde of enemies filling
The fields and heading for the open
Gates. Seeing the slaughter
And destruction wreaked on their ranks,
They ran like wild men, tumbling
One on the other in their haste,
But those defending the gates
Held their ranks, in good
Formation, and fought hard.
But they were few in number, and weak
With hunger, and the enemy had brought up
Every soldier they had,
Making their weight unstoppable;
The defenders retreated to the castle.
Archers posted above
The gates shot arrows into
The mob as it tried to push
And shove its way inside,
And one group got
As far as the entrance. But then
The defenders released a heavy
Hanging gate from above them,
And crashing to the ground it killed
Everyone standing beneath it.
Nothing he'd ever seen
Had so grieved Clamadeu as the sight
Of dozens of his men struck down,
Suddenly crushed to death,
While he could only stand
Outside, helpless, watching
As his hasty, disorganized soldiers
Fell. His grizzled adviser
Consoled him, glibly: "These things
Happen to the bravest, my lord.
If God so wishes it, we know
That—good or bad—we die.
You've lost your men, yes,
And the war with them. But there'll be
A tomorrow! Today's storm
Broke you, our ranks have been thinned
And those inside have won—
But not forever: trust me!
Pluck the eyes from my head
If they last another five days!
This castle and tower will be yours,
And they'll all be your captives, in the end.
Just camp out here today
And tomorrow, and the castle will fall,
And even the girl who's so long
Opposed you will be down on her knees,
Begging in the name of God
That you come and take her prisoner."
So Clamadeu's tent was put up,
Along with the others they'd brought,
While those with no other protection
Took lodgings as best they could.
And the castle's defenders set down
Their weapons. Their own prisoners
Were neither imprisoned nor enchained,
Once they'd pledged on their solemn
Honor as knights to regard
Themselves as captives and to do
No harm to those who had caught them.
And so they stayed behind
Their walls. That day a great wind
Had blown a heavy barge,
Loaded with wheat and other
Foodstuff, clear out to sea.
God was good enough
To steer it, safe and sound,
To the castle, and when the defenders*

* Lines 1708-9 inform us that the castle is "surrounded by the sea and the waves"
Saw it, they sent messengers
Down to the shore, to learn
From those on board who
They were and where they'd come from,
What lord they served, and where
They'd been meaning to go. They answered,
"We're merchants; our boat is bringing
Food to market. We're selling
Bread and wine, bacon
And ham, pork and beef,
And whoever wants it can buy it."
"Now praise the Lord," said
The defenders, "for making the wind
Blow you here to our shore!
Welcome, welcome, good friends!
Disembark: you've sold
Everything at whatever price
You may ask. Just come and collect
Your money: you won't be able
To count the gold and silver
We're going to give you for all
Your wheat, and your wine, and your meat.
Oh, we'll give you a cart
To carry it off with, if you like,
Or more than one. We don't care!"
Thus buyers and sellers both
Concluded a good piece of business.
They hurried to unload the barge
And carry in goods that would mean
So much to the castle's defenders.
And when those inside saw
It was food they were bringing in,
You can ask yourself how happy
They were, and how quickly they got
To work cooking and baking!
Now Clamadeu could wait
Outside as long as he wanted,
For those inside had plenty
Of beef and pork and bacon,
And bread and wine and venison.
The cooks didn't waste a minute:
Boys put a match to the fires
And the cooks prepared the food.
And the young lord of the castle
Could enjoy the girl at his leisure,
Her arms around him, kissing
And taking delight in each other.
The castle hall was quiet
No longer, but once again noisy
With joy. All of them ate
As much as they wanted—and those
Who'd hurried to cook the food
Came to the table, too,
As starved as everyone else.
They finally rose from their meal—
But Clamadeu and all
His men were already dying
Inside, having heard the news,
Declaring they were ready to give up
The siege, for now the defenders
Couldn't be starved. They'd have
To leave; they'd been wasting their time.
Wild with rage, telling
No one what he'd done, Clamadeu
Sent a messenger to the castle,
Informing the knight in red
That until the next day at noon
He could fight a battle, man
To man in the open field,
If he dared. Hearing this message
Announced to her lover, the girl
Was worried and angry, but he replied
At once that, having asked
For a fight, Clamadeu
Would have a fight, whatever
Might happen. The girl was twice
As unhappy, hearing this,
But no matter how sad he made her
The young man meant to fight.
Men and women alike
Begged him not to accept
A challenge from Clamadeu,
Who'd never in his life been defeated.
"Gentlemen," he said, "you'd do
Better to save your breath,
For no one in all the world
Could make me go back on my word."
No one dared continue
Once he'd cut them off
Like this, so they took to their beds
And slept till dawn the next day,
But terribly sad that their lord
Could not be dissuaded, for all
Their prayers, from this foolhardy combat.
That night the girl kept begging
Her lover not to fight
The battle, but stay home in peace,
For now they need no longer
Fear either Clamadeu
Or his men. But nothing could move him—
A fact exceedingly strange,
Considering how well she blended
Caresses with sorrow, weeping
At every word, kissing
So sweetly, so softly, that indeed
She turned the key of love
This way and that in his heart,
Yet never succeeded, whatever
She did, in making him give up
The battle he'd pledged himself
To fight. He ordered his arms
And armor brought, and those
Who served him hurried to obey.
But as they made him ready
They worked in sorrow, and wept,
Praying to the King of kings.
Then he mounted the Norwegian horse
He'd had them bring in, and rode off
So quickly that he left them alone
With their tears and their sorrow, standing
Where he and his horse had been.
When Clamadeu saw him coming,
And knew he meant to fight,
He was sure the boy must be crazy;
He expected to quickly and easily
Sweep the boy from his saddle.
The field was flat and smooth,
And they were completely alone,
For Clamadeu had sent
His men away, and they'd gone.
Both had their lances ready,
Resting on the saddle bow,
And they charged without a word
Or the slightest delay. Both
Their spears were ashwood, with iron
Points; both were heavy
And sharp; both knights were strong
And spurred their horses, hating
Each other, intending death.
The shock as they crashed together
Cracked both their shields,
Broke both their lances,
And threw both knights to the ground.
But they jumped right up and immediately
Drew their glittering swords,
And began to slash at each other.
They fought on equal terms
And I could describe it all,
If I wanted to take the time,
But it isn't worth the effort:
One word is as good as twenty.
Finally, Clamadeu
Was forced to surrender, in spite
Of himself, and accept the boy's
Terms, as his steward had done,
For he had no more desire
For the dungeons of Beaurepaire
Than his steward had felt, and not
For the vast empire of Rome
Would he let himself be imprisoned
By Gornemant of Goort.
So he gladly swore to ride
To King Arthur's court and become
That king's captive and give
The boy's message to the girl
Kay had handled so roughly
(And to whom he'd given such pain):
If God gave him the strength
The boy would surely avenge her.
And Clamadeu promised, too,
That before the dawn of another
Day he'd free all
The prisoners locked in his towers,
And would never again so long
As he lived allow anyone
To attack the castle, but swore
To protect it, and neither he
Nor anyone would bother the girl.
   So Clamadeu rode off
Homeward, and as soon as he got there
Ordered all his prisoners
Unconditionally freed,
Released without restrictions.
This was the pledge he had made,
And this was what was done.
So out they came from his dungeons,
Carrying all their belongings,
Set free at the snap of a finger,
Nothing and no one held back.
And Clamadeu himself
Set off on his lonely road.
In those days (these rules can be read
In books) the custom required
A conquered knight to proceed
Into prison straight from combat,
Dressed exactly as he was,
Removing not a single
Garment nor adding one
To what he was wearing. Armored,
And bearing his weapons, Clamadeu
Followed Anguinguerron,
His steward, to Disnadaron,
Where Arthur was holding court.
Meanwhile, back in the castle,
They celebrated the captives’
Return, set free at last
After long suffering in miserable
Cells. And every lodging
That held a knight rang
With joy. The bells of every
Church and monastery
Sounded, and monks and nuns
Gave grateful thanks to Our Lord.
People were dancing up
And down the streets, and everywhere.
But those in the castle sang
Loudest, now safe from attack.
Meanwhile, Anguinguerron
Rode toward the court, and his lord
Behind him, spending three nights
In a row where his steward had lodged.
Tracking his horse’s hoofmarks,
Master followed man
Straight to Disnadaron,
Where Arthur's court was in session.
So Clamadeu arrived,
Traveling alone and just
As he was, and his steward—already
Delivered of the message he was bearing,
Spoken aloud in everyone's
Presence the day he'd come there—
Recognized his master.
The court had claimed the steward
For itself. But despite his master's
Blood-spattered armor, the steward
Knew him, and immediately called out,
"Gentlemen, gentlemen, what a wonderful
Sight! By God, the boy
In red armor must have sent you
The knight who's coming over there.
He beat him in battle, I'm sure of it,
Seeing the blood all over him.
I see the blood from here,
And I'd know him anywhere,
For he is my lord, I'm his man.
His name is Clamadeu
Of the Islands, and there's no better
Knight in the Roman Empire.
But even the best knights can fall."
These were Anguinguerron's words
As Clamadeu arrived,
And then they ran to each other,
Meeting in the middle of the court.
It was Pentecost. The queen
Was seated at King Arthur's side
As he sat at the head of the table.
Below him sat counts and kings,
Countesses and queens,
Come to court after Mass,
Stately ladies and their knights
Leaving church together.
Sir Kay threw off his mantle
And crossed the great hall, his right hand
Holding a small wand,
A felt hat on his head,
His long blond hair hanging
Down his back. No knight
In all the world could match
His beauty—but his cruel, malicious
Tongue tarnished and blemished
His looks and his courage alike.
His tunic was made of rich
Multicolored silk;
Around it he wore a handsome
Belt, its buckle and clasps
Of hammered gold (as I read
In the book where his costume is described).
Knights stepped out of his way
As he walked through the hall, everyone
Fearing his savage taunts,
His savage tongue; they scurried
To safety, out of his path—
As well they might, for whether
In jest or deadly serious
His words would fly like arrows.
No one there in that hall
Could help cringing away,
Silent, as he came stalking
Straight to the king, and said,
"My lord, if you please, I could have
Dinner served right now."
"Kay," said the king, "leave me
In peace! By the eyes in my head,
I refuse to eat, at a solemn
Feast like this, until
My court hears news of some wonder."

Even as he spoke these words
Clamadeu came to his court,
A vanquished knight, and a captive,
Appearing, as he had to, in full armor,
And said, "God's blessings on
The very best king in the world,
The bravest and noblest of all,
According to those who've been
To his court and seen and heard of
His grand and glorious deeds!
And now please listen, your majesty,
As I give you the message I've brought.
It pains me to admit, in open
Court, that I come here the captive
Of a knight who beat me in battle.
I've been ordered to surrender myself
To you; I have no choice.
But if anyone here intends
To ask me if I know his name,
I must answer no, I don't.
All I'm able to say
Is that his armor is red
And he told me he got it from you."
"My friend," said the king, "in the name
Of Our Lord, tell me the truth:
What state is he in? Is he healthy
In body and mind? Is he free?"
"My lord," said Clamadeu,
"Rest assured: he is—
And surely the bravest knight
I've ever met in my life.
And he's told me to tell the girl
Who laughed at Sir Kay, and whom
Sir Kay so shamed, slapping
Her face, that the blow would be
Avenged, if only Our Lord
In Heaven allowed it." Hearing
These words, the king's fool
Jumped for joy, and cried,
"As God is my witness, my lord,
That blow will be well revenged.
This is no joke, for Kay
Deserves a broken arm,
Or maybe a broken neck!
And he's going to get it!" Hearing
This charming prattle, Kay
Barely kept himself
From cracking the fool's skull—
Not out of fear, but because
Of the king and the scandal it would cause.

The king shook his head,
Saying, "Ah Kay, how sorry
I am that he's not at my court!
Your wild tongue drove him
Away, and I deeply regret it."
Then, at the king's command,
Giflet rose to his feet,
And my lord Yvain, whose company
Improved anyone he was with,
And following the king's instructions
These two noble knights
Led Clamadeu to the rooms
Where the queen's ladies were busy
Amusing themselves. As the king
Had ordered, they brought him directly
To the girl Kay had slapped
In the face, and he gave her a message
She was more than happy to hear,
For she still felt, in her heart
And on her cheek, the shame
And the pain of that blow. Her face
Had long since been cured of the purely
Physical pain, but the blow
To her honor was not so easily
Cured, for she could not forget
The shame or forgive the man
Who'd caused her to feel it. No worthy
Heart, beating strong
And hard, forgets such sorrow,
Though cowards let it grow cold.
Clamadeu delivered his message;
Then the king told him he'd remain
At court the rest of his life.
But he who'd fought that knight—
Snatching Blanchefleur,
His beautiful belovèd, and her lands
From Clamadeu's grip—he lived
In delight, and would have had her
And her lands forever, except
That his heart pulled him away,
Tugging in a different direction:
He remembered his mother, and the sight of her
Fainting and falling to the ground,
And more than anything else
In the world he longed to see her
Again. His beloved would not
Let him go; he dared not
Ask her. She'd ordered all
Her people to beg him to stay—
But they begged in vain. Still,
He swore a solemn oath
That if he found his mother
Alive, he'd bring her back
With him, then stay and defend
Those lands forever, as he also
Would, should his mother be dead.

And so he set off, promising
To return, leaving his lovely
Blanchefleur (and everyone
Else) both very angry
And also very sad.
And as he rode away
The procession that followed behind him
Was like the feast of Ascension.*
All the monks were there,
Wearing silken cloaks
As if it had been a Sunday,
And all the nuns with their veils,

* Commemorating Christ's ascension to Heaven
And everyone crying out,
"Lord, you led us out
Of exile and back to our homes:
Is it any wonder that we weep,
Finding ourselves so soon
Abandoned? Our sorrow is so
Immense it's beyond human
Conception!" He answered, "There's nothing
To fear, believe me: nothing.
Don't you think it right
And proper that I visit my mother,
Who lives alone in that vast
Wood, the Barren Forest?
I have to see her, living
Or dead. I can't abandon her.
If I find her alive, I'll have her
Take the veil in your convent.
And if she's dead, you'll say
A yearly Mass for her soul,
Which God will hold, with the other
Saints, in Abraham's bosom.
And you, monks and nuns:
Don't trouble yourselves, for I'll give you
Gifts in her name, if God
Decides to return me here."
Then monks and nuns and all
The others left him. And he rode
On his way, lance at the ready,
Armed as he was when he came.
He rode all day, meeting
No earthly soul, neither
Man nor woman who could help him
Find his way. Nor
Did he ever stop praying
To the King of Glory, Our Father
In Heaven, to let him, should it be
His will, to see his mother
Again, alive and healthy.
Repeating this prayer, over
And over, he came riding down
A slope and arrived at a river.
The water was deep and ran
So fast that he couldn't cross,
And he said, "Oh, Almighty God,
If only I could cross this water
I know I'd find my mother
Alive and well!" He rode
Along the stream till he came
To a rocky cliff directly
At the water's edge and could go
No farther. And then he saw
A craft descending the river,
With two men on board.
He paused, waiting for the boat
To draw nearer, expecting
The current would surely carry them
Close to the bank. But instead
They stopped dead in the middle
Of the stream, completely motionless,
Firmly anchored in place.
And then the man sitting
In the bow cast his line,
Baited with a fish as small
As a minnow. Not knowing what
He could do to cross the river,
The boy called out, asking,
"Gentlemen, tell me, if you please,
Is there a bridge across
This river?"  The man who sat there
Fishing answered, "No,
My friend, by God! Nor
Will you find, I think, for twenty
Leagues in any direction,
A boat bigger than this one,
Which carries no more than five men
And couldn't carry your horse—
No boat, no bridge, no ford."
"Then tell me," he said, "in the name
Of God, where I might
Be able to find lodgings."
"That's just what you'll need, I think,
And other things, too. I'll be
Your host for the night: follow
The crack you'll see, right
In that rock over there, ride up,
And when you get to the top
You'll see, in a valley in front of you,
The house I live in, with rivers
And forests all around it."
He rode right up the crack
And got to the top. But as
He looked around him, all
He could see, in every direction,
Was the earth and the sky above it.
"What am I hunting, up here?
Such a stupid waste of time!
May God heap infinite shame
On the man who sent me here!
He told me that when I reached
The top of this cliff I'd see
The house he lived in! Fisherman,
Every word you said
Was a lie, and you said them all
To make me miserable.” And then,
In a valley far below,
He saw the top of a tower.
From there to Beirut there was nothing
Lovelier or better built.
It was crafted of gray-brown stone
And ringed around with turrets.
The tower was in back of the living
Quarters, through which one entered.
The boy rode quickly down,
Swearing, now, that the man
Who’d sent him had guided him well.
He was full of praise for the fisherman,
No longer calling him cheater
And trickster, disloyal, a liar,
Since he’d found his lodgings.
He rode right up to the gate
And found a drawbridge, conveniently
Lowered for his use. He crossed
The bridge, and four servants
Came running out to greet him;
Two helped him out of his armor,
The third led his horse to the stable,
To feed him hay and oats,
And the fourth draped on his shoulders
A fresh, clean scarlet cloak,  
And led him as far as the door.  
Believe me, from there to Limoges  
You could scour the land and not find  
Anything so beautifully built.  
And then he waited, in the entry  
Hall, to meet the lord  
Of the castle. Two young servants  
Appeared and led him into  
The great hall, which was square,  
Equal in length and breadth.  
Seated on a bed, in the middle  
Of the hall, he saw a handsome  
Knight with grizzled hair,  
His head covered by a hat  
As dark as a blackberry, wrapped  
Like a turban in purple cloth.  
And all his clothing was black.  
He lay leaning on his elbow,  
And a blazing fire burned  
Beside him, dry wood set  
In the center of four columns  
With room for four times a hundred  
Men to be seated around it,  
Comfortably all at their ease.  
These huge columns, straight  
And strong, supported a towering  
Chimney, bronze and massive.  
The servants conducting the guest—  
One to the left, one  
To the right—led him to his host,  
Who seeing them come immediately
Greeted the boy, saying,
"My friend, don't be offended
If I don't rise to give you
Welcome, because I can't."

"Don't speak of it, Sir, in the name
Of Our Lord. I'm not bothered,
God having granted me joy
And health." With a great effort
The knight sat up as far
As he could: "Come closer, my friend:
Don't be afraid. Come sit
Quietly at my side. It would make me
Exceedingly happy." So the boy
Went and sat beside him,
And the knight inquired, "My friend,
Where have you come from today?"
"Sir," was the answer, "this morning
I started from Beaurepaire castle."

"My Lord!" said the knight. "How long
A journey you've had. Surely,
You must have left before
The watchman sounded his morning
Horn." "Oh no," said the boy.
"I assure you: the day's first hour
Had been signaled." As they spoke
A servant entered the hall.
A sword hung in a swordbelt
Slung from his shoulder, and he carried it
Straight to the lord of the castle,
Who drew it partway from its sheath,
Looking at the words written
On the blade, which told where the weapon
Had been forged, and simultaneously
Seeing what splendid steel
It was made of, impossible to break
Except in a single instance
Known only to the man
Who had done the hammering and forging.
And the servant who’d carried it in
Said, “That golden-haired girl,
Your beautiful niece, has sent you
This sword as a gift. No weapon
So massive, so long, has ever
Been made so perfectly balanced.
Decide for yourself who should have it,
But my lady will be wonderfully pleased
To have it used, and used well,
By whatever hand will wield it,
For the maker of this sword has forged
Three and only three,
And having made this one
He will never make another.”
Then the lord of the castle gave
Both sword and swordbelt (itself
Easily worth a fortune)
To the stranger, his guest. The sword’s
Rounded pommel was fine
Greek or Arabian gold;
The scabbard bore Venetian
Embroidery. Having given his guest
So rich a gift, the host
Declared, “My friend, this sword
Was meant for you, and you
Alone, and I want you to have it.
Buckle it on, and try it.”
The boy thanked him, and buckled it
On, but not too tightly,
Then drew the naked blade
And having held the sword
For a moment, put it back
In its scabbard. Believe me, it looked
Splendid at his side, and still better
In his hand: truly, he seemed
Someone who would use it well,
When he had to. In the clear light
Of the fire, he could see, behind him,
The page in charge of his weapons
And armor, and handed him
The sword, to hold with the rest.
And then he rejoined his host,
Who’d done him so great an honor.
They sat in a hall lit
As brightly as candles can make
An indoor room. And as
They chatted of this and that,
A servant entered the hall,
Carrying—his hand at its center—
A white lance. He came out
Of a room, then walked between
The fire and those seated
On the bed, and everyone saw
The white wood, and the white
Spearhead, and the drop of blood
That rolled slowly down
From the iron point until
It reached the servant’s hand.
The boy saw that wondrous
Sight, the night he arrived there,
But kept himself from asking
What it might mean, for he'd never
Forgotten—as his master at arms
Had warned him, over and over—
He was not to talk too much.
To question his host or his servants
Might well be vulgar or rude,
And so he held his tongue.

And then two other servants
Entered, carrying golden
Candleholders worked
With enamel. They were wonderfully handsome
Boys, and the candleholders
They each clasped in their hands
Bore at least ten
Burning candles. A girl
Entered with them, holding
A grail-dish* in both her hands—
A beautiful girl, elegant,
Extremely well dressed. And as
She walked into the hall,
Holding this grail, it glowed
With so great a light that the candles
Suddenly seemed to grow dim,

* The Old French word is *graal*, meaning cup, chalice, grail, and so on. But as Poirion says, “Dans cette phrase, un graal (avec l'article indéfini) est un objet en apparence quelconque” (In this sentence, a grail [used with the indefinite article] is apparently an ordinary object [p. 1349n])—that is, not *the* grail.
Like the moon and stars when the sun
Appears in the sky. Then another
Girl followed the first one,
Bearing a silver platter.
The grail that led the procession
Was made of the purest gold,
Studded with jewels of every
Kind, the richest and most costly
Found on land or sea.
No one could doubt that here
Were the loveliest jewels on earth.
Just as they'd done before,
When carrying the lance, the servants
Passed in front of the knight,
Then went to another room.
And the boy watched them, not daring
To ask why or to whom
This grail was meant to be served,
For his heart was always aware
Of his wise old master's warnings.
But I fear his silence may hurt him,
For I've often heard it said
That talking too little can do
As much damage as talking too much.
Yet, for better or worse,
He never said a word.
The lord of the castle ordered
Water brought and tablecloths
Spread, and those whose work
This was did what had
To be done. Then host and guest
Washed their hands in mildly
Warmed water, and two servants
Brought in a large ivory tabletop
(The book where one reads this story
Says it was all of one piece).
They held it there a moment,
As the two noblemen watched,
While two other servants
Brought in wooden supports
(Fashioned, we’re told, of timber
Made totally indestructible
For two remarkable reasons:
They’d been carved of ebony, and this wood
Never decays or burns,
So neither possible danger
Could ever occur). Then they set
The ivory top over
The supports, and spread out the tablecloths.
What can I say of these cloths?
Ambassadors—cardinals—popes:
None could command such whiteness.
Their first course was a haunch
Of rich venison, in pepper
Sauce; they drank their clear
Wine from golden cups.
The roasted meat was sliced
Right in front of the diners
(The whole haunch having
Been carved on that silver platter),
And served, to host and guest,
On well-baked breadlike shells.
Meanwhile, the wonderful grail
Was carried back and forth,
But again the boy was silent,
Not asking to whom it was served.
And again it was thoughts of his master
Which kept him from speaking, for he never
Forgot how clearly he'd been warned
To beware of too much talking.
And so he stayed silent too long.
With every course, the grail
Was borne back and forth,
Uncovered, plainly visible,
And still he did not know why.
Although he wished to know
He told himself he'd surely
Make some safe inquiry
Before he left; someone
Would tell him. He'd wait until morning,
When he was taking leave of the lord
Of this castle and all who served him.
And so he postponed his questions,
And simply ate and drank.
There was no shortage of food
Or wine, not at that table;
He dined in delight, and enjoyed it.
They ate exceedingly well:
The lord of the castle served
What kings and counts and emperors
Are supposed to eat, and the boy
Sat at the table beside him.
And then, when dinner was done,
They spent the rest of the evening
Talking. Then servants prepared
Their beds and brought in exotic
Fruit for their final repast—
Figs and dates, nutmeg,
Cloves, pomegranates,
And finally a healthy honey
Paste of Alexandrian
Ginger and other digestive
Herbs that help the stomach
And soothe and calm the nerves.
They drank assorted fine
Liqueurs, neither sharp nor sweetened,
And well-aged wine, and clear
Syrup. The boy was astonished;
He'd never heard of such things.
Then his host said, "My friend,
It's time we went to bed
For the night. If you've no objections,
I'll sleep in my own room,
And whenever you wish to, you can sleep
Here. I cannot walk,
So they'll have to carry me out."
Then four strong and lively
Men came into the hall;
Each one grasped a corner
Of the bed the lord lay on,
And picking him up, carried him
There where he needed to be.
Other servants stayed
With the boy, to attend to his wants,
And gave him whatever he needed,
And when he wished to sleep
They took off his shoes and his clothes
And laid him in the finest linens
And blankets. And he slept until morning—
Indeed, till the sun was well up
And the servants were bustling about.
But looking around, he saw
None were in the room
Near him, so he had to rise
Unassisted. This was annoying,
But he saw it had to be done
And did it, alone, as best
He could, shoes and all,
Then went to fetch his armor,
Which someone had brought and left
On top of a table. Once
His clothing and equipment were in place,
He tried the doors to other
Rooms, all open the night
Before, but wasted his time,
For now they were locked. He banged
And called as loud as he could,
But nothing was opened and no one
Responded. Tired of shouting,
He went to the hall’s main door
And, finding it open, descended
The stairs. Coming to the bottom,
He found his horse, all saddled,
And saw his lance and his sword
Leaning against a wall.
Mounting, he looked in every
Direction, and still saw no one:
No soldiers, no pages, no serving
Men. Glancing to his right,
Toward the gate, he saw the drawbridge
Had been lowered and left unguarded;
He could enter, and he
Could leave, whenever he liked,
Needing no permission.
The household servants, he thought,
Had probably gone to the woods,
Checking snares and traps,
And left the drawbridge down.
He wanted to waste no more time,
But thought he might just ride
Behind them a bit, to ask,
If he could, why the lance
Dripped blood (was some sorrow involved?)
And why they'd borne the grail.
He rode right out the gate.
But just as he got to the end
Of the drawbridge, he felt his horse's
Hind feet rise in the air,
And the horse make a swift leap—
And had the animal jumped
Less well, they both might have been
Hurt, horse and rider
Alike. Turning around,
Anxious to see what had happened,
He saw the drawbridge had been raised.
He called, but no one answered:
"You! You who raised
The bridge, come out here! Talk to me!
How come I can't see you?
Step forward, let me see you!
There's something I want to ask you,
He spoke like a fool: no one
Answered, and no one would—
So he rode into the forest,
Following a path that showed
Signs of fresh hoofmarks,
A horse that had gone before him.
"That," he said to himself,
"Must be the fellows I'm hunting."
He rode on through the wood,
Following the trail, and suddenly
Came upon a girl
Sitting under an oak tree,
Weeping and sighing as if
Afflicted with the worst sorrow
In the world. "Oh miserable one!"
She cried. "Some evil star
Cursed the hour of my birth,
Bringing me into existence
To suffer every sort
Of pain, and escaping none!
I wouldn't have lived to see
My belovèd dead, had God
So willed; He should have decreed
That Death, who brought me such sorrow,
Left him alive and killed me.
Why leave me without my belovèd?
What is life worth, when all
I love best is dead? With him
Gone, both my life
And my body mean nothing to me.
Take my soul, oh Death,
So I can go with him, and serve him,
If he'll stoop so low as to have me."
    And so she grieved, mourning
A knight who lay in her arms
Dead, his head cut off.
Seeing and hearing her, the boy
Rode directly up
And stopped; he greeted the girl;
She bent her head, and returned
His greeting, but went on weeping.
And he asked her, "Tell me,
Young lady, who killed that knight
Lying dead in your lap?"
"My lord," she said, "a knight
Killed him, just this morning.
But one thing I see, as you stand there,
Seems to me astonishing:
A knight could ride, so help me
God (and as everyone knows),
For twenty-five leagues, straight
Along the road you've come,
And never find decent
Lodging, clean and safe,
And yet your horse has been groomed
And brushed, washed and combed,
His coat is clean and polished,
And he's clearly been given oats
And hay, for his belly is full—
And how his mane shines! You
Yourself would seem to have spent
A restful, comfortable night
On some soft, well-made bed."
"Indeed I have, pretty lady,
In lodgings as good as one gets: I ought to seem well-rested! But if anyone, standing right here, Were to call in a loud, clear voice, They'd hear him perfectly well There where I slept last night. Plainly, you don't know this country Well; you haven't explored it. Oh, I had lodgings, all right! The best I've ever had."

"My lord! Then were you lodged At the castle of the rich Fisher King?"

"By Christ, girl, I've no Idea. But fisherman Or king, he's courteous and wise. I can't say any more,

Though I met two men, last night, Sitting in a boat that came gliding Slowly along. The man in The back steered; the man In the front sat there and fished, And he was the one who said He'd give me lodgings in his house."

"My lord," said the girl, "he's a king; I can tell you that for certain.

He was wounded in battle, and so badly Hurt, so maimed, that without Help he can't even walk. A spear struck him right Between the legs, and the pain Is still so great that riding A horse is impossible. And when
He needs to amuse himself
A bit, to rest and relax,
He has himself put in a boat
And sits in the bow, fishing,
And that's why he's called the Fisher King. Fishing is his only
Distraction: every other
Sport or amusement is too painful.
He can't hunt for deer
Or ducks, but his men catch fowl
For him, and roam through the woods,
Killing deer with their arrows.
Which is why he enjoys living
So close to this very spot,
For nowhere in all the world
Could he find a place that suits him
Better. So he's built a house
Worthy of a rich king."
"By God, girl," he said,
"Every word you say
Is true! I was astonished,
Last night, when I stood in his presence.
I kept my distance, at first,
But he told me to come and sit
Beside him, and asked me not
To be offended if he didn't
Rise to greet me, because
He couldn't, he was wounded and weak.
So I went and sat beside him."
"He showed you great honor, indeed,
Seating you at his side.
Tell me: seated there,
Did you see the spear that bled
Without the presence of flesh
Or veins?" "Did I see it?
Oh yes, by God, I did!"
"And did you ask why
It was bleeding?" "I said not a word."
"In the name of God, believe me,
You made a mistake. That was wrong.
Did you see the grail, too?"
"Quite clearly." "By whom was it carried?"
"A girl." "Where did she come from?"
"From a room." "And where did she go?"
"Into some other room."
"Did anyone walk in front of her?"
"Yes." "Who?" "Two servants,
That's all." "And what were they holding?"
"Well-lit candleholders."
"And who came after the grail?"
"A girl." "And what was she holding?"
"A small silver platter."
"Did you ask any of these people
Where they were going with these things?"
"Not a word escaped my lips."
"Oh Lord, that's even worse!
My friend: tell me your name."
And then, not knowing his name,
He somehow knew, and said
He was Perceval from Wales,
Not knowing if he spoke the truth,
But he did, though he did not know it.
And hearing this the girl
Rose and faced him, and spoke
As if in anger, "You’ve just
Changed your name, my friend."
"Really?" "You’re Perceval
The Unhappy, the Miserable, the Unfortunate!
Ah, how unlucky you are,
For had you asked those questions
You could have completely cured
The good king of all his wounds:
He would have become entirely
Whole, and ruled as he should.
How much good you’d have done!
Believe me, miseries will come,
Instead, for you and for others.
You’re being punished for the sin
You committed against your mother,
Who died, sorrowing for you.
I know you better than you
Know me. You don’t know who I am,
But for many years I lived
In your mother’s house, with you,
For I’m your first cousin
And you are mine. I regret it
All equally—the fact
That you never asked what
The grail was, and to whom
It was being brought, and your mother’s
Death, and also the death
Of this knight, for whom I felt
Such affection, and held in my heart,
For he always called me his dearest
Love, treating me just
As a noble knight should."
"Ah cousin," said Perceval,
"If all you've said is the truth,
Tell me how you know it?"

"I know it," the girl declared,
"Because I was there when it happened,
And I saw her buried!" "May God
In His awful goodness be moved
To show her soul His mercy!
You've told a terrible tale.
But now that she's in her grave
Why should I go on seeking,
When she was what I sought?
All I wanted was to see her.
I'll travel in a different direction.
I'd be pleased if you wish to journey
With me—for believe me, that knight,
Lying there dead, will never
Help you again. Death
For the dead, life for the living.
Come with me, and we'll go
Together. Staying all
Alone with this corpse is foolish:
Let's follow the fellow who killed him
And I promise you, here and now,
Either he'll bring me to my knees
Or I'll beat him into submission."

And the girl, still weeping, unable
To stem the sorrow in her heart,
Replied, "My lord, nothing
Could make me go with you,
Or leave him, until
I see him properly buried.
Take my advice and ride
On the paved road—that way—
For that's the direction he took,
The cruel, haughty knight
Who killed my sweet beloved.
Not that I'm trying to talk you
Into pursuing him: no,
By God, no matter how much
I loathe him. I hate him as much
As if it were me he'd killed!
But where did you get that sword,
Hanging at your left side—
A weapon that's never drawn blood
And that no one has drawn in need?
I know exactly where
It was made, and just who made it!
Be careful: never trust it—
As sure as I'm standing here
It will break into pieces, the moment
You draw it in battle.” "Good cousin,
One of my host's nieces
Sent it, yesterday, and he gave it
To me. It seemed a wonderful
Reward, until you spoke,
But now I don't know. Are these things
You're telling me true? And tell me,
Also, if you happen to know,
Can its maker ever be found,
Should it need to be repaired?"
"Yes. But it won't be easy.
To get this sword re-made,
Hammered whole once more,
A man must know the way
As far as the Firth of Forth.
And if you find it, only
Trebuchet * can fix it.
Let no other smith attempt it.
He made it, and he can repair it,
But no one else can ever
Succeed. Be careful! Any
Other smith laying
A hand on this sword will fail."
"I'd be very sorry indeed,"
Said he, "if it broke." And then
He left, and she remained,
Unable to leave the dead man
For whom she grieved so profoundly.
Perceval came upon
The track of an exhausted,
Staggering palfrey that had gone
The way he was going, and followed it.
And soon he saw it, all skin
And bones, so wasted that it seemed
Clear to him it had fallen
Into savage hands, ridden
Hard and poorly fed,
Like a borrowed horse one rides
The whole day long but never
Thinks about at night.
That's just how this palfrey looked—

*A smith with a reputation that must have rivaled that of the god Vulc­
an. Poirion adds that "the reputation of weaponry is such that (not
only in the days of knighthood) a maker of fine swords is something
very like a magician" (p. 1353n).
So miserably thin that it trembled
And shook as if it had palsy,
Its mane cut off, its ears
Hanging halfway to the ground.
Every dog that saw it
Slobbered, expecting a feast,
For all that was left of the beast
Was the skin that covered its bones.
The woman's saddle on its back
And the harness on its head looked
As if they belonged where they were,
And no one's seen a sorrier
Girl than the one who sat
In that saddle. Had she been living
Well, she could have been beautiful,
But life had treated her so badly
That nowhere, on the dress she wore,
Could you find a palm-length of unripped
Fabric; her breasts protruded
Through the rips and tears in front.
Knotted thread and rough
Stitching held her clothes together,
And her skin, having been beaten
And burned by snow and hail
And frost, was scratched and cracked
As if marked by some pointed tool.
Her hair was all wild; she wore
No cloak. Her face bore the signs
Of endlessly streaming tears,
And so did her body: like waves
They'd come pouring down as far
As her breasts, and then, under
Her dress, gone rolling all
The way to her knees. Whoever
Had known such fierce misery
Surely had a heart full of sorrow!
As soon as Perceval saw her
He galloped over as fast
As he could, and she tried to hold
Her dress together and hide
Her flesh. But each tug
That closed one gap opened
A hundred others instead.
Her complexion discolored and pale,
She filled Perceval with pity.
As he came closer he heard
The sad complaint of her misery
And pain: "Oh God," she cried,
"I beg you, please, don't let me
Live like this much longer!
This misery has lasted so long,
And I don't deserve it! I've suffered
Far too much! Oh God,
You know—surely You know!—
None of this is deserved,
So send me, please, dear Lord,
Someone who'll free me from this—
Or free me Yourself from the man
Who's forced me to such a life
Of shame. He shows me no mercy;
There's no way I can escape,
And he has no desire to kill me,
Though why he wants me like this
I haven't the slightest idea,
Except that he finds my shame
And misery warm his heart.
But even if the worst were true,
And I did deserve this treatment
At his hands, then having paid me
Back, he ought to be merciful,
If I've ever in any way pleased him.
Certainly, he no longer loves me—
Not when he condemns me
To so harsh a love and remains
Indifferent.” Perceval cried,
“Beauty, God has saved you!”
Hearing these word, she lowered
Her head and replied, softly,
“My lord, you who've addressed me,
May you have your heart’s desire,
Though it isn’t right to say so.”
Embarrassed, Perceval blushed,
Then said to her: “Ah,
Young lady: why not? I don’t
Believe I've ever seen you
Before, or done you wrong—
Indeed, I'm sure.” “Yes,
You have,” she said, “but I've fallen
So low and suffered so much
That no one knows me any more.
If anyone greets me, or even
Sees me, I sweat with fear.”
“Indeed,” he said, “whatever
I've done I've quite forgotten.
I'd no intention of causing
You pain. In fact, I came
This way entirely by accident. 
And the moment I saw you 
So miserably poor, so naked, 
May my heart enjoy no pleasure 
If I thought of anything except 
What might have happened to bring you 
To such a sorrowful state.”
“My lord,” she said, “have mercy!
Just be quiet and go
Away; leave me in peace.
You were wrong to stop as you have—
But believe me, you need to leave!”
“Why should I flee?” he asked.
“Tell me. As far as I know
No one’s pursued me here.”
“My lord,” she said, “don’t
Be angry: just flee while you can.
Don’t let the Haughty Knight
Find you here with me.
There’s nothing he likes better
Than fighting and combat, and if
He finds you talking to me
He’ll surely kill you on the spot.
It makes him so angry if anyone
Stops and spends a moment
With me, that whoever he comes on
Has his head cut off.
Another knight just lost
His life. But before he kills them,
He tells them why he’s forced me
To lead a life like this.”
While they were talking, the Haughty
Knight himself emerged
From the wood and galloped over
The dusty field like lightning,
Crying, “You! You’ve done it
Now, talking to her!
You can’t get away, I’ve got you!
Your life is over, I’ll kill you
Here and now! But first,
Before I cut off your head,
I’ll tell you exactly why
This girl lives in such shame,
And what she’s done. Now open
Your ears: here’s the whole story.

“I went to the wood, one day,
And left this girl alone
And unattended in my tent,
She being my only
Love, when as it happened
Some young Welshman came along.
How he did it I don’t know,
But he managed to make her kiss him:
She told me so herself.
But she might have lied: perhaps,
After that stolen kiss,
He decided to take the rest?
And who could believe he stopped
At a single kiss—for one thing
Leads to another. Anyone
Who gets away with kissing
A girl, when they’re all alone,
And stops right there, has got
To be stupid: a woman who’s willing
To surrender her mouth will give
Away the rest, if it's wanted.
And who doesn't know how women
Defend themselves? They always
Fight and win—except
In that one desperate battle
Where she's got a man by the throat,
Scratching and biting to the death,
And all she wants is to lose.
She fights, but she gets impatient;
She can't just say she wants to,
She wants him to make her yield,
So she won't feel guilty, or grateful.
That's why I think he took her—
Besides, he also stole
My ring, which she had on her finger.
That made me very mad.
There's more: he drank a lot
Of my wine, and most of three venison
Pies I was saving for myself.
So now you can see how well
I've paid my beloved back!
Do wrong, and you pay: there's no other
Way to teach people lessons.
And now you can understand
My anger, seeing you with her.
I'm angry, and I have a right!
And so I've said her palfrey
Will never eat again,
Or be cared for, or have new iron
Hooves, and she herself
Will wear only what's on
Her back right now, until
I find the man who forced her,
And kill him, and cut off his head.”

Perceval listened to this,
Then said, indifferent to his anger,
“My friend, she can surely stop
Her penitence, now, because
The man who kissed her against
Her will, and made her so sad,
Was me. And I took her ring,
But that was all I took.
And yes, I admit I ate
One of your pies and half
Of another, and I drank your wine:
Should a hungry man abstain?”
“By my head!” said the Haughty Knight.
“What a marvelous answer you’ve made me,
Admitting all these things!
And now you deserve to die,
Confessing your sins as you have.”
“Perhaps my death is not
So close,” said Perceval.
Without another word
They galloped their horses, smashing
Together with such force that both
Lances were shattered to bits
And both knights were hurled
From the saddle and thrown to the ground.
Quickly, they jumped to their feet,
Drew their swords and began
Delivering mighty blows.
They fought fiercely, and hard.
But why tell it all?
I've no interest in wasting
My time. They fought till the Haughty
Knight admitted defeat
And was forced to beg for mercy,
And the boy, who never forgot
His master's warning not
To deny mercy to any
Knight who begged to be spared,
Said, "Knight, by God,
I'll have exactly as much
Mercy on you as you show
To your lady, who never deserved—
And I can swear it! —the terrible
Things you've made her endure."

And the knight, who loved her more
Than his eyes, said, "Sir, I'll make
Whatever amends you demand.
There's nothing you can ask
That I'm not prepared to do.
My heart aches for the painful,
Black-hearted things I've done."

"Then go to the nearest house
You own, here in this region,
And let her bathe and rest
Until she recovers her health,
And when she's ready—looking
As she should, dressed as she should—
Bring her to King Arthur, greet him,
And equipped exactly as you are
Place yourself in his hands.
If he asks who sent you to his court
Tell him you come from the Knight
In Red—knighthed by him
On his steward, my lord Kay’s,
Advice. And tell the king,
In front of all the court,
The pain and wicked suffering
You’ve caused this girl; make sure
That all of them hear you, as well
As the queen and all her ladies,
And the rest of the other lovely
Women around her. But the one
I wish you to single out
Is she who laughed, seeing me,
And received, for that laugh, a stunning
Blow in the face from Sir Kay.
You’re to search her out
And tell her, at my command,
That the Knight in Red will never
Attend King Arthur’s court
Until that blow is avenged—
And that should make her happy.”
The beaten knight declared
He’d gladly go, and say,
And do exactly as ordered,
Without delay, neglecting
Nothing whatever, just
As soon as his love was properly
Taken care of. He’d also
Be very happy to lead
His conqueror home, and see him
Rested and well, all
His wounds and bruises healed.
"Then go, and God go with you,"
Said Perceval. "But forget about me:
I'll seek another lodging."

Then all the talking was done,
And no one lingered any longer,
But left and went on their way.
That very night the girl
Was bathed, and beautifully dressed,
And treated so wonderfully well
That all her beauty was restored.
And then, together, they rode
Directly to Carlion, where Arthur
Was holding, in private, a festive
Court, in sign of which
The king was attended by only
Three thousand worthy knights.
Everyone saw the captive
Come, leading his lady
Into King Arthur's presence
And declaring, when he stood before him,
"My lord, I stand here your prisoner,
Prepared to obey your commands
As I've been ordered to,
In justice and right, by my conqueror,
The man who asked of you, and to whom
You gave, the armor of the Knight
In Red." These words were enough;
The king understood at once.
"Remove your armor, good sir,"
He said. "May the knight who sent you
Live in pleasure and joy;
You yourself are welcome.
You will be treated well
And honored, here in my house."
"My lord, there's more I must do.
Before I remove my armor
Let me ask this favor: may the queen
And the maids who attend her come
And hear the news I bring
To you and to them, for my orders
Do not allow me to speak
Till the girl comes—she
Who was struck in the face for daring
To laugh—just once, and only
For that, and nothing more."
And then he ceased to speak.
Hearing that the queen was needed,
The king called her to his presence,
And she came, her maids with her,
Hand in hand, in pairs.
And when the queen was seated
Near her lord the king,
The Haughty Knight spoke
Once more: "My lady, I give you
Greetings from a noble knight
For whom I have great respect,
Who beat me in man-to-man combat—
Which is all I know of him,
Except that he sends you my beloved,
This girl, here at my side."
"My friend, I thank him warmly,"
Said the queen. And then he told them
All the villainy
And shame he'd heaped on the girl,
And the suffering she'd had to endure.
He told them everything, including
His reasons, holding nothing
Back. And when they'd shown him
The girl Kay had struck,
He said, "Girl, the knight
Who sent me here also
Sends you his greetings, commanding
Me to do nothing before
I told you this: in the name
Of God, he'll never attend
Arthur's court, or assist
The king, until he's somehow
Able to revenge the blow
You were given, the insult and the slap
You received on his account."
Hearing these words, the king's
Fool jumped up, crying,
"Sir Kay, as God is my judge,
You're going to pay—oh yes!
And we won't be waiting too long."
And then the king declared,
"Ah, Kay! How wrong you were
To mock the boy as you did.
Your discourtesy drove him away,
And I fear he'll never return."
Then the king commanded the captive
Knight to take a seat
At court, released from all bonds,
And he ordered his armor removed.
And then Sir Gawain, sitting
At the king's right hand, inquired,
"My lord, who could he be,
By God, able to defeat
So noble a knight as this
In combat? Nowhere on all
The islands in the sea have I heard
Of such a knight, or known
Or seen one, performing the feats
Of knighthood this boy has shown us!"
"Good nephew, neither have I,"
Said the king. "He came to my court,
But when I met him it never
Occurred to me to ask him
Why, for he told me at once
He'd come to be made a knight.
And seeing so handsome a stranger,
I said: 'Gladly, my friend.
But dismount, if you will, and wait
While I have them bring you golden
Armor.' He answered, no,
He wouldn't, and refused to dismount,
Saying all he wanted
From me was bright red armor.
He said other strange things,
Explaining that the armor he wanted
Was worn, at the moment, by another
Knight, who had my golden
Cup. And Kay, who was being
Nasty, as he always was
And is, and will be, speaking
No good, said, 'Brother, the king
Will let you have what you want.
Just go and get it for yourself.'
And the boy, not seeing the joke,  
Thought he was telling the truth,  
And rode right out and killed  
The knight in red armor with a dart.  
I've no idea exactly  
How that fight started, but I know  
The Red Knight, from the Forest  
Of Quincroy, struck him—  
But I don't know why—with his spear,  
And made him angry, and he threw  
A dart right in the center  
Of the eye, and killed him, and stripped off  
His armor, and took it for himself.  
And that was so very agreeable  
To me that, by Saint David,  
To whom Welshmen pray,  
I vow never to sleep  
Indoors, two nights in a row,  
Until I see him again,  
On land or sea, if he lives.  
And now I'll go and find him!"  

Once the king had sworn  
This oath, everyone knew  
They had to pack up and leave.  
You should have seen the linen  
Laid into trunks, and blankets,  
And pillows, the horses loaded,  
The wagons and carts filled up—  
And no one could count the number  
Of awnings and tents! Even  
A well-trained scribe, writing  
From dawn to dusk, couldn't list
The harnesses and equipment
They prepared and carried with them.
The king left Carlion,
Followed by all his barons,
As if he were off to war.
Nor did the girls stay at home,
For the queen swept them along,
To add to the honor and glory.
That night, out in a field,
They slept alongside a wood,
And as they slept snow
Fell, and the country was cold;
Perceval had arisen early,
As he always did, wanting
To hunt for adventure and the chance
To prove how brave he could be,
And riding across the fields,
Beneath the frigid sun,
He came to the king's camp
But saw, before he reached
The tents, a flock of wild
Geese, dazzled by the heavy
Snow, fleeing as fast
As birds can fly from a diving
Falcon dropping out of
The sky. It struck at a single
Goose, lagging behind
The others, and hit it so hard
That it fell to the earth. But the hawk
Didn't follow it down, not hungry
Enough to take the trouble,
Too lazy to chase it. So the falcon
Flew off. But Perceval rode
To where the goose had fallen.
The bird's neck had been wounded,
And three drops of blood
Had come rolling out on the snow,
Dying it vivid red.
The bird had not been badly
Hurt, just knocked to the earth,
And before the knight could reach it
It had flown away in the sky.
But its body's oval shape
Was printed in the snow, the blood-
Dyed color suffused inside it,
And Perceval, leaning on his lance,
Sat staring at the sight. Blood
And snow so mixed together
Created a fresh color,
Just like his belovèd's face,
And as he stared he forgot
What he was doing and where
He was. The red stain
Against the white snow
Seemed just like her complexion.
The more he looked, the happier
He grew, seeing once
Again the exact color
Of her beautiful face. The morning
Slowly passed away,
And still he sat there musing,
Until at last squires
And pages emerged from the tents
And saw him, and thought him asleep.
The king was still asleep,
Lying in his tent, but the wild
Knight named Sagremor
Was standing in front of the king's
Tent, and he called to them:
"Tell me the truth," he said,
"And the whole truth, hiding
Nothing. Why are you out here
So early?" "My lord," they answered,
"We've seen an unknown knight
Out there, sleeping on his horse."
"Armed?" "Oh yes, indeed!"
"I'll go and talk to him," he said,
"And then I'll bring him to court."
But the first thing he did was enter
The king's tent, and wake him.
"My lord," he said, "there's a knight
Out there, sleeping on his horse."
And the king told him to speak
To the knight, and ask him to join them
At court, not stay in the snow.

Sagremor ordered his horse
Brought out, and with it his weapons
And armor. The horse was led out
And saddled, and they quickly buckled
On his armor. And fully prepared,
He rode away from the army,
And rode right up to the knight.
"Sir," he said, "you need
To come to court." It was
As if he had not spoken.
So he said it again, and again
The knight did not move. And then
He grew angry: “By Saint Peter and Paul,
Like it or not, you’re coming!
I’m sorry I even bothered
To ask, for speaking to you
Is a waste of words!” And then
He unfurled the banner wound
Round his lance, spurred his horse
The proper distance away,
Then wheeled and faced the knight
And charged, shouting, “Take care!
Take care!” to keep from attacking
By surprise. Looking up,
Perceval saw him coming
And putting his thoughts aside
Galloped directly at him.
The shock of their smashing together
Broke Sagremor’s lance,
But Perceval’s barely bent,
Striking so fierce a blow
That Sagremor fell from the saddle,
And his horse quickly turned
And trotted briskly away
To the tents, its head held high.
Most of the king’s barons
Saw this with little pleasure,
But Kay couldn’t keep his nasty
Tongue from wagging, and turning
To the king, he joked, “My lord,
Sagremor’s coming back.
He’s got that knight by the bridle
And now he’ll bring him to court!”

Perceval 135
“Kay,” said the king, “you’re wrong
To mock at worthy knights.
Ride out yourself: let’s see
If you can do any better.”

“My lord,” said Kay, “I’m delighted
You’d like me to try. You
Can be sure I’ll bring that fellow
Back, if he likes it or not,
And I’ll make him tell you his name.”

Quickly, he got himself ready.
And then, fully armed,
Rode toward the musing knight
Who was staring, lost in thought,
At the same three drops in the snow.
And Kay cried from far off,
“You there! You there! Come
To the king! You’ll either come
Right now, or pay for it dearly!”
Swinging his horse around,
He faced Perceval, then dug in
His steel spurs and made
The animal gallop like the wind.
Both knights meant to win,
And they came together with a crash.
But Kay’s blow, delivered
With all his strength, broke
His lance into little pieces.
Not lacking in courage, Perceval
Aimed his lance straight
At the shield, and Kay was smashed
Down on a rock; his collarbone
Dislocated, his left arm
Snapped, like a dry twig,
Between elbow and armpit, exactly
As the king’s fool had predicted,
Time and time again:
Prophetic words, and true ones!
Kay fainted from the pain.
Then his horse, too, turned
And trotted to the king’s tents.
And all the Britons watched
As the horse came home without
The steward. Pages rode out
To fetch him, and the whole court
Lamented. Seeing Kay
So still, they thought he was dead.
The king was deeply affected;
Ladies and knights were in mourning.
But Perceval leaned on his lance
And stared at the three drops,
Seeing his beloved’s face.
But Kay was only wounded.
Although the king was upset,
They told him not to worry,
For the steward could be cured—
But they needed a surgeon who could put
The collarbone in place
And set the broken armbone.
So the king, whose affection for Kay
Was deep and lasting, sent for
A wise, experienced surgeon,
Who came with three young female
Apprentices, who restored the collarbone
To its proper place, re-
Aligned and bound up the broken
Bone, then brought Sir Kay
To the king’s tent, explaining
That the fracture would heal well
And no one need be concerned.
And my lord Gawain declared,
"Your majesty, as God is my witness,
It's wrong (as you know yourself,
For I've often heard you say so,
And you've given judgments accordingly)
For any knight to intrude on
Another knight's thoughts, whatever
They may be, as these two have done.
Perhaps they were right, perhaps
They were wrong: I don't know. But one thing
Is sure: it didn't go well.
The stranger knight might
Be thinking of someone he's lost;
His beloved might have been stolen,
And his heart grieving and sad.
But if you like, I'll go
And have a look, and should he
Be free of absorbing thoughts
I'll speak to him and ask
If he'd like to visit your court."
Hearing these words, Kay
Grew angry: "My lord Gawain,
You'll go and lead him by the hand,
Saying nothing to displease him,
And that will be fine with him!
Of course he'll come — and you'll
Still be king of the hill!"
How many knights have you captured
Like that? Knights grow weary,
Fighting's too much like work—
And then you ask the king
For permission to take them prisoner!
Damn me, Gawain! You’re not
As stupid as you seem; there are things
To be learned from watching you.
You know how to talk, all right—
Pretty, and polished, and polite.
Will you boast to this fellow, push him
With wicked, angry talk?
Whatever you say, whatever
He thinks, remember, I know
Your game! Just wear a silken
Tunic: for this sort of battle
You’ll never need to draw
A sword or break a lance.
Unless your tongue fails you,
You’re bound to win. Just tell him,
'Sir, may God protect you
And give you long life and good health,'
And he’ll do whatever you like.
I can’t pretend to teach you:
Your tongue produces soft words
Like caresses on a cat. 'Oh Gawain's
Fighting hard,' they’ll all
Be saying, watching you at work.”
"Kay, my friend, you might
Have spoken a bit more pleasantly.
You’re angry—and you feel like venting
Your spite and spleen on me?
I'll bring him back, all right,  
My good friend, if he can be brought,  
And I won't have a broken arm  
Or a collarbone bent out of place:  
No one treats me like that."

"Nephew, go on," said the king.  
“You’ve spoken as a good knight should.  
If he will come, bring him—  
But go in your armor, weapons  
In hand; you can't go disarmed.”  
And so that best of all knights  
In merit and worth quickly  
Put on his armor, and mounted  
A strong and agile horse,  
And rode straight to where  
The knight was leaning on his lance,  
Still lost in delightful reflections  
On the face he fancied he saw  
In the snow. But the sun, well up  
In the sky, had melted away  
Two of the three drops of blood;  
The morning was well along,  
And Perceval's thoughts were not  
So tightly gripped as before.  
Gawain approached him, carefully  
Letting his horse amble,  
Showing no sign of hostility,  
Then said, “Sir, I'd give you  
Greetings, if I knew the depths  
Of your heart as I know my own.  
But let me tell you, at least,  
That I come as the king's messenger.  

He's sent me to say that he'd like
To have you attend his court."
"Two have already been here,"
Said Perceval, "trying to deprive me
Of my joy and pleasure, attempting
To lead me away like a captive,
When all I wanted to do
Was relish these lovely thoughts.
And those who sought to take me
Away didn't care what was best
For me, for here in the snow
Were three drops of fresh blood
Glittering against the snow.
And to me it seemed as if
I was seeing my beautiful belovèd's
Fresh and shining face,
And my eyes wouldn't look away."
"Indeed," said my lord Gawain,
"These are no vulgar thoughts,
But sweet and courteous both,
And ripping them out of your heart
Would be foolish and brutally harsh.
Still, I should like to know,
If you please, what you mean to do
Now. If you wouldn't mind,
I'd like to bring you to the king."
"Tell me, my good sweet friend,"
Said Perceval, "and tell me truly:
Is Kay the king's steward?"
"Yes, he is indeed,
And let me tell you, too,
He was the second knight
You fought, and he paid for it dearly:
In case you don’t know, you broke
His left arm and dislocated
His collar-bone.” “Then the girl
He struck has had her revenge,”
Said Perceval. And hearing
These words, my lord Gawain
Fairly leaped with surprise,
And said, “Sir, by God
It’s you the king has been hunting!
Please: tell me your name.”
“Perceval, sir. And you?”
“Gawain.” “Gawain?” “Indeed.”
Perceval’s joy was immense.
“Good sir, I’ve heard you mightily
Praised, in many places,
And deeply desired that you
And I might be friends, unless
The idea displeases you.”
“Sir,” said my lord Gawain,
“That pleases me no less
Than you, or even more!”
Then Perceval said, “By God,
In that case I’ll gladly go
With you—it seems only right.
Let me confess, I think
Better of myself for being
Your friend!” They rushed together
And warmly embraced one another,
And each began to unlace
His helmet, and lower his visor,
And strip away the iron
Mail shirt he wore. And then
They rode along together,
Happily, and the young servants
Who'd been watching all that happened
Went running in from their posts
And came straight to the king.
“Lord, lord! By God,
Sir Gawain's coming, and leading
That knight, and they're showing each other
Great pleasure and rare delight.”
All who heard this news
Went running out of the tent
To greet the two who were coming.
And Kay said to the king,
“So now your nephew, my lord
Gawain, has earned high honor
And praise. What a hard battle
He fought, in perfect safety,
For here he comes marching back
As blithe as when he went,
Having neither received
Nor given a single blow,
Nor suffered the slightest damage.
'Oh how he deserves our praise!'
Everyone will say, succeeding
So well where those other fellows
Failed—no matter how hard
We tried. Our efforts were useless.”
And so spoke Kay, right
Or wrong, venting his feelings
As usual. But Gawain preferred
Not to conduct his new friend
To court, wearing his armor. So he took him to his tent and had him Disarmed, and one of his servants Brought proper clothing from a trunk And gave it to Perceval to wear.

And when he was handsomely dressed
In a coat and cloak of perfect,
Resplendent fit, Gawain
Led him, hand in hand,
To the king, waiting at the door
Of his tent. "My lord," said Gawain, "I bring you, now, the knight
You've wanted so much to know,
These last two weeks, and he comes,
As you see, of his own free will.
This is he of whom
You've spoken, and for whom you've longed.
Behold him, here he is!"
"Good nephew, I give you great thanks," said the king, rising at once
To greet his guest, declaring,
"Good sir, how welcome you are! I beg you to tell me, please,
What name I should call you by."
"By God, I'll hide nothing,
Your majesty, my lord:
I'm Perceval from Wales."
"Ah, Perceval, my friend!
Now that you've come to my court
I hope you'll never leave!
I've deeply regretted, after
The first time we saw you here,
Not understanding the goodness
God holds in store for you.
And yet it was clearly predicted
For my court and understood
By my fool and the girl Sir Kay,
My steward, struck in the face.
You've now fulfilled that prediction
In every detail; there's not
The slightest doubt—and the latest
News confirms your worth."

Just then the queen came in,
Having heard the news
Of Perceval's arrival.
He saw her at once, and was told
Just who she was, and saw
Walking behind her the girl
Who had laughed at the sight of him;
He went straight to the queen,
Saying, "May God grant joy
And honor to the best and loveliest
Lady in all the world—
For so say all who see her
And all who ever have!"
And the queen said, in reply,
"And you are exceedingly welcome,
For you've proven yourself a knight
Of immense virtue and worth!"
Then Perceval greeted the girl
Who had laughed when he first appeared
At court, and throwing his arms
Around her, gave her a hug
And said, "My beauty, if you need
My service, remember, this
Is a knight who will never fail you."
And the girl thanked him as she should.
The king and queen and all
The barons with them rejoiced
At Perceval the Welshman's
Coming, and led him back
To Carlion that very same evening.
They celebrated all night,
And the next day, too, and then
On the third day of his coming to court
A girl came riding up
On a tawny mule, her right hand
Holding a whip. She wore
Her hair in two black,
Immense, and ugly braids,
And if the book that tells us
About her are truthfully written
No creature has ever seemed
So awful, not even at the bottom
Of Hell. You'll never see
Iron as black as her neck
And hands, but her hands and neck
Were not her ugliest parts.
Her eyes were two deep caves,
Smaller than the eyes on a rat,
And her nose was a monkey's, or a cat's,
With a donkey's ears — or a cow's.
Her teeth were as yellow as an egg,
But darker, more like rust,
And she wore a beard, like a goat.
A hump grew in the middle
Of her chest, and her back was crooked,
And her thighs and shoulders were perfectly
Made for dancing—oh the hump
On her back and her twisted legs
Were beautifully made for leading
A ball! Riding her mule,
She came right up to the king,
Who had never seen such a lady
At a royal court. She greeted
The king and all his barons
As one—but Perceval
She addressed by name, speaking
From her perch on the tawny mule:
"Ah Perceval, my friend,
Fortune is bald behind,
But hairy in front! May curses
Fall on whoever greets you
Or wishes you well or prays
For your soul: you found Fortune
But didn’t know how to keep it.
The Fisher King made you
His guest, you saw the bleeding
Lance, but you couldn’t be bothered
To open your mouth and speak,
Asking why that drop
Of blood came rolling down
From the point of that shining spear!
You saw the grail carried
In, and never asked
For what great lord it was borne!
Those who see their chance
But never grasp it, hoping
For a better, must suffer for their failure.
You're that unlucky man
Who watched opportunity
Arrive, and held his tongue.
What an unlucky fool!
How wrong to sit there, silent,
When just a simple question
Could have cured that rich
And noble king of his suffering,
Allowed him to rule his kingdom
In peace. But now he never
Will. Do you know what will happen,
Now that he'll never be cured,
Never be able to rule
His own lands? Ladies will lose
Their husbands, countries will be ruined,
Girls will have no guidance
And be forced to linger as orphans,
And a host of knights will die,
And all because of you."
And then she turned to the king:
"King, don't mind if I leave you.
I've a long, long way to go
Before I can sleep, tonight.
Tell me: have you ever heard
Of Castle Pride—for that's
Where I need to go. That castle
Contains five hundred and sixty-
Six worthy knights,
And every single one
Keeps his beloved at his side—
Noble ladies, and lovely.
The only reason I tell you such things is this: no one goes to that castle expecting knightly combat and fails to find it. If they want it, they have it. But he who wants the greatest honor in the world, I can tell him exactly where he can win it, the precise region on earth—just down from the peak of Mount Esclair a young lady’s besieged: whoever can lift that siege and free the girl will win the greatest honor to be won. But not only fame: he’ll also receive, and God will allow him to wear without fear, the Sword Hung from a Magic Sheath."

The young woman had finished speaking, and having said what she wanted to say, she turned and left. Then Gawain jumped to his feet, declaring he’d do everything he could to rescue the girl, and Girflet, Nudd’s son, said with God’s help he’d go straight to Castle Pride. "And I’ll climb Danger Mountain," said Kaerdin, "right to the top, without a single pause."

But Perceval disagreed,
Saying he'd never spend
Two nights in a row in any
Lodging, or hear of any
Strange voyage and not test
Its strangeness, or learn of a worthy
Knight, or pair of knights,
Without offering to fight them—
All this, until he knew
For whom the grail had been borne
And until he'd found the bloody
Lance and understood
Why it bled. These
Were things he would do, whatever
It cost him. And fifty knights
Leaped up, vowing one
And all they'd follow every
Adventure, fight in every
Battle, no matter where
On earth it took them. And as
They were making these declarations,
Who should they see entering
The hall but Guinganbresil,
Carrying a golden shield
Painted with a blue band
So broad and thick that it easily
Covered a third of the span,
Measured in any direction.
Guinganbresil knew and correctly
Greeted the king, but gave
No greeting to my lord Gawain,
Accusing him, instead,
Of a crime: "Gawain, you killed
My lord, striking at him
Without any warning. May you
Be shamed, despised, and condemned,
Labeled as the traitor you are!
And all of Arthur's barons
Know these words to be true.”
Hearing this, my lord
Gawain leapt up, deeply
Shamed, but Agrevain
The Proud, his brother, stopped him:
“For the love of God, good lord,
Don't dishonor your family!
I swear to defend you against
This knight and all the shame
Of these dishonorable claims.”
Said Gawain, “I will defend
Myself, with no one's help:
No one else should act,
Since I'm the one who's accused.
If in fact I'd done wrong
To this knight, and knew I'd done wrong,
I'd very gladly seek
To make both peace and such
Amends as would please all
His friends and all of mine.
But since he has chosen to insult me,
I will defend myself—
Here, or wherever he likes.”
His accuser answered that in forty
Days, before the king
Of Escavalon (more handsome,
I think, than Absalom),
He'd prove that Gawain was guilty
Of cruel and villainous treachery.
"As for me," said Gawain, "I swear
To come riding right behind you,
And then we'll see who's right!"

As soon as Guinganbresil
Left, my lord Gawain
Prepared to hurry after him.
Knights with first-rate shields
And lances, helmets and swords,
Offered to lend them, but Gawain
Wanted only his own
Weapons. He rode off with seven
Squires, seven horses,
And two shields. Taking leave
Of the court was a sad affair:
They beat their breasts, tore
Their hair, scratched their faces!
No lady was able to hold back
An outflow of sorrow, but men
And women both wept. Yet Gawain
Had to go, and he went.
And now I'll tell you the adventures
He found along the way.

First, he met a group
Of knights riding through wooded
Country. He called to a squire
Following after them, all
Alone, his right hand holding
The reins of a Spanish horse;
A shield was hung round his neck:
"Squire, tell me: who are
These knights?” The squire answered, “That one, sir, is Meliant Of Lis, most worthy, most famous.” “And do you serve him?” “No sir, I don’t. My lord is Traé Of Anet, second to no one.” “By God,” said Gawain, “I know Traé very well indeed. Where is he going? Don’t hold back Anything.” “To a combat,* sir, Which Meliant of Lis has arranged Against Tibault of Tintagel— And you’d be welcome, I’m sure, If you joined those in the castle.” “Lord,” said Gawain, “wasn’t Meliant raised in Tibault’s House? That’s his foster father.” “May God save me, sir, Yes. His father so loved His vassal Tibault that as He lay on his deathbed, he commended His little son to his care. And Tibault protected and raised him With as much affection as anyone Could want, until young Meliant Fell in love with Tibault’s Daughter, who told him he couldn’t Have her love until

*Tornoiement in the twelfth century meant (1) modern “tournament” or (2) serious, sometimes bloody combat. Here both meanings apply, and the second needs to be stressed; see lines 4895–96, below.
He’d become a knight. And Meliant,
Wanting her very badly,
Went and became a knight.
But when he pressed her, once more,
She said, ‘By God, no,
That never will happen until
You stand before me so full
Of tournaments won, and battles,
That you’ve paid the price for my love:
Whatever can be had for nothing
Is never as satisfying
Or sweet as what one must pay for.
Arrange a combat against
My father, if you want my love,
For I need to know without
Any doubt that my love is worthily
Given before I can grant it.’

“So Meliant did as she wanted,
And arranged the combat, for Love
Enjoys such absolute power
On those in its grip that they never
Dare refuse Love
Whatever it wants them to do.
And you, good sir, could not
Do better, in choosing which side
To fight on, than decide to help
Those in the castle, for they need you.”
Then Gawain said, “Go on,
My friend; rejoin your lord,
And leave the rest to me.”
So the squire went on his way,
And Gawain went on his.
He was riding toward the castle, There being no other road. Tibault had brought together All his knights and his neighbors, And sent for all his cousins, Humble or great, young Or old, and his cousins had come. But no one in Tibault’s castle Wanted the vassal to accept A combat against his lord, Terribly afraid that Meliant Intended to kill them all. They’d walled up every entrance To the castle, and made it a stronghold, Blocking the doors with quarried Stone, cemented in place, Leaving only a little Gate, just that single One, for going in Or out—and that door wasn’t wood, But hammered from copper, made To last forever, and locked By a bar forged of enough Iron to have built a cart with! And Gawain headed straight For that door, with all his equipment, Having no choice: he either Went through or else he went back. The only other route Would cost him a week of riding. Finding the door locked, He crossed a fenced-in meadow
Close beside the tower,
Then dismounted under an oak tree
From which he hung his shields,
So the people in the castle could see them.
Now most of those in the castle
Were glad the combat was postponed.
There was one old knight, brave
And experienced, of ancient lineage,
Rich in wisdom and land,
And whatever he said was law:
No one disputed his judgment
Or refused to follow his advice.
He’d watched the strangers approach,
For they’d let themselves be seen
From far off, even before
They reached the fence. And he said
To Tibault, “By God, my lord,
Unless my eyes deceive me
I see two of King Arthur’s
Knights arriving down there.
Two knights can accomplish a lot,
For one can win a tournament.
It seems to me, my lord,
That this is now a combat
You can safely allow to begin,
For you’ve plenty of worthy knights,
And good soldiers, and sharp-shooting archers
Who can kill their horses under them—
For surely they’ll need to fight
Right here in front of this door.
Let them, if pride leads them on,
For the gain will all be ours,
And theirs will be the loss."
Tibault accepted this
Advice, allowed his knights
To arm themselves, and those
Who wished to ride out of the castle.
And the joyful knights ordered
Squires to bring out armor
And saddle horses, and the ladies
And girls hurried up
To the castle's highest places,
In order to watch the fighting,
And they clearly saw, beneath them,
My lord Gawain's shields.
It seemed to them, at first,
Seeing a pair of shields
Hung from the oak tree's branches,
That two knights had come,
And happy to have climbed so high,
Thinking themselves in luck,
Looking down and seeing
These two knights make ready.

But only some of them thought so.
Others were saying, "Good Lord
In Heaven! That knight down there
Has so many horses and so much
Equipment he could surely outfit
Two, but there's no one with him!
Why does he need two shields?
Who's ever seen a knight
Carrying two shields at once?"
It struck them as wonderfully strange,
Seeing a single knight
With more than the shield he needed.
As they were talking, knights
Began to emerge from the castle,
And Tibault's oldest daughter,
Who had brought about this combat,
Stood at the top of the tower.
Her younger sister was with her,
Whose sleeves were always so elegant
That everyone called her the Girl
With the Narrow Sleeves, for they clung
So closely to her arms. These two
Young ladies and a host of women
And girls had climbed as high
As they could, and clustered there, watching.
Knights quickly assembled
In front of the castle. And none
Among them was worthy of so much
Attention as Meliant of Lis,
According to the girl he was courting,
Who said to the women around her,
"Ladies, I must tell you
I've never seen such a knight—
It's the truth, and I have to say it—
As Meliant of Lis.
Isn't it wonderfully pleasant
To watch such a man? He sits
His saddle so well, and he carries
His shield and his lance so beautifully,
With such ease and assurance."
But her sister, seated beside her,
Observed that others looked better,
And the older sister was so angry
That she rose, intending to strike her.
But the other women held her
Back just long enough
So the blow never landed— which made
The older sister still angrier.
Then the fighting began, down below them,
And many broken lances
And heavy sword-blows, falling
On many knights, reminded
Them all of the high cost
Of fighting with Meliant of Lis:
No one wanted to remain
His opponent very long,
For he drove them to the ground, and smashed
Their lances, and beat them with his sword.
No one on either side
Was fighting as well, and he made
His beloved so happy that she couldn’t
Keep herself from saying,
"Ladies, ladies! What wonders!
Surely, you’ve never seen
The like, or heard of it, either!
He’s easily best and most handsome
Of all the men down there."
But her sister said, "I see
One who seems to me better."
The older sister turned
And said, exceedingly angry,
"Slut! How dare you, miserable
Creature that you are, mutter
Foul-mouthed words and criticize
Anyone I choose to praise!"
Here's something for your cheek—and try
To be more careful, in the future!"
Then she slapped the younger girl
So hard that, clear and distinct,
Her face displayed the prints
Of each and all five fingers.
The ladies around them drew
The young girl away, and scolded
Her sister, and immediately turned
To gossiping about Gawain.
“Lord,” said one of the young ones,
“That knight under the oak tree:
What’s holding him back?” Another
Girl, speaking less carefully,
Declared he had sworn off fighting,
And then a third one said,
“He must be a merchant. Let’s leave him
Out of our conversation.
He’s here to sell his horses.”
“He’s a moneychanger,” said a fourth.
“And he doesn’t think he can sell
These poor knights, today, any
Of the goods he’s brought along.
I’m telling the truth: those saddle-bags and boxes are stuffed
With money and silver cups.”
“Really,” said the younger sister,
“You have wicked tongues—and you’re wrong.
Could any merchant lift
The huge lance he’s carrying?
These things you’re saying are exceedingly
Painful for me to hear.
I swear by the Holy Ghost
He seems a better fighter
Than a merchant or moneychanger.
He looks like a knight, and he is one.”

Then all the ladies spoke
In chorus, “Ah, dear sweet child,
Looking is not the same
As being: he imitates
The appearance, but all he wants
Is to keep from paying a merchant’s Taxes. It’s a bad mistake,
Because the inspectors will catch him
And put him in prison like the thief
And wicked scoundrel he is.
He’ll end up swinging by a rope!”

But my lord Gawain could hear
Perfectly clearly every
Word these ladies were saying,
And he felt both angry and shamed.
It seemed to him, and correctly,
He was being accused of treason,
And needed to defend himself.
If he held aloof from this battle
That others had agreed to fight,
He would himself be dishonored,
And all his lineage with him.
And yet, not wanting to join
The fighting, for fear of being
Injured or captured, he held back,
Though seeing how fierce the fighting
Remained, not slackening all day long,
He wished he were able to fight.
Now Meliant called for heavier
Lances, for striking better
Blows. Till evening the fighting
Raged, outside the gates.
Whatever anyone won
Would be brought to some safer place.
The ladies saw a tall
Squire, quite bald, carrying
The stump of a lance and wearing
A horse's harness on his shoulder.
And one of the ladies mocked him,
Calling out, "As God
Is my witness, you've got to be
The craziest squire on earth,
Walking around in that throng
Collecting spearheads and harnesses,
And the stub-ends of lances, as if
You knew what a squire should be doing!
Throw them away! They're worthless!
But I see from up here some pretty
Fancy goods just waiting,
Unguarded, for someone to take them.
You're out of your mind, ignoring
When opportunity knocks.
And just look at that knight—the most cheerful
Fool ever born:
You could pluck out every hair
In his mustache and he'd never move!
Make yourself rich! Hurry!
Go get it, if you've got any brains—
He won't try to stop you!"
So the squire went and whacked
One of Gawain’s horses
With his lance-stump, and said, “Fellow, What’s wrong with you, spending The whole day lazing around, Doing nothing but taking Care that your shield won’t get scratched And your lance doesn’t get broken?” “Go away,” said Gawain. “It’s none Of your business. Someday, perhaps, You’ll know why I’m staying here. But it’s none of your affair, And I’m in no mood to tell you. Go do whatever you ought To be doing, and leave me alone!” And the squire immediately left, Not being the sort who’d argue With someone who spoke like Gawain. Then combat stopped for the day. Many knights had been captured, And many horses killed; The men from the castle had been braver, But those outside had won More booty. And as they parted They agreed to return in the morning And fight the whole day long. So darkness finished the fighting, And those who’d emerged from the castle Went back inside. And my lord Gawain followed along Behind them, and in front of the door Met the brave old knight Who, earlier that day, had advised
The lord of the castle to let
The combat begin. And speaking
With great politeness, he invited
Gawain to spend the night
With them: "Good sir, your lodgings
Await you, here in this castle.
Stay with me, if you please,
For if you decide to ride on,
There's nothing fitting nearby.
Do stay with me, my lord."
"Thank you, good sir, I will,"
Said Gawain, "and gladly. I've heard
Much less friendly words,
Today." The old knight showed him
The way, talking of this
And that, then asked why,
With such a combat occurring,
He hadn't thought to join in.
And Gawain told him the reason,
Explaining he'd been accused
Of treachery, and had to avoid
Becoming a captive, or wounded,
Or injured, until he'd proved
Himself not guilty of that crime.
He and all his friends
Would find themselves dishonored,
Should he be late for the pre-
Arranged judicial combat.
The old knight agreed,
And thought even better of Gawain:
If that was why he'd stayed
On the sidelines, he'd done the right thing.
Then he led Gawain to his house,
And they both dismounted. But others
Inside the castle were not
So friendly, harshly accusing
Gawain, maintaining that Tibault
Should not have permitted him in.
And Tibault’s oldest daughter,
For sheer dislike of her sister,
Ingeniously argued the case:
“Believe me, nothing’s been lost
Today, my lord. Indeed,
It seems to me you’ve won
Far more than you think you have,
And I’ll tell you exactly why.
All you have to do
Is order the arrest of a man
Who instead of offering us help
Has wickedly tricked and deceived us,
Bringing into this castle
A load of lances, and shields,
And leading behind him horses.
Pretending to be a knight,
He’s cheating us out of taxes,
For all he really intends
To do is sell his goods.
But treat him as he deserves.
Garin, Berte’s son, has given him
Lodging right under your nose.
They’ve just gone by: I saw
Garin leading him home.”
And thus she did whatever
She could to dishonor the knight.
And her father mounted his horse,
Determined to see for himself.
He rode straight to the house
Where he knew Gawain could be found.
Seeing her father ride out,
The younger sister left
As well, but by a back door,
For she wanted no one to see her.
She went, by another way,
To the place where Gawain was lodging,
The house of Garin, Berte's son,
Who had two beautiful daughters.
And seeing their lord's young daughter
Coming, these girls were delighted,
Nor made the slightest attempt
To conceal their pleasure. One took
Her right hand, and one the left,
Then led her happily in,
Kissing her eyes and her mouth.
Their father, who was neither feeble
Nor poor, was already back
On his horse, and with his son,
Bertrand, was heading (as he often
Did) to court, there
To confer with Tibault, his lord.
Meeting him in the middle of the street,
He greeted his lord, asking
Where he was going. And Tibault
Replied that, in fact, he was coming
To Garin's own house. "That
Presents no problem whatever,"
Said Garin. "And, besides, now
I'll be able to show you the most
Handsome knight on earth.

"Oh lord, that's not why I'm coming,"
Said Tibault. "I mean to arrest him.
He only pretends to be
A knight. He's really a merchant."

"Oh God!" cried Garin. "What wicked
Words you've spoken! I am
Your man, and you are my lord,
But here and now, in the name
Of myself and all my family,
The moment you do such a thing,
And in my very own house,
I'll deny your rule forever."

"As God is my witness," said his lord,
"That's not what I meant to do.
You and your house will have
Nothing but honor at my hands.
All the same, I assure you,
Serious accusations
Have surely been made!" "Thank you,"
Said the old knight. "In which case,
I'll be honored to have you visit
Both my house and my guest."

Side by side they rode
Together, quickly reaching
The old knight's house, where my lord
Gawain had his lodging. Seeing them
Come, Gawain—a model
Of proper, courteous manners—
Greeted and welcomed them. The lord
And his vassal dismounted and greeted
Gawain, and sat beside him.

Then Tibault, lord of that castle,
Politely inquired Gawain's
Reason for merely watching
Their combat, all that day,
Instead of joining in.
Without denying his actions
Were strange, and could have been shameful,
Gawain replied by explaining
That he had been accused
Of treachery and had to defend
Himself at a king's court.
"An honest and faithful reason,"
Said Tibault. "No question about it.
Where will this combat take place?"
"My lord," said Gawain, "at the king
Of Escavalon's court, and I'd better
Go directly there."
"I'll give you an escort," said Tibault,
"Who will show you the way. And since
It's barren country you'll be crossing,
I'll make it easier by giving
You food to carry with you,
And horses on whose backs to put it."
But my lord Gawain replied
He needed to bring nothing,
For he could buy whatever
He wanted, and where he was going
There'd be good horses and plenty
Of food and other supplies.
So he'd ask nothing of Tibault.

Tibault and his host made ready
To leave—but Tibault suddenly
saw his younger daughter,
who knelt in front of Gawain,
grasped him by the leg, and said,
"My lord, hear me, please!
I've come to complain against
my older sister, who struck me.
I beg you to set things right!"

Gawain said nothing, not knowing
her or what she meant,
but set his hand on her head.
Clasping his hand, she went on:
"My complaint about my sister,
for whom I have no love,
is directed to you, good sir,
because she shamed me on your
account." "But what can I do?"
he answered. "How can I help you?"

Tibault, who had said his farewells,
heard what the girl was asking,
and said, "My daughter, what business
have you, complaining to this knight?"

And Gawain asked him, "My lord,
is this girl truly your daughter?"
"Indeed," said Tibault. "But pay
her words no attention whatever.
She's an ignorant child, who knows nothing."

"Ah," said Gawain, "but I
would be unbearably cruel
if I simply ignored her words.
tell me, my sweet and charming
child, and tell me clearly,
What has your sister done wrong,
And how can I set it right?"
"My lord, all you need
To do for me, tomorrow,
Is to bear arms in combat."
"But tell me, my sweet little friend,
Have you ever asked for help
From any other knight?"
"No, sir." "Pay no attention,"
Said her father, "to anything she says.
Don't encourage her folly."
But Gawain answered, "Sir,
God help me, but your daughter speaks
Extremely well for a girl
Of such tender years. How
Could I refuse such a claim?
Indeed, just as she asks,
Tomorrow I'll fight in her name."
"Oh dear sweet sir, thank you!"
Said the girl, so overjoyed
That she bowed right to the ground.
And then they said no more.
The father rode off, with the girl
Seated on his horse in front of him,
And he asked his daughter to tell him
How this quarrel had begun.
And she told him the truth, recounting
The tale blow by blow,
Explaining, "Sir, it made me
Unhappy, hearing my sister
Say that Meliant of Lis
Was the best and most handsome of all,
For I saw, in the meadow below,
This noble-looking knight,
And I couldn’t keep myself
From contradicting my sister
By saying I saw someone better,
And then my sister called me
A stupid slut and pulled
My hair. And the devil with those
Who laughed! I’ll let them cut
My hair down to the nape
Of my neck, and spoil my looks,
If only this knight will take
To the field, tomorrow, and flatten
Melian of Lis—
And then, finally, my sister
Will have to hold her tongue!
All the ladies grew tired
Of her noise, today, but a little
Rain will wash away
A big wind.” “My daughter,” he said,
“I hereby give you permission
To send him, as a sign of affection
And for courtesy’s sake, a sleeve
From your dress, or perhaps a scarf.”
And she answered, in all innocence,
“Gladly, father, since you ask it.
But my sleeves are so terribly small
I wouldn’t dare send one.
He might very well think
I meant to insult him.” “Daughter,
I’ll take that into account.
You need say nothing more:
Everything is taken care of."
   And thus discussing the matter,
He brought her home in his arms
And how happy it made him feel,
Holding her closely against him.
But when the older sister
Saw the younger returning
In his arms, her heart was sore,
And she said, "Sir, where
Has she been, the Girl with the Narrow Sleeves? What schemes and tricks
She invents—and she's started so soon!
Where did you find her today?"
"And what are you trying to
Accomplish?" he answered. "You'd do well
To be silent: she's better than you are—
You, who've pulled her hair
And struck her, which makes me angry.
You haven't acted well."
Hearing such scathing, scolding
Words from her father left her
Abashed and deeply distressed.
And then the father took
Rich red silk from his strongbox,
And immediately had them make
A great wide sleeve. And then,
Calling his younger daughter,
He told her, "Daughter, tomorrow
You're to rise early and go
To the knight's lodging before he
Leaves. Give him this sleeve
As a sign of affection, and he
Can wear it when he comes to the combat.”
And she assured her father
She’d be up at the crack of dawn,
Exactly as he wished, dressed
And ready to perform her errand.

With these instructions, her father
Left her, and the girl, extremely
Happy, ordered all
Her maids not to let her
Lie in bed, the next morning,
But to wake her up at once
(If they wanted her to love them)
At the first light of day.
They said they were glad to obey,
And the very moment they saw
The sun’s first rays they came
And woke her, and helped her dress.

She rose at dawn the next day
And went, all by herself,
To my lord Gawain’s lodgings.
But she hadn’t come so early
That the household wasn’t already
Awake and gone to church,
Anxious to attend Mass,
So the girl was obliged to wait
A long time, at Garin’s
House, while they finished their prayers
And heard all they needed
To hear. When they finally returned,
She threw herself in front
Of Gawain, and said, “May God
Save you and give you joy!
Please, for love of me,
Wear this sleeve I bring you."
"Gladly, my dear," said Gawain,
"And thank you very much."
But the knights could not linger long,
Needing to put on their armor;
They assembled in a group outside
The gates, ready to fight.
And once again all
The ladies climbed the tower,
And watched brave and worthy
Knights forming their ranks.
And Meliant of Lis
Was the first to come charging up,
Leaving those on his side
Hundreds of yards behind him.
And the older sister, seeing
Her lover, couldn't keep silent,
But cried out, "Ladies, see!
Here comes the pride and glory
Of knightly chivalry!"
And Gawain spurred his horse
Directly at him, as fast
As the beast could run, and Meliant
Met him. But his lance shattered,
And my lord Gawain struck him
So fierce a blow that Meliant
Was hurt, and fell to the ground,
And Gawain grasped his horse
By the reins and handed them over
To a squire, directing that the beast
Be brought to the girl for whom
He was fighting. "Tell her I send
This horse as her first prize
Of the day, and hope she approves."
And the squire quickly led
The horse, all saddled, to the girl,
Who'd already seen, from the high
tower window where she sat,
How meliant of lis had fallen.
And she said, "Now see, sister,
That meliant of lis, whom you've praised
So much, is stretched out flat
On his back. How you've wasted your words!
But this proves what I told you, yesterday;
Judge for yourself, as God
Is my witness, which knight is better!"
It was hardly spoken by accident,
For she meant to provoke her sister,
Who nearly lost her mind,
Screaming, "Slut, be quiet!
If I hear you say another
Word, I'll give you such
A slap that you won't be able
To walk!" "God save us!"
Said the younger sister. "I've simply
Spoken the truth; there's no
Reason to hit me. By God,
I saw him knocked to the ground,
And you were sitting right here,
And as far as I can tell
He's still not able to stand.
And even if it makes you angry,
I have to say that every
Lady in this tower saw him
Knocked flat, with his legs in the air.”
The older sister was ready
To strike, if only they’d let her,
But all the ladies around them
Stopped her from hitting her sister.
Just then, they saw the squire
Coming, his right hand leading
The horse. He saw the young girl
At the window, and presented her prize.
The girl thanked him sixty times
Over, asking that he tend
The horse and convey her thanks
To his lord, who was surely destined
To be the master of this combat,
For every knight who encountered
His lance—so great was his skill—
Would say goodbye to stirrups
And saddle. Gawain had never
Collected so many horses!
That day he presented four,
Each of them won at his hands:
The first he sent, as we’ve seen,
To Tibault’s youngest daughter;
The second went to Garin’s
Wife, who was mightily pleased;
One of Garin’s daughters
Got the third, the other the fourth.
Then fighting was over for the day,
And the knights of the castle returned,
But Gawain carried with him
The day’s highest honors,
Despite leaving the combat
Before the day was half over.
And as he rode back to his lodgings
So many knights rode with him
That the way was packed with horses
And men, and all who saw him
Wondered, and asked, who
He was, and where he’d come from.
Tibault’s younger daughter
Met him in front of the house,
And all she could think of doing
Was to take him by the stirrup
And greet him, using these words,
“Thank you, thank you, my lord!”
He realized what she meant
To say, and replied, frankly,
“Girl, I’d have to be old
And gray before I refused
To serve you, wherever I might be.
If ever I hear that you need me,
From no matter how far away,
Nothing will keep me from coming
The very first time you call.”
“Many thanks,” said the girl.
They chatted of this and that,
And then her father arrived,
Seeking to persuade Sir Gawain
By any means he could
To spend the night at his house.
But Gawain excused himself,
Assuring Tibault that he could not
Stay. And then the lord
Of the castle asked his name.
“Sir, I am called Gawain. I never conceal my name When anyone asks it, just As I never tell it unless Someone bothers to ask.”
And when Tibault heard that this Was my lord Gawain, his heart Filled with joy, and he said, “Sir, do come and accept My house as your lodging for tonight, For, let me tell you, never In my life have I seen a knight I so much wanted to honor, And I’ve not been able to serve you.”
And he asked, again, if Gawain Would stay, but Gawain persisted, Refusing all invitations.
And then the girl, neither A fool nor wicked, bent And kissed his foot, and commended Him to Our Lord in Heaven. And when Gawain asked her what This gesture was intended to mean, She answered by saying she’d kissed His foot, as she had, so he Would never be able to forget her, On account of this mark of special Attention, wherever he went. Then Gawain said, “Don’t worry, My pretty friend: as God Is my witness, I’ll never forget you,
No matter where I may be."
   And then he said farewell
To Garin and all the others,
Who commended him to God.
That night my lord Gawain
Took lodging at a monastery,
And found there whatever he needed.
And then, all the next day,
He rode along the road
Until he saw a herd
Of does grazing at the edge
Of a dense wood. Calling
To his squire to stop where they were,
He told him to bring the horse
He was leading (the very best
Gawain had) and a strong
Straight spear he was carrying as he went,
Then give his master the spear
And the horse, taking in exchange
The reins of the palfrey Gawain
Had been riding. The squire quickly
Did exactly as instructed,
Bringing both horse and lance,
And Gawain rode toward the deer,
Craftily approaching close
Enough to surprise a white
Doe, feeding near a blackberry
Thicket, and strike it on the neck.
But the doe leapt away,
Exactly as a stag might have done,
And Gawain galloped after
And would have caught the fleeing deer
Except that his horse lost
A shoe from a front foot.
Gawain turned to go back
To the road, where his squire was waiting,
But feeling his horse limping
He felt immense concern,
Not knowing what might be hurting—
Perhaps it had bumped its hoof
On a tree stump? He told his squire
To dismount from his own horse
And find out what was wrong,
For by now the horse was limping
Badly. The squire obeyed,
Lifted the horse's foot,
And found that the shoe was missing.
"My lord," he said, "we need
A blacksmith. You have no choice
But to ride on gently until
We find one and this hoof is re-shod."
So on they went, until
They saw men leaving a castle.
Those leading the way
Were wearing short clothes—boys
On foot, with packs of dogs.
And then came huntsmen, carrying
Sharpened spears. And then
Came archers and men at arms,
Bearing bows and arrows.
And then came the knights.
And after the knights came a mounted
Pair, one of whom
Was a boy in his teens, and the loveliest
Boy in the world. He
Alone greeted Gawain,
Taking him by the hand
And saying, "Sir, I've caught you.
Go back the way I've just come
And let me offer you lodging.
Surely, it's now the hour
For resting, if you've no objections.
I have a courteous sister
Who'd be very happy to see you,
And this gentleman riding with me
Will gladly show you the way.
Sir," he told his companion,
"I send you to go with this lord
And lead him to my sister. Greet her,
First, and then give her
This message: tell her that by
The love and trust that she and I
Share, as brother and sister,
If ever she has loved a knight
She must love this one, and treat him
Well, exactly the way
She'd treat me, her very own brother.
Let her offer him comfort
And company, unless she objects,
Until we return from our hunt.
And when you see he's been welcomed
With all my sister's charm,
Come hurrying back to me,
For I would like to seek
His company, too, and return
As soon as I possibly can."
And then the companion left,
Bringing my lord Gawain
To a place where everyone hated him.
Gawain suspected nothing;
He'd never been there before
And knew no reason to be on
His guard. He noted how the castle
Stood on an arm of the sea,
And saw how the tower and walls
Were so strong that nothing could shake them.
And everywhere he looked
He saw singularly beautiful people,
And those who dealt in gold
And silver, and their coin-covered tables,
And saw shops and streets
Crowded with all sorts of workers
Plying their different crafts,
Everything under the sun:
Mail-coats over here, and helmets;
Lances over there, and coats
Of arms; and harnesses
And spurs, and lances and spears;
Weavers of cloth, and finishers,
Those who card, and those
Who shear; smelters of silver
And gold; makers of beautiful
Things, goblets and cups
And lovely enameled ware,
Rings and belts and clasps.
One could have said, and truly,
They held a fair every day,
So bursting with goods was the place—
Beeswax, and dyes, and pepper,
Squirrel fur, and fox, and whatever
Men made for other men.

He went and looked at everything,
Here and there, far
And near, then came to the tower,
From which servants came running to remove
Their armor and take their weapons.

Leaving the servants, his escort
Took Gawain into the tower,
Then led him by the hand straight
To his host's sister, to whom
He said, "My beautiful friend,
Your brother greets you, and sends you
This lord, and commands you to offer him
All the honor and service you can.

He asks you not to be vexed,
But to do your duty with such
A good heart that this knight might be
Your brother and you his sister.

Don't be reluctant to allow him
Whatever a man might want,
But be charming, gracious, and generous.
Reflect on these words, for I'm leaving:
I must return to the hunt."

And the girl answered, exceedingly
Happy, "Blessings on him,
For sending me company like this!
No one who lends me so handsome
A man can hate me, and I thank him.

My lord," said the girl to Gawain,
"Come sit over here, beside me.
Since you're so handsome and noble,
And my brother asks me to befriend you,
I find you a delightful companion."

And then his escort left him,
Unwilling to linger, and my lord
Gawain remained, not
In the least inclined to protest
At being alone with the girl,
Who was both agreeable and lovely,
And had been so perfectly raised
That being alone with a man
Seemed no particular risk.
They spoke of love, of course—
Indeed, had they spoken of anything
Else, they would have been fools.

Gawain made amorous advances,
Swearing he'd be her knight
The whole rest of his life,
And she said no to nothing,
But cheerfully gave what he asked.
Just then, alas! a knight
Appeared, who spoiled their fun,
For he knew who Gawain was.
He found them exchanging kisses,
Profoundly pleased with each other.
But seeing what they were up to
He couldn't hold his tongue,
But cried as loud as he could,
"Shame on you, woman! Shame!
May God blast you to nothingness,
Allowing the very man
You ought to hate the most
To hug and kiss you like that,  
Happy to hold you in his arms!  
You stupid, wicked woman,  
Born to become such a slut!  
Your hands should rip out his heart,  
Not your foolish mouth.  
If your kisses struck to his heart  
They could have pulled the heart  
Right out of his belly—but your hands  
Could do it better. And that  
Is what you ought to have done,  
If a woman can do anything right.  
But women are worthless creatures:  
A woman who hates evil  
And loves good is not  
A woman, for she loses that name  
The moment there’s good in her heart.  
But you’re a woman, all right,  
To sit there, next to the man  
Who killed your father, kissing him!  
When a woman can have what she wants,  
She cares about nothing else.”  
And then he ran out of sight,  
Not waiting to see what my lord  
Gawain might have to say,  
And the girl fainted dead  
Away, and lay still a long time.  
Gawain bent and lifted her  
Up, blue and pale  
From the fright she’d had. And when  
She was conscious again, she exclaimed,  
“Oh, we’re as good as dead!
I'm going to die on your
Account, and you because
Of me. All the common
People will be coming—you'll see!—
Ten thousand or more will be massing
Right in front of this tower.
And yet, there are plenty of weapons,
And I'll have you in armor in a minute!
One knight who knows what he's doing
Surely can defend this tower."
Worried as she was, she ran
And fetched weapons and armor.
And once he was fully equipped
Both she and my lord Gawain
Were considerably less concerned,
Although there was still a problem,
For she hadn't found him a shield.
But he picked up a heavy chessboard
And said, "My dear, don't bother:
This is all the shield I need."
He threw the chessmen to the ground;
They were carved of ivory, ten times
Heavier and harder than usual.
Now, whatever happened,
He was sure he could hold the door
And the entrance to the tower, for belted
To his side he wore Excalibur,
The best sword ever made:
It could cut through iron as if
It were wood. The angry knight
Had run outside, and found there,
Milling about, the mayor
And many notables, and a swarming
Horde of other townsfolk
Who clearly hadn't been feeding
On fish, their bellies were so fat!
He ran to this crowd as fast
As he could, crying, "Gentlemen,
To arms! Let's catch this traitor
Gawain, who killed our lord!"
"Where? Where?" they shouted.
"By God," he answered, "I found him—
Gawain himself, that traitor!—
Sitting there in our tower,
Hugging and kissing our lady,
And she wasn't objecting—
She liked it, she wanted more.
Come with me, let's get him!
If we can hand him over
To our lord, we'll have done a great service.
This traitor surely deserves
To be caught in the middle of his shame.
But we have to take him alive,
Because our lord, and rightly,
Wants him alive, not dead.
Dead men have nothing to fear.
Rouse the whole town! Everyone!
Do your duty! All of you!"
The mayor was ready in a moment,
And all the notables with him.
Ah, you should have seen
Those clowns picking up axes
And pikes! They grabbed up shields
Without straps, and gates, and baskets.
The town crier called them
To arms, and everyone came,
The town bell ringing
To remind them not to stay home.
Every single rogue
Snatched up a pitchfork or a flail
Or a hammer: they made more noise
Than a mob out hunting snails!
Children came running, too,
Carrying whatever they could.
Oh, Gawain would get himself killed,
Absent help from Heaven!

And then the girl, brave
As she was, got ready to fight.
But first she called to the crowd,
"Ah, you scum! You foaming
Dogs! You dirty rascals!
What devil sent you here?
Ha! What are you after?
May God deprive you of all pleasure!
In the name of the Lord, you’ll never
Lay hands on this knight in here:
You won’t be able to count
The people he’ll chop up and kill!
He didn’t use wings, and fly
To this tower; he came by no tunnel.
My brother himself sent him
Here, and asked me to be his host,
And treat him with all the warmth
And affection I’d show to my brother.
You think, when my brother commands me,
I’m some kind of slut, giving him
Company, pleasure, and comfort?
Believe it if you want to: go on!
But I've told you my only reason;
Nothing worse was involved!
But you're behaving wildly,
You're shaming me, coming
To my bedroom door with drawn
Swords in your hands, none of you
Certain why you're here,
And even if you were, not saying
A word to me, which is why
I tell you you're all scum!"
But while she was telling them off,
They were whacking away at the door
With their axes, trying to force their way
In, and they split it in two.
But the inside porter, guarding
The gate, defended his post,
Meeting them sword in hand,
And the first one who came paid
So huge a price of admittance
That no one dared to follow.
Anxious to stay alive,
They were all afraid of losing
Their heads. Those who'd pressed forward
Hurriedly beat a retreat;
No one would stick out a hand
Or risk a single step.
And the girl picked up the chessmen
Lying on the floor and threw them
Angrily into their faces.
Tucking up her skirt
And swearing like a fishwife,
She told them she'd kill them all,
If she could, before they killed her.

But the peasants refused to give up,
Swearing they'd pull the tower
Down on their heads, if they didn't
Surrender. They both continued
To fight, throwing great chessmen.

Most of the mob retreated,
Unable to endure these missiles,
And began digging at the tower's
Foundation, hoping it would topple
Down, for they didn't dare fight
At the door, so well defended.
And let me tell you, that door
Was low and exceedingly narrow,
And even two men abreast
Could not have made their way through—
Which was why a single bold knight
Could hold and defend it so well.
For slicing these unarmored peasants
From the top of their heads to their teeth,
They needed to call on no better
Porter than the one they had.

Now the lord who'd offered Gawain
Lodging knew nothing of all this,
Although he returned from the hunt
As soon as he possibly could.
Meanwhile, the peasant sappers
Kept attacking the tower.
And now (I don't know how)
Guinganbresil also arrived;
He galloped up to the castle
And was shocked to the very bottom
Of his soul, seeing the assembled
Peasants hammering and digging.
He had no idea, of course,
That Gawain was in the tower.
But the minute he understood it,
He warned the mob that no one
Who valued his life had better
Be brave enough to touch
So much as a single stone.
His saying so wouldn't make
Them stop, they replied: if he
Were inside with Gawain, they'd pull
The tower down on them both.
And seeing how little attention
They paid him, he thought he'd better
Go find the king, and let him
See the unholy mess
These bourgeois men were making.
So he found the king in the wood,
And informed him what was happening:
"My lord, the mayor and all
The merchants are heaping dishonor
On your name. Ever since
This morning they've been attacking
Your tower. Make them sorry,
Make them pay, or I'll
Be shamed. I accused Gawain
Of treachery, as you know quite well,
But the man to whom you've offered
Lodging in your house is Gawain
Himself. Because he accepted
Your offer, it's right and proper
That now you give him protection."
The king gave Guinganbresil
This answer: "Master, the moment
I get there, there'll be no danger!
I'm terribly sorry, believe me,
That something like this has happened.
The fact that my people hate him
So desperately doesn't displease me,
But having made him my guest,
Honor requires me to keep him
Safe from all such assaults."
They rode straight to the tower
And found it surrounded by a howling
Mob of townsfolk. The king
Immediately commanded the mayor
To order everyone away.
And the moment the mayor spoke,
They left, and no one lingered.
A wise old knight who'd been born
And raised in the town, and had given
Advice that everyone welcomed—
Sensible and sane—said
To the king, "My lord, it's time
I gave you some heartfelt counsel.
It's hardly surprising that the man
Guilty of murdering your father,
And accused of a treacherous killing,
Should come here and be attacked,
For everyone here hates him,
And hates him rightly, as you know.
But once you've offered him lodging
You have no choice but to keep him
Safe from capture or harm.
And to tell you the whole truth,
He who is truly obliged
To protect him is Guinganbresil,
Who came to Arthur's court
And accused the man of treachery.
This fact can't be denied:
Gawain came here to defend
Himself. But I advise
A delay in any such combat,
And that Gawain be sent in search
Of the bleeding spear, its point
Forever dripping a single,
Unstoppable drop of blood.
Either he brings you that lance,
Or else he returns and you lock him
Up, as he's locked up now.
There'd be better cause for keeping him
In prison than you have right now—
And could you invent a jail
So severe it could hold a man
Like that forever? Besides,
Given the chance, you should make
Your enemy suffer as much
As you possibly can. I doubt
I could tell you a better way
To torment this fellow Gawain.”

The king accepted this advice.
He entered the tower, looking for
His sister, and found her still angry.
But she rose to greet him, as did
My lord Gawain—and he,
If he felt any fear, refused
To show it by trembling or changing
Color. Guinganbresil
Came forward, greeting the girl,
Who'd become extremely pale,
Then speaking these empty words:
“Oh Gawain, Gawain! Dear sir,
You had my safe conduct for coming
Here, provided only
That, intending to return alive,
You keep yourself from rashly
Entering any of my lord’s
Castles or towns. Under
The circumstances, there’s nothing
To say about what you’ve done."
And then the wise old man
Spoke up: “My lord, please God,
These matters may all be arranged.
To whom can one complain,
When merchants and butchers attack you?
One couldn’t sort that out
From now to the day of Last Judgment!
But here’s what my lord the king,
Standing right here, proposes:
He’s ordered me to suggest,
If you and he both agree,
That this trial by combat should be
Postponed for another year,
And that you, Sir Gawain, should leave here,
Bound however by an oath
To my king, namely, that you'll
Return, in no more than a year,
Bringing that lance dripping
Bright red blood—a spear,
It is written, which in time to come
Will destroy the entire kingdom
Of Logres (already known
As the land of ogres). This
Is the pledge and agreement my lord
The king is seeking from you.”

“Ha!” said Gawain. “I’d much
Prefer to be murdered where I stand,
Or to spend eight years in prison,
Than to bind myself to such
A pledge, and swear to perform it.
I’m not so afraid of death
That I wouldn’t rather die
With honor than allow myself,
Living, to be perjured and shamed.”

“Ah no, good sir,” said the old man.
“No dishonor is involved,
Nor any breaking of your word,
If you do as I instruct:
Swear to do your best
To find and bring back the lance.
If in the event you can’t,
Simply return to this tower
And your promise will be fulfilled.”

“In that case,” said Gawain, “I’m inclined
To accept the oath you propose.”

A precious, holy relic
Was quickly brought in, and the oath
Was solemnly recited: Gawain
Promised to do all he could
To find the bleeding lance.

And so the battle between
Gawain and Guinganbresil
Was postponed for the term of one year.
And Gawain escaped the great peril
Hanging over his head.

He immediately left the tower,
Having said farewell to the girl
And ordered all his servants
To go back home, taking
Every one of the horses
With them, except Gringolet.

His squires and pages wept,
Obliged to leave their lord,
But they went, and I've no interest
In describing any of their sorrow.

For now, this Story of the Grail
Is done with my lord Gawain,
And will turn its attention to Perceval.

And the book tells us that Perceval
Had so completely lost
His memory he'd even forgotten
God. Five Aprils and five Mays
Had passed, five whole years,
And he'd never entered a church
To adore God or His saints.

For five years he lived
Like this, but never gave up
Hunting chivalric adventure,
Engaging in the wildest exploits,
Savage and cruel and hard.
He hunted them, and found them,
And proved his courage over
And over; nothing he started
Was ever left unfinished.
In those five years he sent
Fifty worthy knights
To Arthur's court, as his prisoners.
And so he spent five years
Without a thought of God.
And then, at the end of those years,
He found himself in a wilderness,
Riding, as he usually rode,
Armored from head to foot,
When he met with five knights,
Along with ten ladies,
Their heads completely covered,
And all were walking, not riding,
In woolen robes, and wearing
No shoes. Seeing him mounted
As he was, armored, with his shield
And his lance, all the ladies
Doing penance for their sins,
Barefooted, striving for the good
Of their souls, were struck with astonishment.
Then one of the five knights
Stopped him, and said, "Good sir,
Don't you believe in Jesus
Christ, who wrote the new Law
And gave it to Christians like us?
Surely it's wrong, and indeed
A great sin, to be bearing arms
On the very day of His death.
Not knowing what day it was,
Or what time of day, or what year
(His heart so deeply troubled),
Perceval asked, “What day
Is today?” “What? You don’t know?
Today is Good Friday, when we openly
Honor the Cross, and weep
For the sins we’ve committed. Betrayed
For thirty pieces of silver,
Christ was crucified today.
He who had never sinned,
But saw how the world was sinning,
Chose, of his own volition,
To take on human form.
He was God and man in one,
Born of the Holy Virgin,
Conceived of the Holy Ghost—
God in flesh and blood,
Divinity covered by the skin
Of a man: no one can doubt it.
Refuse to believe these things,
And you’ll never see His face.
He was born of Our Lady, the Virgin,
Mingling His holy self
With the soul and shape of a man,
And, indeed, on this very day
Was nailed to the Cross, and traveled
To Hell, and freed those who love Him.
He died the most saintly of deaths,
Saving the lives of the living
And resurrecting the dead.
The Jews, in their wicked jealousy
(They ought to be killed like dogs!)*
Setting Him high on the Cross,
Harmed themselves, but helped us,
For they were lost, and we
Were saved. Those who believe in
Him must give Him our penance,
This day; no believer
Should wear armor or fight.”
“And where have you come from?” Perceval
Asked. “From there, good sir,
In the midst of this forest, where a saintly
Hermit dwells—so holy
A man, indeed, that he lives
Only by the glory of God.”
“Tell me: what were you seeking?
What did you ask for? What
Did you do?” “What?” said a lady.
“We asked forgiveness for our sins,
And confessed them all. Nothing
A Christian could ever do,
If he hopes to please his Lord,
Could possibly be more urgent.”
Hearing these words, Perceval
Wept, and wanted to speak
With the holy hermit himself.

* Poirion claims that “the invective against the Jews is surprisingly vio-
lent” (p. 1371n, emphasis added) and translates an devroit tuer come
chiens as on devrait les abattre comme des chiens, although by 1150 tuer
meant “to kill” rather than “to strike.” Says Father Edward H. Flan-
nery, “Medieval anti-Semitism left a mark on both Jew and Christian”
"That's where I want to go,"
He said, "to this hermit, if only
I knew which road to take."
"Sir, if you wish to see him,
All you need do is follow
The path that brought us here,
Straight through this dense forest,
Paying careful attention
To the branches we tied together
With our own hands as we came.
We did this so no one seeking
The holy hermit could lose
His way and fail to find him."

They commended him to God
And asked him no more questions,
And Perceval followed their path,
Sighing from the bottom of his heart
For all the sins against God
He'd committed, which he now repented.
He wept as he rode through the wood,
And when he arrived at the hermit's
Dwelling, he dismounted, and disarmed
Himself. Tying his horse
To an elm tree, he entered the hermitage.
And there, in a tiny chapel,
He found the hermit, with a priest
And a choir boy (I tell it as it happened),
Just beginning the most beautiful,
The sweetest service the sainted
Church can celebrate.
Perceval dropped to his knees
The moment he entered that chapel,
But the holy hermit called to him,
Seeing the honest tears
Rolling down his cheeks
All the way to his chin.
And Perceval, deeply afraid
Of having offended God,
Clasped the hermit's feet
And, bending low, his hands
Joined in supplication,
Begged for help, for his need
Was great. The good man instructed
Him to make his confession,
For sins could not be forgiven
Before confession and repentance.
"Sir," said Perceval, "for five
Full years I haven't known
Where I was, or believed in God,
Or loved Him. All I have done
Was evil." "Good friend," said the hermit,
"Tell me why this happened,
And pray God to have mercy
On your sinful soul." "Sir,
Once I was at the Fisher King's
Castle, and I saw—without
Any question—the bleeding lance,
And seeing that drop of blood
On the bright white of its point,
I never asked what or why.
There are no amends I can make.
And when I saw a holy
Grail, I had no idea
For whom it was meant, and said nothing,
And ever since I've felt
Such sadness that I wished to die;
I forgot about God and never
Prayed for his grace and mercy
Or did what I should to deserve it.”
“Ah!” said the hermit. “Good friend,
Now you must tell me your name.”
And he answered, “Perceval, sir.”
And hearing this, the hermit
Sighed, for he knew that name,
And said, “Brother, this comes
From a sin of which you know nothing.
It happened the day your mother
Heard you say you were leaving,
And she fell to the ground in a faint,
Near the bridge, in front of the door,
And there she died of her sorrow.
And that was the sin which caused you,
Later, to ask no questions
About the grail or the lance;
Everything followed from that.
You've only survived this long,
Believe me, because she commended
You to our Holy Lord.
Her prayer had such spiritual strength
That for her sake God gave you
Protection from prison and death.
That sin stiffened your tongue
When you saw, passing before you,
That spearpoint that goes on bleeding
And never asked what it was.
Not knowing for whom the grail
Was meant, you were out of your mind.
He who was served is my brother:
Your mother was his sister, and mine,
And the rich Fisher King
Is the son, I believe, of the man
For whom the grail was intended.
But don't imagine it holds
Salmon and pike and eels!
A single sacred wafer
Is all it contains, and it keeps him
Alive and gives him comfort,
So holy a thing is that grail,
And he so exceedingly spiritual
That without the Eucharist he receives
From the grail he could not live.
It's been like this for fifteen
Years: he never leaves
The room you saw the grail
Go to. I wish to administer,
Now, your penance for that sin."
"Oh my uncle, gladly!"
Said Perceval. "With a willing heart!
My mother having been your sister,
I am truly your nephew, and you
My uncle, and well belovèd."
"Indeed, good nephew. Now repent!
If you care for your soul as you should,
You'll open yourself to repentance.
The first thing you'll do each day,
The first place you'll go to, will be church,
Where soul and body will prosper.
Never omit this, for any
Reason! Cathedral or chapel
Or parish church, go
As soon as the bells are rung,
Or, when you're awake, even sooner.
The holy service won't hurt you,
And your soul will profit. If the priest
Has already begun to say Mass,
Remain there and hear the rest,
Listen to every word
He either speaks or sings.
If your heart is sufficiently willing,
It's not too late: return
To grace, and then to Heaven!
Love God, adore Him, believe
In Him. Honor good men
And women. Stand when the priest
Enters: it costs you little,
But truly God loves to see it
As the sign of a humble spirit.
If a girl asks for your help,
Give it, and help yourself.
Or a widowed lady, or an orphan:
These are acts of absolute charity.
Help whom you can, as you should.
Be careful, never fail them!
These are the things I wish you
To do, to reclaim God's grace
As, once, you used to have it.
Tell me: is your heart willing?"
And in penitence dine with me, 
Eating the foods I eat."
And Perceval gave his consent, 
And the hermit bent and whispered
A prayer in his ear, and had him
Repeat it till he knew it by heart—
A prayer full of the sacred
Names God is known by,
His highest and holiest names,
Only to be invoked
When a man is in mortal fear.
Once he had learned it, the hermit
Forbade him ever to say it
Except when facing the greatest
Danger. "Nor will I, sir,"
Said Perceval. And then he heard
Mass, and was filled with joy.
And after the service he adored
The Cross, and wept for his sins,
Humbly repenting of them,
Over and over for a very
Long time. He dined, that night,
Exactly as the hermit pleased,
On parsley, lettuce, and water-
Cress, and the bread they ate
Was baked of wheat and barley,
And they drank cold clear water.
And his horse was fed on straw,
With a full basin of barley,
And he slept in a good dry stable,
Cared for as a horse requires.
   And Perceval learned, once again,
That Our Lord had died that Friday,  
Crucified high on the Cross.  
He made his Easter communion  
Humbly, in perfect simplicity.  
And here the story breaks  
Away from Perceval,  
About whom the tale turns silent:  
I'll speak a good deal of Gawain  
Before Perceval is mentioned again."  
Gawain had gone a long way,  
Once he'd escaped from the tower  
Where the angry townsfolk trapped him.  
In the latter part of the morning  
He was galloping up a hill  
When he came to an immense oak tree  
And saw the shade it provided.  
And he saw a shield hung  
From its branches, and a spear stuck  
In the ground. He hurried over  
To the oak, where he found a small  
Scandinavian palfrey,  
Which struck him as very strange,  
For shields and armor and weapons  
Were ordinarily not  
To be found with women's horses.  
Were it a stallion, he thought,  
He could have concluded that a knight  
In search of fame and fortune  
Might have been crossing this country,

* In fact, in the remaining pages that Chrétien lived to write, we never return to Perceval
And could have climbed this hill.
Looking under the oak,
He saw a girl, who would have
Seemed lovely and charming, had she shown
Signs of happiness and joy.
But her hands were raised to her hair,
As if to rip it out;
Her grief could not be mistaken.
And the cause of her grief was a knight
Over whom she was bent, covering
His eyes and his face and his mouth
With kisses. As Gawain came closer
He saw the knight had been hurt,
His face cut to shreds,
A great deep sword wound
Right in the middle of his head
And another along his side,
And blood spurting all over.
The wounded knight kept fainting,
Again and again, until
At last he slept. When Gawain
Saw him, he could not tell
If the man were living or dead,
And asked, “Girl, is this knight
Likely to live?” And she answered,
“Sir, you can easily see
How terribly badly he’s wounded:
The least of these injuries could kill him.”
“My sweet friend,” he said,
“If you don’t mind, please wake him,
For I wish to ask him about
The state of affairs in this land.”
“Sir,” said the girl, “I will not
Wake him: I’d rather let
Myself be flayed alive,
For there’s no one I’ve ever loved
So much, and no one I will,
As long as I live. What a wicked
Fool I’d be, seeing him
At rest and asleep, to do
Anything that might annoy him.”

“Then I’ll wake him myself, by God,”
Said Gawain, “because I need to.”
Then turning his lance around,
He touched the sleeping knight’s shoulder,
And woke him, but touched him so softly
And gently that he did him no harm,
For which the wounded knight
Thanked him: “Sir, I offer you
Five hundred thanks for so
Politely waking me up
That you caused me no pain whatever.
But let me beg you, on your own
Account, not to continue
Your journey. You’d be a fool.
Believe me, stay where you are.”

“Stay here, sir? But why?”
“By God, since you want to be told,
Sir, I’ll tell you. No knight
Can ever come back, if he travels
In that direction, whether
He keeps to the road or takes
To the open fields. There lies
The Galloway border: no one
Who crosses that border can ever  
Return. Indeed, no one  
Ever has, except  
For me, and you see my condition,  
So badly hurt that, it seems  
To me, I can hardly last  
Till sunset. I encountered a knight  
Over there, so strong, so skilled,  
So haughty, that no one I’ve ever  
Met could possibly match him.  
And that’s why I tell you to leave,  
Rather than continue down  
This hill. “By God,” said Gawain,  
“Running away is for peasants!  
I didn’t come here to turn back:  
Whoever might want to call me  
A coward could certainly do so,  
If I started in this direction,  
Then turned around and went back.  
I’ll keep to this road, by God,  
Until and unless I’m stopped.”  
“I see that you’ll surely go on,”  
Said the wounded knight. “You crave  
The honor and glory, and you’ll seek them,  
Whatever the cost. But if  
You don’t mind, if it’s not too much,  
Let me ask you, please,  
If God grants you that honor—  
Though there’s never been a knight  
Who’s earned it, and I think there never  
Will be any such knight,  
Neither you nor anyone else—
That if you come back this way
You’d do me the favor of stopping,
Here, to see if I’m dead
Or alive, or better, or worse.
And if I’m dead, for charity’s
Sake, in the name of the Holy
Trinity, I beg you to care for
This girl and keep her from any
Misery or shame. And my reason
For asking is that God could never
Make, and never will make
Again, a girl any nobler—
So open and generous, so courteous
And beautifully raised. Her sorrow
Now, is surely for me,
For she sees me, as I am, near death.”

My lord Gawain promised
That, absent his capture or another
Such obstacle, he would surely return
To this spot, and the wounded knight,
And would give the girl whatever
Aid and counsel he could.

And then he left them, and rode on
Through fields and forests, never
Stopping until he came to
A strong castle, bordering
On the sea, with a port full of ships—
So towering a castle that it stood
As mighty as noble Pavia.

Spread out on the other side
Were vineyards and a great city,
Clean and well kept and beautiful,
With a river than ran below it
And came lapping against its walls
Before it flowed to the sea.
Both the castle and the town
Were guarded by tall stone walls.
My lord Gawain rode into
The city, across a bridge,
And when he arrived at the very
Center of the place he saw,
In a courtyard, under a yew tree,
A girl standing alone
And staring at her image in a mirror,
And her skin was white as snow.
And on her head she wore
A close-fitting golden crown.
Gawain spurred his ambling
Horse, to reach her sooner,
And she cried out, "Slowly, slowly,
Good sir! Go gently! You're dashing
Ahead like a wild-tempered fool!
There's really no need for such haste:
Don't hurry your horse for no reason.
That's madness, good sir, plain madness."
"God's blessings on you, young lady!"
Called out my lord Gawain.
"Now tell me, my pretty friend,
What did you think I was up to,
Riding toward you like that,
Not knowing why I had come?"
"Oh yes, I knew, good knight,
I knew perfectly well."
"And my intention?" "Was to steal me
Away and carry me off, Draped on your horse's neck."
"Exactly, young lady, exactly!"
"I knew I was right," she said.
"But the devil with that sort of thing!
Don't think I plan to let you Cart me away on your horse.
I'm not some silly little girl
Who plays such games with you fellows,
Letting you lug me away
When you need to prove your knighthood.
You won't hoist me up there!
But if you're a good enough knight,
I'll gladly go where you lead.
Just take the trouble, please,
To walk into that garden
And find my palfrey; it's in there,
And I'll ride along behind you
No matter what troubles and problems,
What sadness and misery and misfortune
You experience, traveling with me."
"Is courage all that's required,"
He asked, "my sweet young friend?"
"Fellow, as far as I know
That's all," the girl replied.
"Ah, my pretty, and what
About my horse, if I go there?
Where will I leave him? He can't
Possibly cross on that plank."
"No indeed, sir, so leave him with me,
And you go walking across.
I'll stay and watch your horse
For just as long as I'm able.
But hurry on back, if you can,
For who knows how long it can wait?
Perhaps it won't stay here in peace—
Someone might lead it off
Before you come back.” “Quite so,”
He said. “You’re right. And if
It’s led off, you’ll be excused,
And the same if it somehow escapes:
You won’t hear me complaining.”

Then he gave her the horse, and went,
But had the good sense, at least,
To keep his armor and weapons,
In case there was someone there
Who might want to stop him, keep him
From leading off the palfrey,
In which case he would have to fight
Before he could bring it back.

Having crossed the plank
He saw an immense mass
Of people watching in wonder,
And they all cried out, “Girl,
May you burn in Hell for the evil
You do! May bad things happen
To someone with no respect
For the brave! Oh shame! You’ve caused
So many to have their heads
Cut off! And you, who bring her
Her horse, you simply don’t know
The miseries you’re bound to suffer
If you put those reins in her hand!
Oh knight, why have you come?
Truly, you'd never be here
If you knew the dishonor, the misery,
The misfortune and pain you'll experience
The moment you do what she wants!"

Every one of them shouted
These things at Gawain, trying
To keep him from coming after
The palfrey, trying to turn him
Back. He may have heard them,
But had no intention of listening:
He greeted them all, most politely,
And as they returned his greetings
It seemed that all the spectators
Felt, in advance, great
Distress and sorrow for his fate.
Reaching the palfrey, my lord
Gawain stretched out his hand,
Intending to grasp the reins
(For the horse was both bridled and saddled).
But a tall knight seated
Beneath a green-leaved olive tree
Spoke up: "Knight, you're wasting
Your time, coming for that palfrey.
Just lay a finger on that horse
And you'll stand convicted of enormous
Arrogance. I will not try
To forbid you, I will not stop you,
If you really want to take it.
But I'd advise you to leave:
Just stop in your tracks, or else
You'll encounter serious trouble."
"All the same, I won't stop,
My good sir,” said my lord Gawain,
“For the girl who was looking in her mirror,
Standing under that tree,
Sent me, and why would I come,
If I didn't intend to fetch her
Her horse? I'd be labeled a liar
And coward all over the world.”
“Good brother,” the tall knight replied,
“You'll be getting more than you've asked for.
May God our Father witness,
To whom I hope to surrender
My soul, that I've never seen
A knight do what you mean
To do without suffering
The pain of having his head
Cut off. It will happen to you.
I've tried to warn you off
Without the slightest self-interest—
For let me assure you, you can lead
Away that horse without
Interference from me or anyone
Else. But your path will be perilous
Once you presume to touch it.
Again, I advise you to stop
Before you lose your head.”
These words had no effect
On Gawain, who did not pause.
He led the palfrey, which had
A head part white, part black,
Back across the plank,
Which it walked over easily, having
Learned on repeated trips
In both directions how to do it.
Then Gawain took it by the reins,
Which were made of silk, and led it
Directly to the tree where he'd met
The girl staring at her mirror;
She'd let her cloak and her kerchief
Fall to the ground, the better
To show off both her face
And her figure. My lord Gawain
Brought her the palfrey, bridle
And saddle and all, and said,
"Come over here, girl,
And I'll help you up on your horse."
"By God," said the girl, "you'll never
Be able to boast, wherever
You go, that you held me in your arms.
If your naked hand so much
As touched anything I wore,
Or brushed against my skin,
I'd be dishonored and stained.
What a misfortune, if anyone
Knew or said you were actually
Able to touch my flesh!
I'd infinitely rather, believe me,
That here and now they cut
My skin and flesh to the bone!
Leave the palfrey to me:
Get back! By God, I know how
To mount. I don't need your help.
May God allow me, today,
To see you have what I hope
You will have. It would give me great pleasure!
But wherever you happen to go,
Never touch my clothes
Or my body: don’t even come close!
I’ll ride along behind you
Until I get to see you
Suffering pain, misfortune,
And sorrow on my account,
And I know I’ll see you twisting
And turning to get away,
But you’re going to die in the end!”

My lord Gawain listened
To every word the haughty girl
Spoke, but made no reply;
He gave her the palfrey, and she
Gave him back his horse.
Then Gawain bent down, intending
To take her cloak from the ground
Where she’d dropped it, and hand it to the girl,
Who only stared, neither
Afraid nor slow at heaping
Shameful abuse on a knight:
“Fellow,” she said, “what business
Of yours are my cloak and kerchief?
By God, I’m nowhere near
So naive as you think I am!
I’ve never asked you to offer
Me service, nor do I want to:
Your hands aren’t clean
Enough to handle my clothes,
Nor even touch my head.
Why do you have to grab at
Whatever comes close to my eyes
And my face and my mouth? God's
Own Son couldn't stand the thought
Of you in my service, and neither
Can I. I've no interest whatever!"

And then, having put on her cloak
And her kerchief, she mounted her palfrey,
Exclaiming, "Knight, go
Wherever you feel like going,
And I'll follow behind you until
I see you dishonored on my
Account—today, if it pleases
God." Gawain said nothing,
Not speaking a word. Completely
Shamed, he mounted and they left.
Riding with his head bent low,
He headed for the great oak tree
Where he'd left the girl and the dying
Knight, whose injuries were such
That he desperately needed a surgeon.
No one was better than Gawain
At the curing of all such wounds,
And seeing in a hedgerow an excellent
Herb, useful for the easing
Of pain, he went to pluck it.
And as soon as he had it, he went straight
To the oak tree, where he saw the girl
Overwhelmed with sorrow;
The moment she saw him, she said,
"My very dear sir, I believe
This knight of mine is dead,
For he hears and understands nothing."
Then my lord Gawain dismounted,
And felt the knight’s pulse, and found it
Still strong; neither his mouth
Nor his cheeks had gone cold. So he said,
“Girl, this knight is not dead,
But very much alive,
For his pulse and breathing are fine.
If none of his wounds is mortal,
I’ve brought him an excellent herb
Said to be very helpful
At stopping much of the pain
And suffering his injuries have caused,
For according to all the books
On these subjects nothing better
Has ever been found to put
On a wound. It’s written that it has
Such strength, indeed, that simply
Applying it to the bark of infected
Trees—not yet quite dry
And dead—will cause the roots
To grow again, and the trees
Will return to life, sprouting
New branches and leaves and flowers.
You needn’t worry about
Your lover dying, my dear,
Once this herb has been spread
On his wounds, and bandaged in place.
But I’ll need a well-made kerchief
To tie it on as I should.”
“I’ll give you one right away,”
She said with no hesitation,
“This one I’ve got on my head,
Since I have no other with me.”
She took the white and delicate Kerchief off her head,
And Gawain tore it, as he had to,
In order to make a bandage
That would hold the herb in place,
The girl offering him all
The help she knew how to give.
Then Gawain stood and watched
Until the knight sighed
And spoke: "May God reward
Whoever restored my power
Of speech. I was very afraid
Of dying before I was able
To confess. Devils were already
Standing in line, waiting
For my soul. Before my body is buried
I need to be confessed.
I know a priest, nearby,
And if I could find a horse
I could go and tell him all
My sins, and make my confession,
And then receive communion.
I wouldn't fear death, after that,
For then I'd be in a state
Of grace, fully confessed.
Do me this service, please,
If I'm not asking too much:
That squire, bouncing along
On his nag—may I use his horse?"
Hearing this, my lord
Gawain turned round and saw
A squire approaching. Who
Was he? I'm going to tell you.
His hair was red, thick,
Stiff, and standing straight up
Like a wild boar in anger,
As were his eyebrows, which seemed
To grow all the way down
His face, and over his nose,
Covering everything as far
As his huge and twisted mustache.
His mouth was narrow, his heavy
Beard was forked and curly.
His neck was short, his chest
Immense. Gawain intended
To greet him, asking if the knight
Could use his nag, but first
Spoke to the knight: "By God,
This squire is someone completely
Unknown to me. I'd rather
Give you seven horses,
If I had them here, than that nag,
Such as it is." "Sir,
Believe me, all he wants
Is to injure you, if he can."
Then Gawain stepped forward, facing
The onrushing squire, and asked him
Where he was going. And the squire,
Somewhat deficient in courtesy,
Replied, "Fellow, it's none
Of your business where I come from
Or go, or what road I follow!
May misfortune fall on your head!"
My lord Gawain paid him
What he deserved, for these words, 7020
Striking such a blow,
With his open palm (gloved
For combat), that the squire fell over
Backward and tumbled to the ground.
He kept trying to rise,
But instead—believe me!—dropped
On his face nine times over
(Or more), crawling on hands
And knees no farther than a spear-length.
When he could finally stand,
He said, "Fellow, you hit me."
"Indeed I did, and I meant to.
But I haven't done you much harm.
As God is my witness, I'm truly
Sorry I had to—but you spoke
Such stupid, insulting words."
"Hah! That won't stop me
From telling you what you deserve.
I don't accept your apology:
You'll lose your hand and your arm
For striking such a blow!"

As this was going on,
The wounded knight managed
To recover the power of speech,
And said to my lord Gawain,
"Never mind this squire, good sir.
Arguing with such a man
Can only bring you dishonor.
Ignore him, that's my advice:
Just bring me that nag he was riding,
And help this girl you see
Beside me ready her palfrey
For riding, and then, if you please,
Help her mount, for I wish
To stay here no longer. I'll leave,
Riding off, if I possibly
Can, on that nag and seeking
Someone who can give me confession,
For how can I be at ease
Before I've been able to confess
And my soul has received the last rites?"
Gawain immediately fetched
The nag, and brought it to the knight,
Whose eyesight had been fully restored;
He was able, for the very first time,
To see my lord Gawain—
And immediately knew who he was.
Meanwhile, Gawain was assisting
The girl, politely helping her,
As courtesy required he should,
To mount her Norwegian palfrey.
And while he assisted the girl,
The knight took Gawain's horse,
Mounted it, and began to make
Gringolet jump about.
Gawain watched him galloping
Up and down the hill,
Shocked and amused at once,
And finally said, laughing,
"By God, good knight, this
Is really foolish, making
My horse leap like that.
Dismount, and let me take him,
For you're likely to hurt yourself,
Making your wounds reopen."
He answered, "Gawain, be quiet.
You might as well take the nag,
For now you've lost your horse.
I made him jump on purpose,
And now I'll take him for my own."
"Ah! I came here to help you,
And you play me such a dirty trick!
Stealing my horse, like this,
Is treachery; that's what it is!"
"Gawain, with just that same malice,
No matter what it cost me,
I'd rip your heart right out
Of your belly with my own two hands."
"You make me think of a proverb,"
Replied Gawain. "The reward
For doing good deeds is a broken
Neck. All the same,
I'd like to know why you want
Both my heart and my horse.
So far as I know, I've never
In all my life tried to hurt you.
How have I deserved
Such behavior, here, at your hands?
Have I ever seen you before?"
"Oh yes, Gawain, you saw me,
And you covered me with shame.
Don't you remember the man
You forced into eating with dogs,
And kept me there for a month,
And caused me such pain, my hands
Bound behind my back?
That was wild behavior,
As perhaps your shame will show you,
Now.” “It's you, then, Gregorias”—
You who raped a girl
For the sheer fun and pleasure of it.
But you ought to know King Arthur's
Country protects its girls
And guarantees their virtue.
The king gives them safe-conduct,
Allowing them freedom of movement.
I can't believe—and I don't!—
That because you were treated badly,
And deserved it, you're harming me,
Because what I did was lawful,
Established by law, and observed
All over Arthur's lands.”
“Gawain, how well I remember
What you like to call your 'justice.'
Let it be justice for you
As well. Now it's your turn.
I'm taking your Gringolet:
It's the best revenge I can manage.
You beat that squire. Go steal
His horse: that's the best you can do!”

And then Gregorias left him,
And the girl who loved Gregorias
Followed him on her palfrey,
Riding very rapidly,
Which made the other girl

*Guinganbresil's brother
Laugh, and she said, maliciously,
“Ah fellow, fellow, what now?
Isn’t it time to admit
That the world still holds its share
Of fools? Following you
Is such pleasure! As God is my witness,
You couldn’t talk me into turning
Back: I’m so glad to be here!
I regret, however, that the nag
The squire so thoughtfully left you,
And you’ll be riding, can’t really
Be a donkey. I’d like that, you know,
For then you’d truly be shamed.”
Gawain quickly mounted
The stupid, slow-footed nag:
There was nothing better to be had.
It was truly a terrible horse,
With a spindly neck and huge
Head, great drooping ears,
So gap-toothed with age that its sagging
Chops couldn’t get closer
Than two whole fingers of touching
Each other—a scrawny, feeble
Beast, with cloudy eyes,
Clawlike hooves, its flanks
Worn down by digging spurs,
A scraggly mane, a bony
Spine. Frayed rope
Was all the bridle and reins
It had; the saddle was bare,
As old as the animal itself,
And the spurs so thin and stretched
They could bear almost no weight.
“Ah, that’s the way to go!”
Exulted the wasp-tongued girl.
“How delighted I’ll be, now,
To follow wherever you go;
How right it all seems that I cheerfully
Trail along behind you
For a week, or two, or even
Three, or perhaps a month.
Now you’re properly equipped,
Mounted on the perfect steed!
Now you’ve become an appropriate
Guide for leading a girl around!
At last I’ll have the pleasure
Of seeing you come to grief.
Why not prod your horse
A bit, spur it on—
Don’t be afraid: you’ve got
A splendid stallion, light
On its feet! Don’t worry yourself:
I won’t be leaving until
I see you properly shamed.
I’m sure you won’t disappoint me.”
He answered, “My dear sweet friend,
You can say whatever you like,
Though once a girl has reached
The age of ten she shouldn’t
Be guilty of such naughty talk,
But try to exhibit her excellent
Breeding and courteous manners.”
“Oh exceedingly unfortunate knight,
Don’t try to give me lessons:
Just shut your mouth and ride,
For now you've achieved exactly
The state I was hoping to see."
They rode along until evening,
And both of them held their tongues.
He led the way, and she followed,
Though he found it hard to lead,
Riding the horse he had,
For nothing he did could make it
Gallop. It went on walking
Along; when he tried to use
The spurs, it trotted so hard
That his guts shook; and finally
He simply let it walk,
Since walking was all it could do.
Riding this nag, he crossed through
Barren and lonely forests,
And at last arrived at open
Fields along a deep-flowing
River, so broad a stream
That not even a catapult
Could hurl a stone across,
And no crossbow could fire so far.
On the opposite bank sat a castle,
Beautifully built, exceedingly
Strong, and obviously rich:
I'm obliged to tell you the truth.
Constructed high on a cliff,
The castle was so elaborately,
Richly fortified
That no one living has seen
Its like, a palace built
Entirely of brown marble
And set in native rock.
More than five hundred windows
Were open, filled with ladies
And girls, all of them looking
Down at the meadows and brilliantly
Flowering gardens spread
Before their eyes. Most
Of the girls were dressed in satin,
Though some were wearing tunics
Of many different colors,
And gold-embroidered silk.

The girls stood in those open
Windows, displaying their shining
Hair and graceful bodies,
For even from the ground one saw them
Well, from their waists to their heads.
And that most malicious creature
In the world, the girl that Gawain
Was leading, went straight to the river,
Stopped, descended from her white-footed
Palfrey, and found a boat
Moored at the bank, locked
To a chain attached to a nearby
Boulder. An oar was lying
In the boat, and on the block
Of stone was the key that opened
The lock. The girl got into
The boat—she and the savage
Heart that beat in her belly—
And her palfrey got in, too,
For he’d done this many times.
"You," she said to Gawain. You and that miserable horse Of yours, as skinny as a bird, And cast off that chain: you're about To be in plenty of trouble Unless you quickly cross This river and get to safety."

"Really?" he said. "And why?"

"You haven't seen what I see?" She said. "If you had, knight, I think you'd be moving faster."

Then Gawain quickly turned His head and, seeing a knight Riding across the fields, Fully armed, asked The girl, "Tell me, if you please, Just who that might be, riding Toward us, mounted on my horse, Stolen away by that traitor Whose wounds I cured this morning?"

"In the name of Saint Martin,* I'll gladly Tell you," said the girl. "But let me Remind you, I'd never give you So much as a hint, if I thought My words would do you a bit Of good. But since I'm sure The information won't help you, I won't conceal it. That knight Is the nephew of your friend Gregorias,

* Model of Christian charity, especially venerated in the city of Troyes
Who's sent him riding after you,
And the reason I tell you this
Is simply because you asked me.
His uncle's ordered him
To chase you down and kill you,
Then bring him your head as a gift.
And now, as I said, get down
Off your horse, unless you're anxious
For death. Hurry and get in here!"
"Girl, I'll never run
From him. I'll wait till he comes."
"I won't even try to stop you,"
Said the girl. "I've nothing more
To say. But what a show
You'll put on, what a display
For all those pretty girls,
Watching from those windows up there!
They've come there just for you,
And you'll give them such a good time!
How happy they're going to be,
Seeing you beaten to the ground!
Ah, you look so much
Like a knight desperate for combat,
No matter what it might cost him!"
"My girl, I've no intention
Of running. I'll go to meet him.
And if I can get back my horse
I'm going to be wonderfully happy."

Then Gawain quickly turned
The old nag's head toward
The knight, who was galloping at him
Down the riverbank. And Gawain
Let his opponent come
To him, setting himself
In his stirrups so firmly that they broke,
Making the saddle bow bend
To the left, while he leaned
To the right. How else could he hope
To meet the knight, since his nag
Couldn't be moved, no matter
How hard the spurs might dig in?
“Lord!” he said. “Whoever
Wants to distinguish himself
In combat shouldn't be riding
On a nag!” And the knight came dashing
Toward him on a quick-footed, healthy
Horse, and hit Gawain
Such a blow with his lance that it bent
And broke in two, though the point
Remained in Gawain's shield.
But my lord Gawain struck
With his sword, on the upper rim
Of the other's shield, and smashed
Through shield and mail shirt, too,
And toppled him down on the sand.
Gawain reached out, grasped
The reins, and jumped on Gringolet's
Back. And how happy he was!
Nothing he'd ever done
In all his life had filled
His heart so full of joy!
He turned and went back to the girl,
Whose escort he'd been, but couldn't
Find her anywhere in sight:
She and the boat were both gone,
And he felt a certain chagrin,
Losing her in such a way,
Not knowing what might have happened.

And as he thought of the girl,
He saw a barge approaching,
Poled by a sturdy boatman
Who was clearly coming from the castle.

And when he reached the shore
The boatman called, "Sir,
I bring you greetings from those girls
Up there, who also ask you
To pay me for services rendered.
So pay me now, if you please."

And Gawain replied, "May God
Bless those beautiful girls,
And you along with them, my friend.
You won't be cheated, on my
Account, of anything you're due.
Believe me, I'll do you no wrong.
But what sort of fee are you owed?"

"Sir, you've fought and beaten
A knight, right here on this shore,
Whose horse belongs to me.
If you'd like to treat me fairly
You'll let me have that horse."

Said Gawain, "My friend, that
Would cost me far too much:
I'd be forced to travel on foot."

"Ha, good knight! Those girls
You see up there will take you,
Right away, for a most
Unfaithful man. You've got
To pay me my fee. No one,
So far as I know, has ever
Heard of a combat fought
On this shore without the horse
Of the beaten knight going
To me. At least, if I don't get
The horse, I've got to get
The knight.” “Take him, my friend,
And gladly. Keep him, if you like.”
“By God, he's not so badly
Hurt,” said the boatman. “So I can’t.
I think you'd better get him
For me yourself. You're strong
Enough to fetch him, if he starts
Fighting again. If
You're brave enough, go get him
And bring him here to me,
And that will settle your debt.”
“My friend, if I dismount
And fetch him, can you be trusted
To watch my horse for me?”
“Yes, indeed,” was the answer.
“I'll be his faithful watchman,
And gladly give him back:
Believe me, as long as I live
I'll never do you any wrong.
You have my word, on my honor.”
“That's good enough for me,”
Said Gawain. “I take you at your word.”
He got down from his horse at once,
As the boatman had asked, and gave
The man his horse’s reins.
And then, his sword unsheathed,
My lord Gawain approached
The beaten knight, who wanted
No more fighting, badly
Wounded and bleeding freely.
As Gawain came cautiously toward him
He said, terribly frightened,
“Sir, to tell you the truth,
I’m seriously hurt, and not
Anxious to suffer any more.
I’ve lost a gallon of blood:
I throw myself on your mercy.”
“All right. Get up,” said Gawain.
The knight was barely able
To stand. Then Gawain led him
To the boatman, who thanked him for the gift.
Then Gawain asked him if he knew
What might have happened to the girl
He’d brought there with him, and where
She might have vanished. The boatman
Replied, “Sir, don’t worry
Yourself about that girl
(Who’s not, in fact, a girl
Any more), who’s worse than Satan
Himself. Ah, how many
Knights have had their heads
Cut off, right here, because
Of her! Trust me, sir,
Just come and lodge with me,
Tonight, in my very own house.
It won’t be to your advantage
To linger long on these shores,
For this is a savage land
Where incredible things can happen.”
“My friend, since that’s your advice,
I’m much inclined to accept it,
No matter what may come.”

So he did as the boatman suggested,
Stepping on board the boat
And taking his horse with him.
And they crossed to the other side.
The boatman’s house was near
The river—so rich and fine
A dwelling, so full of comforts,
That a count could have slept in its rooms.
The boatman led in his guest
And his captive, immensely happy
To have them in his house. My lord
Gawain was served as a knight
Of his fame and courage deserved:
He dined on pigeon and pheasant,
On venison and partridge,
And drank clear unmixed wine,
Both white and red, both new
And aged. The boatman was as pleased
With his prisoner as with his guest.
Once they had eaten, the table
Was removed, and they washed their hands.
Gawain’s lodging, that night,
And his host, were all he could want;
The service he was offered, and received,
Was deeply appreciated.
Next day, as soon as the light
Of dawn could be seen, Gawain
Arose early, as he ought to
And as he always did.
And strictly for love of his guest
The boatman arose with him,
And they stood together in a little
Tower, looking out
Its windows. Gawain stared
At the lovely country around them,
Seeing forest and fields
And the castle high on its cliff.
“If it please you, my host,” he said,
I’d like to have you tell me
Who is the lord of this land,
And whose is that castle over there.”
And then his host replied,
“Sir, I don’t know.” “You don’t?
I find that wonderfully strange,
For you’ve told me there are soldiers in there,
And you do business with the castle,
And you still don’t know its lord!”
“Truly,” said the boatman, “I neither
Know nor ever knew.”
“Tell me, then, good host,
Who keeps and defends the castle.”
“Sir, it’s very well guarded,
Five hundred bows and crossbows
Always ready to shoot.
And any invader would find
They’d go on shooting forever
And wouldn’t get tired, for they’re fired
By extremely ingenious machines.
And I also know this: they're governed
By a queen, a wise and noble
Lady from a royal family.
She came here, with all the gold
And silver treasure she owned,
In order to live in this land,
And built herself the powerful
Castle and noble palace
You see for yourself right there.
And she brought with her a lady
She loves so deeply she calls her
A queen, and says she's her daughter,
And that one has a daughter,
Too, who's never dishonored
Or shamed her family name.
She's said to be the most beautiful,
Best-bred girl in the world.
Art and enchantment both
Protect the great hall of that castle,
And I know enough about it
To tell you the entire story.
The queen brought here a learned
Astronomer priest, who performed
Such incredible feats of magic
In that palace that any knight
Who so much as dared to try
Couldn't get in and couldn't
Stay alive, if he did,
Not for a minute, unless
He'd lived a life free
Of cowardice and devoid of any
Sin, or lying, or greed.
No coward or traitor could survive,
No man of bad faith or deceit.
They'd all be dead on the spot,
And nothing on earth could save them.
There are plenty of young men in that castle,
Gathered from around the world,
Who can handle weapons well,
Perhaps five hundred in all,
Some of them bearded, some not:
A hundred quite without beards,
A hundred who've begun to grow them,
A hundred who shave and shape
Their beards every week,
A hundred whose beards are white
As wool, a hundred all gray.
Many old ladies live there,
Women without a husband
Or lord, wrongly deprived
Of the lands and honors they held
Now that their husbands are dead.
There are orphaned girls, too,
Who live with the two queens
And are treated with great respect.
People like that have come
To this castle, and remained, living
In wonderfully foolish hope
That someday, somehow, a knight
Will come and rescue them all,
Providing husbands for the girls,
Giving the ladies back
Their honors, and making the boys
Knights. But oceans will turn
To ice before any
Such knight will ever appear,
Able to be at once
Wise and generous, quite
Without greed, handsome, brave,
And faithful, unable to do evil.
If such a knight exists,
And comes there, he could rule that castle,
And give the ladies their lands,
And turn war into peace.
The girls would all get married,
And the boys would turn into knights
And quickly, easily lift
Away the magic that binds them."

My lord Gawain liked
This story; it pleased him immensely.
“Good host,” he said, “Let’s
Come down from this tower. Bring me,
Please, my horse and my armor:
I can’t linger any longer,
I’ve got to leave.” “But where?
Stay, Lord love you, at least
Another day or two.”
“Not this time, good host. But blessings
On this house of yours! As God
Is my witness, I need to go.
I want to see those ladies
And the magic ruling that place.”
“Oh no, sir! In the name of God,
That’s foolish: don’t do it. Listen
To me, please, and stay here.”
“Good host,” said Gawain, “don’t take me
For a shiftless, faithless coward!
May God give me up for lost
If I listen to such advice!"
"Sir, I'll hold my tongue:
I can see my words would be wasted.
You want to go, and you'll go,
And although it gives me pain
It seems only right that I guide you
On your way, for no one else
Could help you do what you wish to.
But let me ask for one favor."
"And that, good host? Tell me."
"Promise me, first, you'll grant it."
"I'll do as you wish, good host,
Provided it's nothing shameful."
Then the order was given to lead
His horse from the stable, completely
Equipped for combat, and Gawain
Called for his weapons, and his sword,
And spear, and shield were brought.
He put on his armor, and mounted,
Sat high on his saddle and waited
While the boatman made himself ready
To mount his palfrey, prepared
To lead his guest as he'd promised,
Though the destination was not one
He liked. They reached the bottom
Of the stairs in front of the palace,
Where they found a cripple sitting,
Alone, on a bundle of reeds,
Whose wooden leg was silver
Wound around with gold
And bespangled all over with golden
Rings and precious stones.
Nor was he sitting at rest,
For his hands held a pocket-knife
And were busy polishing an ash-wood
Wand. He said nothing
As they walked right by him, and they
Said not a word to him.
And the boatman, coming close
To my lord Gawain, said, “Sir,
Do you know who this cripple is?”
“He’s wooden leg isn’t wood,
By God,” Gawain replied,
“And it’s quite incredibly lovely!”
“Oh Lord,” said the boatman, “he’s rich,
All right, he earns a good living!
If you hadn’t come with me
As your guide, let me tell you, you’d hear
A good many things you had
No interest at all in hearing!”
Then on they went, together,
Until they came to the palace;
The entryway was high,
The gates beautiful and rich,
Every nail and every
Hinge made of gold (according
To the story). One gate was ivory,
Carved all down its length;
The other was ebony, equally
Elaborately worked, and both
Were ornamented with gold
And all sorts of costly gems.
The ground was paved in green
And red, violet and blue—
And all these different colors
Extremely beautiful, carefully
Worked, beautifully polished.
And there in the great hall
Was a bed, made without wood,
Fashioned only of gold—
Except for the ropes, which were spun
Entirely of the purest silver.

I'm not inventing this bed,
From every corner of which
There hung a bell. A great
Coverlet, all of silk,
Had been stretched across it, and in each
Of the bedposts great diamonds
Were set, glittering and gleaming
More brightly, and far more clearly,
Than four burning candles.
It was mounted on four sculpted
Heads, sucking in their cheeks,
And each of the heads sat
On a wheel, that turned so easily
It could be pushed by a single finger
From any part of the room
To another, in any direction.
Truly, no king or count
Has ever had such a bed,
Nor ever will. The palace
Walls were covered with brand-new
Tapestries, and the whole building,
Believe me, was solid as rock,
Constructed of quarried marble,
At the top of which were windows
Of such clear glass that, standing
Inside, one could easily see
Whoever approached the palace
And whoever entered its doors.
Parts of the glass were colored
With such magnificence
That no one could hope to describe them,
And I have no wish to attempt
That task, in any detail.
A hundred of the palace windows
Were open, four hundred were closed.
My lord Gawain was careful
To examine everything, looking
Here and there and every­
Where. And when he was done
He called the boatman to his side
And said, "Good host, I've seen
Nothing, here in this palace,
That could make anyone fear
To walk right in. Tell me,
Please, why you warned me
In such strong terms not
To pay a visit to this place.
I think I'll sit on this bed,
For a bit, and rest myself:
It's the best I've ever seen!"
"Ah, good sir! God keep you
From even going near it!
Merely approaching this bed
Would cause you to die the worst
Death that any knight
Could die." "And what should I do?"
"What? I'll tell you, good sir,
For I have some serious interest
In seeing you stay alive.
Just before you came here—
We were still at my house—I begged you
For a favor, but did not say what
I wanted. Now here's what I wish:
Go back to your own country.
Tell all your friends, and all
The people who live there, that you've seen
A palace so exceedingly rich
That no one can believe its wealth,
Neither you nor anyone else."
"I'd also have to say
That God hates me and I'm covered
With shame. Good host, I believe
You're trying to help me. But how
Can I give up my plan, how
Can I keep myself from sitting
On this bed or making a visit
To those girls I saw, yesterday,
Leaning out of their windows?"
Then his host spoke as harshly
As he could: "Those girls? You'll never
Get to see them! Take yourself
Out of here as fast
As you got yourself in, for you,
My good sir, haven't a chance
In the world of seeing them,
Though they can perfectly well
See you, through their clear glass windows—
Those girls, and ladies, and queens,
So help me God, are watching you
Now, from inside their rooms."
"Indeed," said Gawain. "Well,
At least I'll try the bed,
And if I never see
The girls, I still can't believe
That such a bed would exist
If no one was meant to use it,
Some noble man or highborn
Lady—and so, by my soul,
I'll sit there, no matter what happens!"
Seeing that Gawain couldn't
Be stopped, his host gave up.
Nor could he simply stand there
And watch whatever would happen
To his guest, so he turned to leave,
Saying, "Sir, your death
Will weigh on my heart. No knight
Has ever sat on that bed
Without being killed,
For this is a Magic Bed,
Never meant for sleeping
Or rest, not even for sitting:
No one can use it and live.
Your forfeiting your head
Without a hope of ransom
Or redemption fills me with sorrow!
And since neither my love
Nor my words are strong enough
To save you, my God have mercy
On your soul. My heart won't allow me
To stay here and see you die."
And then he left the palace,
And Gawain, armed and armored
As he was, his shield hung round
His neck, sat on the bed.
And then, at that very moment,
The bed's silver ropes
Groaned, and the bells rang out,
Echoing all through the palace,
And every window flew open
And wonders began to happen
As the magic started to work,
And arrows and crossbow bolts
Came flying through the windows,
Clattering against Sir Gawain's
Shield, though he saw no archers.
And this was exactly the enchantment,
For no one could ever see
Or understand where arrows
And bolts had come from, nor from
Whose bows they came, though you
Should have no trouble believing
The hail of falling missiles
Created a ghastly racket,
And for no amount of gold
Would Gawain have wanted to be there.
And then the windows reclosed
Themselves, without any human
Help, and Gawain began
To remove the arrows stuck
In his shield, many of which
Had pierced his skin as well;  
His wounds bled quite freely.  
But before he’d cleaned his shield  
Another ordeal occurred:  
A peasant came in and banged  
His club on a door, and the door  
Opened, and a terrible lion,  
Strong, and angry, and hungry,  
Came leaping into the room  
And, roaring wildly, attacked  
My lord Gawain, raking  
His shield with outstretched claws,  
As if it were soft as wax,  
And forcing Gawain to his knees.  
But the knight leapt right up  
And, drawing his sharp-edged sword,  
Struck so hard that he cut off  
The lion’s head and his two  
Front paws. And Gawain was happy,  
Seeing how one paw hung,  
Its claws buried in the wood,  
Along the outside length  
Of his shield, and the other hung,  
Again by its claws, on the inside.  
Having killed the lion,  
He resumed his seat on the bed—  
And his boatman-host, smiling  
Broadly, quickly came back  
To the palace, and found him quietly  
At rest. “Sir,” he said,  
“I’m sure your troubles are over.  
It’s safe for you to take off
Your armor: you who have come
And accomplished all these things
Have broken the enchantment forever,
And you'll be served, here
In this place, by young and old
Alike, may God be praised!"

Then squires crowded around him,
Dressed in beautiful clothes,
And all of them dropped to their knees,
Declaring, "Oh good sweet lord,
You are the one we have yearned for
And endlessly awaited, and we offer
You our service—although
We confess it seems to us
You've taken your time about coming!"
Then some of the squires began
Removing his armor, and others
Went out to his horse and led it
Off to the stable. And as
They were taking off his armor,
A strikingly beautiful, alluring
Girl entered the room,
A golden crown on her head,
Her hair easily as yellow-
Bright as gold, or even
Brighter. Her face was white,
But Nature itself had tinted
Her cheeks the purest red.
Truly, she was perfectly made,
Slender, and lovely, and straight.
And many noble, beautiful
Girls followed her in.
And then a young man entered,
Carrying a bundle of clothes,
A tunic, a coat, and a cloak.
The cloak was lined in ermine,
And in sable, blackberry-dark,
Covered over with cloth
Of a flaming red. My lord
Gawain was struck by the sight
Of these beautiful girls, and couldn't
Keep himself from jumping
To his feet, exclaiming, "Welcome,
Welcome! Girls, you're welcome!"
And the girl who'd entered first
Replied, "Good sir, my lady
The queen sends you her greeting.
She has commanded us all
To take you as our rightful lord
And come and offer our service.
Let me promise you, here
And now, my faithful service,
And these girls who have come here with me
Accept you as their lord, for whose
Arrival they have longed, and waited:
They are overjoyed to see,
At last, the best of all knights!
All that remains is for us
To serve you. My lord, we are ready."
They all fell to their knees,
Bowing their heads before
The man they knew they were meant
To serve and honor. My lord
Gawain immediately asked them
To rise, then once more seated
Himself, delighted to see them,
First because they were lovely,
And then because they'd made him
Their prince and ruler and lord.
He was happier than ever before
In his life, with these honors that God
Had given him. Then the same girl
Came forward: "Before she'll see you,
My lady—lacking neither
In courtesy or good sense—
Sends you this clothing, believing
As she does that you must have gone through
Immense troubles and labors,
Suffered endless hardships.
Put these on, and see
If they fit you as well as they should,
For he who is wise will be careful
Of catching cold, when he's been
So warm and his blood's stirred up.
Which is why my lady the queen
Sends you this ermine robe,
To protect you from becoming chilled,
For just as water will turn
To ice, blood will curdle
And clot, when shivering follows
On warmth." The most courteous man
In the world, Gawain answered,
"May my lady the queen enjoy
God's blessing—He in whom
All goodness inheres—and you, too,
Who speak, and act, and look
So well! The queen is wise,
As well as exceedingly courteous.
She understands exactly
What a knight needs, and should have,
And I thank her kindly for sending
Me these clothes to put on.
Please tell her how grateful I am."
"I will, sir, by God," said the girl,
"And very gladly. And now
We'll leave you. You may dress, and consider,
If you like, the sights of this country,
As seen from these windows. And then,
If you please, climb up that tower
And see the forests and meadows,
The rivers and fields, until
I return to bring you to my lady."
And then the girl left him,
And Gawain put on the beautiful,
Costly clothes he'd been brought,
Fixing them around his shoulders
With a buckle that hung from the neck.
And then he decided to see
What could be seen from the tower.
Walking with his boatman-host,
They climbed a spiral staircase
Attached to the outside of the palace,
And came to the top of the tower,
And saw the landscape around them,
Lovelier than words can describe.
My lord Gawain examined
The rivers and level fields,
The forests filled with animals,
Then turned to his host and said, 
"By God, good host, how wonderfully
Pleasant to be here, in a place
Furnished with such excellent hunting
As I see in these forests around us."
“Good sir,” the boatman replied,
“You’d better not talk about that,
For I’ve often heard it said
That whoever God so loves
That He makes him master of this place,
Protector and lord, needs
To understand that he’s bound
Never again to go out
Of this castle for any reason
Whatever. Which is why I say
You’d better not talk about hunting,
For this is where you must stay:
You’ll never leave here again.”
“Be quiet, good host!” said Gawain.
“You’ll turn me into a madman
If you go on talking like that!
In the name of God, I couldn’t
Stay here a week, not
To mention thousands of weeks,
If I thought I couldn’t go out
Whenever I wanted to go.”

Then he walked down from the tower,
And went back into the palace,
Worried and deep in thought.
And when the girl with whom
He’d spoken, before, returned,
She found him seated on the bed,
His face exceedingly grim.  
Seeing her come, my lord  
Gawain stood up, obviously  
Displeased, and greeted the girl  
With frigid, formal politeness.  
She saw at once how his face  
And expression had changed; it was perfectly  
Clear from both his look  
And his voice that something had made him  
Angry, but she did not dare  
To ask: “Sir, when you please,  
My lady will pay you a visit.  
And food is ready, too:  
You can eat whenever you like,  
Either down here or upstairs.”  
My lord Gawain replied,  
“Girl, I’ve no interest in eating.  
Food won’t help my body  
If I make the mistake of dining  
Before I hear the sort  
Of news that makes me happy,  
Which I very much need to hear.”  
Surprised and shocked, the girl  
Quickly went back to the queen,  
Who called her to her side and asked  
How the conversation had gone:  
“Granddaughter,” said the queen, “what mood  
Did you find him in, what state  
Of mind, this wonderful lord  
Our gracious God has given us?”  
“Alas, oh noble queen,  
I come to you dying of sorrow:
The only words I was able
To hear from our well-bred, noble
Lord were words of deep
Annoyance and anger. Nor
Can I tell you why, for he
Did not choose to explain and I
Do not know nor dared to ask.
But I surely can tell you that when
I met him the first time, earlier
Today, I found him so easy
And courteous of speech, so nobly
Bred, that I listened in rapture,
Savoring his looks and his bearing.
He seems utterly changed,
As if he wished he were dead,
Disliking whatever he sees."
"Don't worry yourself, granddaughter:
He'll be calm and peaceful again,
As soon as I go to see him.
There can't be any sorrow
So heavy on his heart that I can't
Replace it with pleasure and joy."
Then the queen prepared for her visit
To Gawain, in the palace great hall,
Taking with her the younger
Queen, who was happy to go,
And leading with them at least
A hundred and fifty girls
And as many pages and squires.
The moment my lord Gawain
Saw her coming, holding
The younger queen's hand, his heart
Told him, without any doubt,
That this was indeed the queen
Of whom he'd heard them speak.
Her long hair, hanging
Below her waist, was white,
Which helped him to guess who she was.
And she wore a white silk dress,
Finely embroidered with close-stitched
Golden thread. Seeing
The lady, Gawain didn't
Delay, but went to greet her.
And she greeted him: "Sir,
I'm your second in command, at this palace.
I grant you primary lordship,
Which you've so well deserved.
Do you come to us from King Arthur's
Household?" "My lady, I do."
"And are you, I should like to know,
One of the knights of the king's
Guard, so famous for their courage?"
"No, my lady." "I believe you.
And do you then, please tell me,
Belong to the knights of the Round
Table, the best in the world?"
"Lady," he answered, "I can't
Presume to call myself
The best, or one of the best,
But I'm not among the worst."
And then she said, "Good sir,
You speak with great courtesy,
Claiming neither the highest
Honors, nor admitting to the lowest."
Now tell me about King Lot:
How many sons does he have?"
"Four, my lady." "And their names?"
"My lady, Gawain is the oldest,
And the second is Agravain
The Proud, famous for his strong
Hands. And the names of the two
Youngest are Gerit and Gueret."
Then the queen spoke once more:
"Sir, as God is my witness,
Those are indeed their names.
I wish God had been pleased
To let them be with us, here!
Now tell me: do you know of a king
Named Urien?" "I do, my lady."
"Has he a son at court?"
"Two sons, my lady, both very
Well known. One’s name is Yvain,
Famous for courtesy and breeding.
I count the morning fortunate
When I see him, at the start of the day,
So wonderful are his wisdom and his manners.
The other’s name is also
Yvain, but he’s not a legitimate
Brother, so he’s known as the Bastard,
And he is so skilled at combat
That he beats whoever he fights with.
Both these knights are at court,
Courageous, and wise, and courteous."
"Good sir," she said, "now tell me
How Arthur is, these days?"
"Better than ever—exceedingly
Happy and healthy and strong."
"Ah, that's quite normal, for him!
Arthur is a child, you know.
He'll never change, for better
Or worse, if he lives to a hundred.
But there's one thing more I should like
To ask, if it's not too much:
Tell me, please, how the queen
Is keeping, and whether she's happy."
"Surely, my lady—so very
Courteous and lovely and wise
That God has made no model
For comparison, nor words to describe her.
Since He created the first
Woman from Adam's rib,
No woman has enjoyed such fame,
And so well deserves it, for she teaches
And instructs little children
Like the ripest and wisest sage
And, indeed, my lady the queen
Is everyone's model and teacher,
For she radiates goodness as she goes,
It's born and takes life from her.
No one leaves an audience
With her without good counsel,
For she understands what everyone
Needs, and what she must do
To make them happy. And no one
Ignores what my lady the queen
Advises, but honors her words,
Never leaving her company
Displeased, but with pleasure in their heart."
“Will it be different, with me?”

“Lady, it will be the same,
I think, for before I saw you
I felt indifferent to everything,
Sad and oppressed at heart.
And now I feel as happy
As a man can possibly be.”

“Sir,” said the white-haired queen,
“By the God who gave me life,
Let your joy be twice as great
And forever keep on increasing;
May you never be without it.
And now that you’re happy once more,
Let me remind you that your food
Is ready, if you’d care to dine:
You may eat wherever you please.
Your meal can be served right here
Or, if you’d rather, you’re welcome
To dine with me, in my rooms.”

“My lady, I’ve no desire
To eat anywhere but here:
I’ve been told that no knight
Has ever eaten in this hall.”

“No one, sir, who left here
Alive, or remained among
The living for many more minutes.”

“With your permission, then,
My lady, I’ll eat right here.”

“I grant it, sir, most gladly,
And you indeed will be
The first to dine in this hall.”

And then the queen left him,
Leaving behind her a hundred
And fifty of her loveliest girls,
Who remained to help him as he ate,
To serve and entertain him
In any way he wanted.
And more than a hundred servants
Were in attendance, some
With white hair, others whose hair
Was graying, and some with none,
Some with no beards or mustaches,
And two who stayed on their knees,
One to cut his meat,
The other to pour his wine.

My lord Gawain had his boatman-host eat beside him,
Nor did they eat in haste,
For the meal lasted even
Longer than the feasts of Christmas:
Blackest night had fallen,
And torch after torch had been burned,
By the time their dinner was done.
Words flowed freely, the whole
Time, and after eating,
And before they slept, they merrily
Danced and sang carols,
Sharing joy in their new
Lord, who was loved by all.
And he, when he went to sleep,
Stretched himself out on the Magic
Bed. And one of the girls
Brought him a pillow, so sleep
Would come more comfortably.
And when he woke, the next day,
He found they’d laid out garments
Of silk and ermine. His boatman-host
appeared beside
His bed, that morning, to help him
Rise, and wash, and dress.
And Clarissant, beautiful,
Wise, well-spoken, who’d been
The first to greet him, was there
Again. And then she went
To the queen, her grandmother, and was greeted
By a hug and a question: “My dear
Sweet girl, please tell me: Has
Our lord risen from his bed?”
“Oh yes, my lady, long since!”
“And where would I find him, my dear?”
“He went to the tower, but whether
He’s come back down I don’t know.”
“I plan to pay him a visit,
My dear. Pray that God
Will give him nothing but pleasure,
Today.” The queen hurried,
Anxious to see him once more,
And found him still in the tower,
Standing at one of the windows
And watching a girl, who was coming
Across a meadow, and with her
Was a knight wearing full armor.
Gawain watched from one window,
And his boatman-host from the next,
And there the queens, walking
Together, hand in hand,
Perceval

Found them staring intently
Down. "Good morning, my lord!"
Both queens said at once.
"May today be joyous and gay,
By the grace of our Father in Heaven,
Who made His daughter His mother!"
"Lady, may He who sent
His son for Christianity's
Glory give you great joy!
And now, if you wouldn't mind,
Come to this window, please,
And tell me, if you possibly can,
Who might that girl be,
Approaching with a knight whose shield,
I see, is painted in quarters?"
"I'll be very glad to tell you."
Said the queen, after looking down.
"That's the girl—and may Hell's
Fires burn her!—who led you
Here. Don't think about her:
She's full of evil and malice.
And please ignore, as well,
The knight with whom she's traveling,
For he is surely the most
Courageous knight in the world.
Fighting with him is no game,
For standing right here I've seen
Many fine knights killed
At his hands." "Lady," he said,
"I need to speak to that girl:
May I have your leave, if you please?"
"Sir, God does not wish me
To permit you to hurt yourself.
Let that wicked girl
Attend to her own affairs.
God does not want you to leave
This palace for such foolish business.
Nor should you go through these gates
Intending your own harm."

"Ah, my noble queen!
Your words are deeply troubling.
I'll feel myself most unfortunate,
If I can't go out of this castle.
Surely, God does not wish me
To be held captive for so long."

"Oh, lady!" cried the boatman.
"Let him do as he wishes.
If you hold him here against
His will, he may die of sorrow."

"Then I will allow him out,"
Said the queen, "but on this condition:
If God preserves him alive,
He'll return here tonight."

"My lady, don't worry," he said.
"I'll surely return, if I can.
But there's one thing more I need
To ask you, please: don't ask me
My name for another eight days.
Wait, if you possibly can."

"If that's what you want, I'll agree,"
Said the queen, "though it won't be easy.
I've no desire to displease you.
Had you not forbidden the question,
My lord, requesting your name
Would otherwise have been
The very first thing I did."
Then down from the tower he went,
And servants came running to bring him
His weapons, and put on his armor,
And they led out his horse and, completely
Equipped for battle, he mounted.
He rode straight to the gate,
Along with his boatman-host,
And both went on board a boat,
And were rowed so quickly across
That soon they reached the opposite
Bank, and Gawain disembarked.
And the unknown knight said
To the merciless, malicious girl,
"My dear, tell me: do you know
This knight I see over there,
Riding out against us?"
"Not who he is," she said,
"Except that, yesterday,
He was the one who led me
Here." "As God is my guide,"
He said, "that's the one
I want. I was very worried
He might have gotten away.
No knight born of a mortal
Mother can cross the Galloway
Border, if I see him riding
Along and confront him, and none
Can boast they ever came back,
Once they reached this country.
They're taken captive and held,
If God lets me see them.”
With that, and without a challenge
Or warning, the knight spurred
His horse and braced his shield,
And Gawain galloped to meet him,
Striking so hard with his spear
That he wounded his arm and his side,
But not badly enough to kill him,
For the mail shirt held, and only
The point of the lance pierced through
And went two fingers deep
Into his body, and he fell
To the ground. He was able to stand,
And did, but both his arm
And his side were bleeding freely,
And the sight gave him no pleasure.
He drew his sword, all the same,
But soon discovered he was far
Too weak to keep on fighting,
And was forced to ask for mercy,
Which Gawain granted, after asking
For his formal surrender, and the waiting
Boatman received the prisoner.
And then the malicious girl
Came down from her palfrey, and Gawain
Approached, and gave her a courteous
Greeting: “Remount, my dear,
For I’m not about to leave you.
I intend to take you with me
To the other bank, where I’m staying.”
“Hah!” she said. “Now
You’re so fierce and brave, knight!
You would have had a different
Combat on your hands, if my lover
Had not been afflicted by old
Wounds. You wouldn’t be so full
Of good humor, or so free with your boasts,
And your mouth would be stuffed by checkmate!
Just tell me the simple truth:
Can you really think you’re better
Than him, because you beat him?
You know quite well how often
The weaker beats the stronger.
But come away from the river
For a moment, and ride over
To that tree over there, and just
Do a little something
For me that my lover would have done,
Except that you’ve got him in your boat,
And if you can do it I’ll tell
The world you’re better than he is
And I’ll stop treating you as I have.”
“A simple request like that,”
He said, “shouldn’t be too hard
To fulfill. Gladly, my girl.”
And she answered, “May God keep me
From having to see you come back!”
And so he went with her,
She in the lead, and he
Behind, and the girls and ladies
Of the palace pulled out their hair,
And ripped and tore at their clothes,
Crying, “Alas, alas!
How can we live, seeing
The knight who should be our lord
Following her, who means
To bring him hurt and shame?
That evil girl, so full
Of malice, is conducting him
To a place no knight can return from!
Ah, how our hearts are hurting,
Though we'd thought ourselves so happy,
God having sent us this knight
So wise and good, lacking
Neither in strength nor in virtue,
Deficient in nothing we needed.”

And thus they expressed the sorrow
They felt, seeing their lord
Follow the wicked girl.
They both arrived under
The tree, and then my lord
Gawain said to her, “Girl,
Tell me, please, if now
I've done what you wanted me to do.
If there's anything else you want
I'll gladly do it, if I can,
Rather than disappoint you.”
And then the girl said,
“Do you see that deep ford,
With the steep banks on each side?
And the flowers over there,
In those trees and in those meadows?
My lover would take me down there
Whenever I wanted, so I
Could pick them.” “And how could he get there?
I can't even see the ford!
The river runs too high,
And the ford is surely too deep.
How could you possibly reach it?"
"You wouldn't dare, of course,"
Said the girl. "I already knew that.
I never thought you'd have
The courage to make the attempt,
Much less to succeed. That's known
As the Perilous Ford, and no
Merely ordinary knight
Can hope to get across it."
Quickly, my lord Gawain
Rode to the river bank,
And saw the depth of the water
Racing high against it.
But he saw, too, that the river
Was narrow, and remembered that his horse
Had jumped over many wider
Ditches; he also recalled
Hearing it said, here
And there and often, that whoever
Leapt the Perilous Ford
And crossed so deep a stream
Would win the greatest honor
In the world. He rode off
To the side and came galloping back
For the jump, but made the mistake
Of leaping a little too soon
And landed in the middle of the ford,
But his horse swam until
It found the ground with all
Four feet, and set itself firmly,
And jumped again, and this time
Landed up on the high
Bank, where it stood immobile,
Having crossed the river, indeed,
But exhausted and unable to move.
My lord Gawain, aware
Of the horse's fatigue, knew
That something had to be done.
Quickly dismounting, he unbuckled
The saddle straps, removed
The saddle, then laid it down
To dry. Removing the saddle-
Cloth as well, he rubbed
The horse's back and sides
And legs, until it was dry.
Then he put the saddle back
And mounted, riding slowly
Along until he saw
A solitary knight
Hunting with a hawk. Three bird dogs
Lay in the meadow beside him.
This was so handsome a knight
That words could never describe him.
As my lord Gawain approached,
He greeted the hunter, saying,
"Good sir, may God, who made you
The loveliest creature in the world,
Give you good hunting today."
And the other knight replied,
"But it's you who are handsome, and good!
But tell me, if you please, why
You've left that wicked girl
Alone back there. She had
An escort: what happened to him?"
"Indeed," said Gawain. "A knight
With a shield painted in quarters
Was with her, when I met them." "And what
Did you do?" "We fought, and I beat him."
"And what's become of that knight?"
"I gave him to my boatman, who's told me
My prisoners belong to him."
"He's told you the truth, good sir.
I once was that girl's lover,
But not because she ever
Really loved me, or ever
Acknowledged me as her lover,
Or let me so much as kiss her,
Believe me, unless I used force.
I never came close to having
What my heart longed for, from her:
But like it or not, I loved her.
I took her away from another
Knight. I killed him and put
Myself to the trouble of serving
Her. It did me no good:
She left me as soon as she could,
And went with a new lover,
The one you took her away from.
And he's no knight to fool with,
By God, but strong and brave—
And yet, he never dared
Come riding anywhere
He thought he might meet me.
But you, just now, have done
Something no one has ever
Attempted, and earned for yourself,
With great courage and ability,
The highest reward of fame
And honor the world can offer.
Jumping across the Perilous
Ford was a feat of immense
Virtue—and let me say
Again, never before done.”
“Sir,” said Gawain, “then the girl
Told me a lie, saying—
And I thought she was speaking the truth—
That her lover crossed it every
day, for love of her.”
“The liar! Is that what she said?
She ought to be drowned in that ford
For telling you such nonsense:
She’s full of the devil, all right.
She certainly hates you, that’s clear,
And hoped it was you who would drown
don that deep and treacherous
Water—may God confound her!
Good sir, now give me your word,
We two will make a pact:
Whatever you feel like asking
I’ll be obliged to answer,
For better or for worse,
If you ask me something I know.
And you’ll do the same for me,
And never tell me any lies,
No matter what I ask you:
If you know the truth, you’ll tell me.”
Both of them gave their word,
And the first to ask his questions
Was my lord Gawain. "Sir,
He said, "I'd like to know
The name of that city I see
Over there, and who is its lord?"
"My friend," was the answer, "I'll tell you
The whole truth. That city
You see belongs to me;
I hold it free and clear.
My only debts are to God.
And its name is Orquelain."
"And yours?" "I'm Grinomalant."
"Sir, I've certainly heard
Of you, and your courage and valor,
And the size of the lands you hold.
But what's the name of that girl
Of whom no one speaks well,
However far and wide
One goes, as you say yourself?"
"Oh, I can testify
That the further away from her,
The better! She's haughty and evil.
Which is why her name is the Proud
Beauty of Logres. She was born there,
But taken away as a child."
"And her lover's name, who was led
Away, like it or not,
A captive in my boatman's prison?"
"As I've told you, my friend, this
Is a truly remarkable man,
And his name is the Haughty Knight
Of the Rock in the Narrow Road,
Who guards the gate to Galloway.”
“And what is the name of that splendid,
Wonderfully beautiful castle
On the other bank, where I ate
And drank last night, and came from
This morning?” And Grinomalant
Turned away, as if
In sorrow, and started to leave.
But Gawain called him back:
“Sir, speak to me, please!
Remember the pledge we made!”
And Grinomalant stopped, turned
His head to the side, and said,
“May the very moment I saw you
And made you the promise you speak of
Be cursed, and damned in shame!
Leave me: I free you from your promise,
And you release me from mine,
For I’d meant to ask you the news
From that castle on the other bank,
But you seem to know as much
About it as you know of the moon!”
“Sir,” said Gawain, “I spent
The night there, I slept in the Magic
Bed—which wasn’t like
Any bed I know of!”
Grinomalant said, “Sir,
This is astonishing news.
You make me very happy,
Telling these lies I’ve just heard;
I listen to you as I listen
To other fine storytellers!
You're clearly a minstrel; I see that.
Alas, I took you for a knight,
Someone who might have done
Courageous deeds down there.
But try to tell me the truth:
Have you ever been a knight? Have you
Been witness to things worth describing?"
My lord Gawain replied,
"Sir, when I sat on that bed
The palace fairly exploded—
Don't think I'm telling you lies!—
The very bed ropes were moaning,
And bells were ringing like mad,
Hanging as they were from that bed.
Then all the windows, which were closed,
Suddenly opened by themselves,
And steel-tipped arrows and crossbow
Bolts struck my shield,
Which also received the claws
Of a huge lion, with a mane,
Who'd been lying in wait for a very
Long time, chained in a room.
That lion was directed at me
By a peasant, who freed him from his chains.
The lion came leaping at me,
And struck at my shield with his paws,
But his sharp claws stuck
In the wood, he couldn't retract them.
If you think I'm telling you tales,
Look: his claws are hanging
Right here! God be thanked,
I cut off his head, and his paws.
Here's the proof: can you see it?"
Grinomalant dismounted
And quickly fell to his knees,
His head bowed, his hands
Bent in supplication,
Begging pardon for his folly.
"I forgive you. Of course!" said Gawain.
"Remount, if you please." And he did,
Though very ashamed of himself:
"Sir, as God is my Saviour,
I couldn't believe that any
Knight from far or near
Could ever have earned the enormous
Honor you've won! Tell me,
Please: did you happen to see
The white-haired queen, and did
You ask her who she was
And where she came from?" "I saw her,
And we spoke, but I never thought
To ask." "I'll tell you, then,"
Said Grinomalant. "That white-haired
Queen is King Arthur's mother."
"By the faith I owe to God,"
Said Gawain, "Arthur's mother
Died a great many years
Ago—at least sixty,
I think, but perhaps even more."
"But she is truly his mother.
When Uther Pendragon, his father,
Was laid in the earth, Queen
Ygerne came to this country,
Bringing with her all
Her treasure, and then she built
A castle high on that rock,
And that rich and beautiful palace
You've seen for yourself. You've also
Seen, I know you have,
That other great lady, that other
Queen, the beautiful woman
Who once was the wife of King Lot
And mother—I curse the name!—
Of Gawain." "Gawain, my dear sir,
Is someone I know quite well,
And he has not had his mother
For twenty years or more."
"But all the same, it's true.
She came here after her mother,
Pregnant with a healthy baby—
The noble, beautiful girl
I love, and Gawain's sister.
Sir, I tell you no lies:
May God give Gawain endless
Shame! Not even the Lord
Himself could save that man,
If I had him here in front
Of me, standing where you are:
I'd cut off his head—like that!
His sister couldn't help him:
I hate him so much I'd tear
The heart right out of his belly."
"Clearly," said Gawain, "you don't
Love the way I do!
If I loved a girl, or a lady,
For the sake of her love I'd love
Her family, too, and serve them.”
“You’re right; I can’t disagree.
But when I think of Gawain
I remember his father killing
Mine, and how can I wish him
Well? And Gawain himself
Killed one of my cousins,
A brave and valiant knight.
I’ve never yet had a chance
To work the revenge I long for.
But you can do me a service:
The next time you go to that castle,
Carry this ring to my love,
On my behalf. And when
You put it in her hands, I wish
You’d tell her my love is true,
And I trust her love so much
I believe she’d rather see
Her brother Gawain die
Horribly than I have a scratch
On the littlest toe of my foot.
Give my love my greetings
As you give her, from me, this ring,
For I am her true belovèd.”
Gawain put the ring
On the smallest finger of his hand,
And said, “Sir, I must tell you
Your belovèd must be courteous and wise,
Born of the noblest blood,
And beautiful, charming, and gracious,
If she agrees with all
You've told me, in every detail."
"Sir," was the answer, "you'll do me
A great favor, I assure you,
If you bring that ring to my dear
Belovèd, for whom my love
Is immense, as a present from me.
And in return for that favor
I'll tell you, exactly as you asked,
The name of that castle. It's called
(You seem not to have heard this)
The Rock of Champguin, and its walls
Are lined with beautiful red
And scarlet cloth, in which
They do much business, buying
And selling.

"I've answered whatever
You've asked, without any lies;
You've given me useful news.
Is there anything else you wish?"
"Only permission to leave you."
"Before I let you go,
Good sir, tell me your name,
If you've no objection." "None,"
Said my lord Gawain. "I've never
Considered my name a secret.
I am the man you hate
So much, I am Gawain."
"You are Gawain?" "Indeed
I am, King Arthur's nephew."
"By God, you're either incredibly
Brave, or insanely foolish,
To tell me your name, in the face of
My hatred. How I regret
Not having my helmet laced
And my shield hung from my neck,
For had I my weapons and armor,
As you do, rest assured
I'd quickly cut off your head:
I'd never spare you, Gawain!
If you're brave enough to wait
Right here, while I fetch my armor,
I'll hurry back, and we'll fight.
I'll bring three or four men
To witness our combat. Or,
If you wish, we can do it differently,
Waiting exactly a week
And then returning here
To this place, armored and ready,
And you can have the king
And queen to watch, and whoever
You like, and I'll bring my people
From all around the country,
And then the battle between us
Won't be a private affair
But in front of all who wish
To watch it, as public as it ought
To be, with two such knights
As our reputations make us:
Other knights, and ladies,
Should enjoy the right to behold us.
And then, when one of us loses,
The whole world will know it,
And the winner will earn honor
Infinitely greater, when the news
Perceval

Is much more widely known."
"Sir," said my lord Gawain,
"I'll gladly oblige you, and require
A good deal less, if a battle
Can be readily arranged, and you want one.
If, however, amends
Can be made for whatever wrong
I may have done you, I suspect
Our mutual friends can find
A solution." "I see no reasonable
Way," was the answer, "if you aren't
Willing, or able, to fight me.
I've given you two clear choices:
Pick whichever you want.
If you dare, just wait right here,
And I'll go and get my armor.
Or you can tell your friends
To be here in exactly a week.
I've heard King Arthur's court
Is always at Orcanie,
For Pentecost, and that's
A ride of at most two days.
Your messenger should find
The king and his people quite ready.
Send him: as everyone knows,
Time is worth more than money."
"God save me," said Gawain, "surely
The court will be there, as you say.
Your information's correct.
I hereby give you my word
I'll send someone tomorrow,
Before I close my eyes."
"And now, Gawain, I'd like
To show you the best bridge
In the world. This river's too deep
And dangerous for anyone to cross it
Alive, and it can't be jumped."
My lord Gawain replied
He had no interest in bridges
Or fords, whatever they were like:
"That wicked girl, who's waiting
For me to return, as I promised
To do, will tell the world
I'm a coward, unless I come back."
A flick of his spurs, and his horse
Leaped straight across the river,
As if it were only a ditch.
Seeing him safely across,
The girl, whose tongue had soundly
Whipped him back and forth,
Dismounted, tied her palfrey
To a tree, and came walking toward him,
Looking completely changed.
Her greeting was modest and polite,
And she said, at once, that she meant
To ask forgiveness for her wrongs,
And for all the pain she'd caused him.
"Good sir," she said, "give me
The chance to explain just why
I've shown such arrogance
To all the knights who've met me.
I hope you'll let me tell you.
The knight you spoke to, on the other
Bank (may God destroy him!),
Was wasting his love on me: 8935
He loved me, but I hated him!
What pain and suffering he caused me,
Killing—I’m telling the truth—
The man I truly loved!
He thought he could win my heart 8940
By showering me with honor.
He never succeeded; he couldn’t.
I fled him, the very first moment
I could, and went, instead,
With the knight from whom you took me 8945
Today—who’s worth about
As much to me as a clove
Of garlic! After my original
Lover was taken by death,
Grief drove me insane, 8950
And I spoke with such wild pride,
Such wicked, half-crazed folly,
That it made no difference to me
Who might suffer for my words.
Indeed, I did it all 8955
Deliberately, hoping
I’d find someone so easily
Angered I’d drive him to distraction
And he’d cut me to little pieces:
For a long, long time I’ve wanted 8960
To be dead. Now deal with me
However justice may require,
So girls, hearing my story,
Won’t shame and slander knights.”
“My dear,” he said, “who 8965
Am I to bring you to justice?
Our Lord in Heaven won't like it,
If punishment comes from me.
Hurry, and mount your horse,
And we'll ride to the castle I came from.
My boatman's waiting, there
On the bank, to take us across."
"My lord, I'll do whatever
You ask," replied the girl.
And then she mounted her little
Palfrey, with its flowing mane,
And they rode to where the boatman
Was waiting, and without any trouble
Or fuss he took them across.
And all the ladies and girls
Who'd so much mourned his going
Saw him coming back.
And so did the pages and squires,
Who'd been half-mad with grief.
All were happier, now,
Than they'd ever been in their lives.
The queen was seated in front
Of the palace, awaiting their coming,
Surrounded by her girls, singing
And dancing all together,
In order to express their pleasure—
Singing and dancing carols,
Moved by their joy and relief.
He came, and dismounted in their midst.
And the ladies and girls, joined
By the two queens, hugged him,
And told him how happy they were,
And celebrated as they took off
His armor, piece by piece.
And the girl he'd brought there with him
Was also received with great joy,
All of them wanting to serve her,
But on his behalf, not hers.
They paraded them into the palace,
Where everyone inside was seated
And waiting, and Gawain took
His sister to sit beside him
On the Magic Bed, and said,
Carefully lowering his voice,
"My dear, I bring you a little
Ring from the land on the other
Bank, a lovely green emerald.
A knight sent it, for love
Of you, and sends you his greetings,
And declares you his dearly beloved."
"How nice, good sir," she said,
"But I cannot love him very much,
Knowing him only at a distance,
Nor has he ever seen me
Except from across the river.
But I know he's long since offered
His love (for which I thank him),
And even if he hasn't come here
He's sent me so many words
Of love that I've promised to love him,
And that's the whole story.
Nothing else has happened."
"Ah, my dear! He's boasted
You already love him so much
You'd rather see my lord
Gawain, your brother, die
Than have him hurt his toe!"
"Oh sir, how can he say
Such wild and foolish things!
Lord, I never thought
He could be so badly bred.
He's thrown prudence to the winds,
Sending me such a message.
Heavens! My brother doesn't
Even know I'm alive.
He's never seen me. And this
Is all wrong: upon my soul,
I wish for no such thing!"

And as they sat there, talking,
The ladies watched them closely,
And the old queen, seated
Beside her daughter, said,
"Dear daughter, how do you like
That gentleman there, sitting
Next to your lovely daughter?
They've talked for quite some time—
Who knows of what?—but it's not
Something to worry about:
Clearly, his noble heart
Finds itself attracted
To the best, most beautiful, wisest
Girl in this palace—and rightly!
May it please God she pleases
Him as Aeneas was pleased
By Lavinia, and they marry, these two!"
"Ah lady," the other queen said,
"May God so bend his heart,
For they seem like brother and sister,
And if they loved each other
They'd truly be joined into one!"
She meant, of course, that the two
Should be joined as man and wife,
Not recognizing her son.
They were like brother and sister,
And that was how they would love,
Once the girl had learned
She was his sister and he
Her brother. Her mother would be happy,
But not as she'd thought she would.

Gawain had said what he needed
To say to his beautiful sister,
So he rose and called to his side
A servant he'd seen, standing
To his right, who struck him as modest
But brave, anxious to please,
And the wisest, most sensible page
Of all the young men in that hall.
And then he went to a room
Off the hall, and the youngster went with him.
When the door was closed, and they
Were alone, he said, "Young man,
I think you're well-trained and clever.
I'm going to tell you something—
But you need to keep it a secret,
In your own best self-interest.
I propose to send you somewhere
Where your message will be greeted with joy."
"Sir, I'd let them pull
The tongue right out of my mouth
Before I let myself speak
A single, solitary word
You wanted to hide away."

"My friend," said Gawain, "you'll go
Straight to King Arthur's court.
I am Gawain, his nephew.
The trip will neither be long
Nor hard, but only to Orcanie,
Where the king has set up his court
To keep the Pentecost feast.
Whatever expenses you have
On the way will be mine to pay.
When you stand in front of the king,
Remember, you'll find him displeased,
But as soon as you greet him in Gawain's
Name, he'll be happy once more.
Indeed, no one who hears
The news you'll bring will be sad!
Tell the king that, by
The faith between lord and man,
On the fifth day of the feast
He's to come (on whatever pretext
He likes) to the foot of this tower
And set up his camp, and he's
To have with him such men
And women of high and middle
Rank as may be at his court,
For I'm to fight in combat
Against a knight who thinks
Little of the king or of me.
His name is Grinomalant,
And he hates me with a deadly passion.
And tell the queen to come,
Too, by the great faith
We've given one another,
She my lady, and I
Her friend, and let her spread
The news as widely as she can,
And lead here, for love of me,
As many of the ladies and girls
At her husband's court who can join her.
But one thing still worries me:
Have you a horse speedy
Enough to get you there
In time?" The young man replied
That he had the use of excellent
Horses, fast and strong.
"Good," said Gawain. "I'm glad
To hear it." Then the youngster led him
To the stables, and brought out, for Gawain
To see, a number of large,
Well-rested horses, one
Of whom was completely ready
To travel wherever was wanted,
Not only newly shod
But saddled and bridled as well.
"By God," said my lord Gawain,
"You come well-equipped, youngster!
Now go straight to our lord
The king, go and return,
And stick to the narrow path!"

The messenger went on his way,
Escorted as far as the river
By my lord Gawain, who ordered
The boatman to ferry him
Across—a task that presented
No obstacles at all,
For the boatman had many men
At the oars. The youngster hurried
On toward Orcanie,
Well aware that knowledge
Of roads can lead a man
Wherever he wants in the world.
And my lord Gawain returned
To his palace, remaining there
In great joy and delight.
Everyone celebrated,
And the queen ordered five hundred
Baths and sweat-rooms to be heated,
So all the young men would be able
To bathe and wash as they liked.
Brand-new clothes had been made,
So when they emerged from their baths
They were well and properly dressed.
The fabrics were all good silk;
The fur was ermine. And then
The young men stayed in church
All morning, standing as they prayed,
Never kneeling once.
And later that morning, with his own
Hands, my lord Gawain
Put a spur on each one's right foot,
Buckled on a sword, and dubbed each one
A knight. And he had a company
Of half a thousand new knights!

Meanwhile, his messenger rode
So fast that he'd reached the city
Of Orcanie, where King Arthur
Held court in royal style.
Cripples and beggars, watching
As he galloped by, exclaimed,
“There's someone who's truly
In a hurry! He must be bringing
News from some far-off country!
But whatever he tells the king,
He'll find Arthur all out
Of sorts, silent and angry.
But who will there be to give
The king the counsel he'll need,
Once he's heard this message?"
"Tell me," said another. "Are we
Supposed to worry how the king
Searches for wisdom? We're all
Lost and broken, now
That we've been deprived of the man
Who, acting for the love of God,
Kept us alive with alms
And gifts and all manner of charity."
All over the city, the poor
And needy, who deeply loved
Gawain, regretted his absence.
The messenger kept to the road
And finally came to the palace
Where he knew he could find the king,
With a hundred counts around him,
And a hundred dukes and kings.
Arthur was pensive and sad.
Seeing himself with so many
Great ones, but without Gawain,  
He fainted with distress, and everyone  
Rushed to his side, all  
Wanting to be the very  
First to assist him. My lady  
Lorre,* seated in the gallery,  
Saw and heard the commotion  
Down in the hall, and came there,  
Hurriedly, just in time  
To find the queen arriving,  
Distraught like everyone else,  
And seeing my lady Lorre  
Guinevere asked if she . . . . . .

EXPLYCYT PERCEVAX LE VIEL  
["Here ends the old Perceval"]**

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* In thirteenth-century tales, Lorre is a fairy; in one such tale, she is Gawain's lover  
** Added by an unknown hand, to separate the poem Chrétien did not finish from its continuation
Afterword
Joseph J. Duggan

Perceval: The Story of the Grail, a masterwork of world literature, was written under the patronage of Philip, count of Flanders and Alsace. This powerful noble Philip was the seneschal of France in 1180, during the reign of King Philip II; his niece, Isabelle of Hainaut, was married to the king, whom Philip of Flanders knighted in June of that year.

Philip of Flanders participated in the Third Crusade, leaving France in September 1190 and dying at Acre in June the following year. The date of Chrétien de Troyes’s death is unknown, but he left Perceval unfinished, and one of the poets who wrote a continuation, Gerbert de Montreuil, says that Chrétien died before completing this last of his five surviving romances. Some believe that Chrétien must have accompanied Philip on the crusade and that he died in the Holy Land, but others place the composition of Perceval almost a decade earlier, in the period of good relations between Champagne and Flanders that began in June 1180. This might explain Chrétien’s reference to Philip as the most worthy man in the Holy Roman Empire, since in the period after 1181 Philip took steps to improve his relationship with the emperor, from whom he held several fiefs. Fol-
lowing the death of Philip's wife in March 1182, he began at-
ttempts to marry Marie de Champagne, who had been a widow
since Count Henry the Liberal's death the previous year and
was regent of the county of Champagne. Marie was the king's
half-sister and Chrétien's patron for his romance *Lancelot: The
Knight of the Cart*. But Philip of Flanders turned away from this
course of action in the fall of 1183. Anthime Fourrier places the
composition of *Perceval* in this period, between May 1182 and
the autumn of the following year. In this case, Chrétien's death
would not have been connected with the crusade.

Chrétien writes that Philip of Flanders gave him a book con-
cerning the Grail (l. 66). What would this book have contained?
It is likely that we will never know beyond what Chrétien tells
us at various points in the romance, namely that the book was
the source of his knowledge that Perceval kissed Blanchefleur
seven times, that the Hideous Damsel was indeed ugly, and
that Perceval forgot God. The consensus is, however, that the
Grail mystery draws upon Celtic myth, and the source book was
perhaps a link in that chain of transmission.

The objects Perceval encounters during his visit to the Grail
castle recall the talismans of the Tuatha Dé Danaan, the “people
of the goddess Danu,” divine figures central to Irish myth. The
talisman are the spear of the god Lug that made its holder un-
conquerable, the cauldron of the Dagda (the “good god”) from
which no company went unsatisfied, and the sword of the god
Nodens that pursued the enemy relentlessly once it was drawn.
These three may be the sources respectively of the lance and
Grail that are carried in procession in the Rich Fisher King's
castle and the sword that the king presents to Perceval. That
the Grail, like the Dagda's cauldron, is a vessel of plenty is suggested by its description as a dish in which one might serve a fish, by the fact that it is carried through the hall at each course of the king's elaborate feast, and by its being used to carry a single host that keeps the Fisher King's father, the Grail King, alive. Another vessel of plenty, this one attested in Welsh lore, is the platter of Rhydderch, which supplies whatever food one wishes. In later Grail romances the Grail typically provides food in abundance, according to the desires of the person who is eating. The fourth talisman of the Tuatha Dé Danaan, the stone of Fál that cries out under the true ruler, does not have its counterpart in the Grail castle, but since both the Fisher King and the Grail King are Perceval's kin, it may be that a magic device such as the stone would have appeared later to determine Perceval's fitness to inherit the Fisher's kingdom, had Chrétien been able to complete the romance.

Other parallels to elements in Perceval appear in Celtic tradition. The god Nodens is pictured among fish and tridents and is thus a fisher king. The god Bran bears the epithet "the man with holes in his thighs," which is thought to signify that he has been castrated, as is the case with the wounds of both the Fisher King and Perceval's father. A story pattern found in Irish sagas, the boyhood deeds of the hero, particularly as exemplified in The Boyhood Deeds of Finn, contains striking parallels to the plot of Perceval. Finn is brought up by his widowed mother in obscurity in a forest, travels to the court of the king of Bantry, takes up with a lover, encounters a woman whose son has been killed by a warrior whom he pursues and defeats, meets his uncle in the wilderness, overhears between two fairy mounds the voices of fairies exchanging questions and answers, sees a cooked pig being carried out of one of the fairy mounds on a kneading-trough, and kills a warrior who used to slay anyone
attempting to court his female companion. What Finn overhears includes the question “Is there anything to be brought from us to you?” and the reply “If something is brought to us, something will be brought to you in return for it.” The saga contains many elements that bear no resemblance to the plot of the French romance, but like Perceval, it recounts the boyhood, coming of age, and training of a hero. The Boyhood Deeds of Finn is unlikely to have been the direct source for the plot of Perceval, but Chrétien may have had access to some Breton analogue of the Irish tale that is no longer extant.

But whatever the contents of Philip’s book, Chrétien’s romance, in addition to conveying the mystery of the Grail, is also the story of a boy’s progression from the naive state of a child brought up in rural seclusion and imposed ignorance of chivalric institutions to the status of one of the most respected knights of Arthur’s court. In this trajectory Perceval has two teachers, his mother, who instructs him on respectful relations with both women and men and on the central elements of the Christian religion, and Gornemant of Goort, whose advice concerns knightly skills and duties and includes an admonition not to speak too much. During the course of the romance, Perceval gains in maturity and thoughtfulness until he is able to reject the choice made at Arthur’s court by the other knights to seek worldly adventures. Instead, Perceval decides to devote himself to a search for the answers to the questions he should have asked in the Grail castle.

The bleeding lance is never explained in the romance as we have it from Chrétien. The answer to the second of the two questions that Perceval’s cousin identifies is that the Grail was being carried to the Grail King, who had been an invalid for fifteen years and was being sustained by a single communion wafer. Had Perceval asked the question, the Grail King would
have been cured, regaining the use of all his limbs, and would have held the land again. The reason for Perceval's failure to ask the questions is revealed, however: in the course of leaving home, he did not turn back to tend to his mother when he saw her fall, and she died of grief at his departure. That this is a sin of which he had no knowledge, according to Perceval's hermit uncle, raises theological questions, since sin implies awareness of culpability for one's acts. Perceval's failure has, then, causes on two planes, the level of human motivation that is explained by his desire to follow Gornemant's counsel, and a spiritual dimension in which the responsibility of the son for his mother dominates.

The relationship between son and mother is only one of the many elements in Perceval that involve kinship ties. The romance is, in fact, permeated by the theme of lineage. Virtually all the characters for whom Chrétien inspires sympathy in the reader belong to two royal families, the Grail King's and King Arthur's. Perceval's father has died of grief after his two older sons were killed on the same day, but his mother's kin play key roles in the romance. The Grail King is her brother and the Fisher King is her nephew, which means that the Fisher King is Perceval's cousin and the Grail King his uncle, although Chrétien does not spell out the relationships. The hermit is the brother of Perceval's mother, and thus also brother of the Grail King, which makes him the uncle of both Perceval and the Fisher King. Perceval's first cousin, who meets him in the forest just after he leaves the Grail castle, speaks of having dwelt in his mother's house and appears also to be a relative on his mother's side of the family. The Fisher King received the sword he gives Perceval from his blonde niece, who is perhaps in a relationship of second cousin to Perceval. The other important lineage in the romance is Arthur's, which includes his nephew Gawain.
Gawain's sister Clarissant and his unnamed mother live in the Castle of the Rock of Champguin with his grandmother Ygerne, who is also Arthur's mother and rules the castle.

The Castle of the Rock of Champguin appears to be a fortress in the land of the dead, ruled by the white-haired Queen Ygerne dressed in white brocade, who has been dead for sixty years (see l. 8738), and her daughter, who has been dead for twenty, and inhabited by, among others, a hundred gray-haired and a hundred white-haired men. The name Champguin is composed of two elements, one of Latin or British Celtic provenance, champ "field," and the other of British Celtic origin, guin "white, sacred." In Celtic lore white is the color of the dead and the Otherworld is also known as the "land of the dead." That the castle is subject to a taboo is shown by the queen's reluctance to allow Gawain to leave it and the fact that Grinomalant is reluctant even to tell Gawain its name. Its most salient feature for those who come upon it is that any man who enters must die, a threat that Gawain is the first to overcome by passing the test of the Magic Bed. Overtones of incest mark Gawain's visit to Champguin, as his grandmother and his mother, unaware of his identity, discuss the prospects of his marrying Clarissant, his own sister.

In his other romances, Chrétien de Troyes shows a propensity to construct episodes that in some way resonate with each other. Gawain's adventure in Champguin illuminates obscure characteristics of Perceval's Grail experience. The Grail castle is inhabited by Perceval's kin just as Gawain's family live on the Rock of Champguin, but while Champguin is ruled by two queens, a mother and daughter, the Grail castle is ruled by a father and son who are kings. Access to each is facilitated by a man in a boat. In both castles the newcomer is subjected to a test: Gawain would have died had he failed the test of the Magic
Bed, and Perceval is told by the hermit that he would have died except for his mother's prayer. Gawain observes running waters, broad plains, and forests filled with game in Champguin, but only after he has passed the test and attained sovereignty, at which point he is dressed in a white (ermine) robe. He is destined to recover the noble ladies' possessions and to free the castle from its enchantments, as Perceval would have done for his kin had he passed the question test.

There is also a suggestion of incest in Perceval's adventure in the Grail castle. His mother had told him that his father was wounded between the legs and as a consequence both his land and his treasure went into decline. Perceval's cousin explains that the Fisher King has been wounded between the haunches, and he lives in a land that is in a state of profound decline, a wasteland. Wounding between the legs is, as I have mentioned, a medieval circumlocution for castration: the king is sterile and his infirmity renders the land barren. Is it possible that the Fisher King, then, is Perceval's own dead father and the Grail King his grandfather? If this is so, then Perceval would be the offspring of incest between his mother and her nephew. Had Perceval been able to pass the test in the Grail castle, both the king and the land would have been healed. Was he then destined, like Gawain, to be installed as the new king of a familial enchanted castle after returning and asking the right questions? Although the last 2,700 lines of the romance, in the incomplete state in which we have it, concern exclusively Gawain's adventures, Chrétien no doubt planned to reintroduce Perceval into the narrative to fight a battle in which his cousin's prediction would be fulfilled, namely that the sword given him by the Fisher King would fail him. But the Hideous Damsel's prediction (ll. 4670–76) makes it unlikely that the Fisher King's health would have been restored.
In addition to these worldly concerns, *Perceval* has a spiritual aspect that sets it apart from Chrétien's other works. The prologue highlights Christian charity, the love of God and one's neighbor, to both of which the young Perceval must be initiated. Although his mother instructs him on what the church is, tells him to pray, and gives him a brief account of Christian beliefs, and although he does indeed pray for her health, Perceval eventually forgets God and does not enter a church for five years until the Good Friday on which he meets the penitents, one of whom again gives him a summary of the tenets of Christian faith. When last heard of in the romance, Perceval has learned again about Christ's death and has received the Eucharist from his uncle. One cannot help thinking that if he was to come again to the Grail castle and this time ask the questions, his correct conduct would have resulted from his spiritual progress.

Chrétien's unfinished *Perceval* exercised such a fascination that in eleven of the fifteen manuscripts it is followed, without a break, by continuations written between the final years of the twelfth century and around 1230. There are four continuations ranging in length from around 9,500 to more than 19,000 lines. The first two are anonymous (the second being falsely ascribed to Wauchier de Denain), the third is by a certain Manessier, and the fourth is by Gerbert de Montreuil.

The First Continuation, unfinished, carries forward the narration of Gawain's adventures and identifies the bleeding lance as the spear used to pierce the side of the crucified Christ. The Second Continuation takes up where the first ends, and breaks off with Perceval returning to the Grail castle. Manessier, who wrote for Jeanne, countess of Flanders, the grandniece of Chré-
tien’s patron, has Perceval see the Grail procession a second time. He is crowned as the Fisher King’s successor and upon his death the Grail, the lance, and the platter are transported to heaven. Gerbert’s Fourth Continuation is an interpolation between the Second and Third Continuations. In both the First and the Third Continuations, the Grail is a vessel that produces food. In addition, prologues that have been given the titles Bliocadran and the Elucidation are included in some manuscripts. Perceval and its continuations and prologues make a compilation of more than 60,000 lines in most of the manuscripts, testimony to the power that Chrétien’s tale exercised over its readers. The extent to which the continuators had access to independent versions of the Grail legend is a vexed question.

That Chrétien does not attach the epithet “holy” directly to the word Grail is important to note. He only has the hermit say, when mentioning the host that keeps the Grail King alive, that the Grail is “so holy a thing” (l. 6426). He does, however, confer on the Grail an aura of the sacred in the scene in which its approach fills the hall with a mysterious light and in which it is accompanied by candelabra in a procession. Graal, “grail,” is a rare word in Old French, but we are fortunate to have a definition from the pen of an author who wrote about forty years after Chrétien, Helinand, who describes it as “a plate broad and somewhat deep.”

The transformation of the Grail into the Holy Grail is the work of Robert de Boron, a Burgundian knight who is thought to have written his Joseph of Arimathea in verse around the year 1200. Robert identifies the Grail not as a serving dish but as the chalice of the Eucharist that Christ used at the Last Supper,
given by Pontius Pilate to Joseph of Arimathea, who later used it to collect the blood of Christ as he took his body down from the cross. According to Robert’s narrative, Joseph is imprisoned but stays alive miraculously without food or drink and Christ appears to him with the Grail in hand. When he is freed from captivity, Joseph travels with his sister Enygeus, his brother-in-law Bron, and a group of other Christians through many lands. In memory of the Last Supper, he establishes at the bidding of the Holy Spirit a ceremony in which the Grail, along with a fish, is placed on a table and those sitting at it who have led a chaste life and believe in the Trinity have all that they desire. Robert calls Bron the Rich Fisher because he is the one who catches the fish used in the Grail service. One seat at the Grail table is reserved for the future son of Bron; anyone else who sits in it will be swallowed up by the earth. Bron receives the Holy Grail from Joseph and travels west with it to the vale of Avalon, probably the region near Glastonbury in Britain. Robert de Boron does not mention the bleeding lance. Bron and Enygeus have a child, Alain, whose unnamed son will be the next keeper of the Grail.

According to another work, the prose Didot Perceval, which is thought to be the translation, with additions, of a lost poem by Robert de Boron, Bron’s son Alain is Perceval’s father. Bron is infirm but can be healed by Perceval. First, however, Perceval goes to King Arthur’s court and sits at the Round Table in the Siege Perilous. The seat roars out and splits beneath him, and a voice declares that on account of his boldness in sitting in the seat, Bron will not be healed, the seat will not be rejoined, and the enchantments of Britain will not be lifted until a knight who surpasses all others in prowess asks what the Grail is and whom it serves. Perceval sets off in search of Bron’s dwelling and reaches an analogue of Chrétien’s Grail castle, where he sees
the Grail procession but fears to ask the questions because he wants to be polite to the host. After meeting the weeping young lady in the forest and confessing to his uncle the hermit, he encounters the Fisher King in his boat, revisits the Grail castle, and does ask the questions, causing Bron to be cured. Bron instructs Perceval in the secrets of the Grail before dying two days later. The Siege Perilous is joined together and the enchantments of Britain dissipate. There follows a brief account of Arthur's conquest of Gaul, his battle with his nephew Mordred, and his death. Whether Robert de Boron knew Chrétien's *Perceval* is uncertain, although the author of the Didot *Perceval* surely did.

Yet another early example of French prose, *Perlesvaus, the High Book of the Grail*, probably composed in the first decade of the thirteenth century, builds on the Grail treatments of both Chrétien and Robert de Boron and its anonymous author appears to have known Celtic traditions not reflected in those authors. In *Perlesvaus*, the Fisher King is Perlesvaus's uncle, who dies; the Grail castle has fallen into the hands of another uncle, the pagan King of Castle Mortal, which has led to the disappearance of the Grail and the implements that accompany it. Perlesvaus reconquers the Grail castle, becoming thereby the Grail King without having to ask any questions. After a great battle in which he defeats the Black Hermit, Perlesvaus leaves to assume rule over the Isle of Plenty. Also playing a role in the *Perlesvaus* is Lancelot's love for Guinevere, who dies in the course of the romance. *Perlesvaus* is imbued with Christian typological overtones and the crusading spirit, neither of which appear to play a significant role in Chrétien's *Perceval*. Benedictine monasticism is thought to have had a role in shaping the particular forms of spirituality found in *Perlesvaus*.

On the basis of Chrétien's and Robert de Boron's works and the Didot text, a vast compilation known as the Lancelot-Grail
Cycle was put together in the period 1220-30. This series of anonymous prose texts is also called the Vulgate Cycle because of its widespread popularity in the period, as evidenced by more than a hundred surviving manuscripts. It consists of the *Story of the Holy Grail* (a "prequel" written to bring the early tale of the Grail into line with the later parts of the compilation), *Merlin*, the *Lancelot* proper, the *Quest for the Holy Grail*, and the *Death of King Arthur*.

The *Quest*, suffused with monastic values, gives the most thoroughly Christian interpretation of the Grail myth of any medieval work. In the *Lancelot*, we learn that Lancelot has a son, Galahad, whose mother is the Grail maiden, daughter of the Rich Fisher King. Galahad is descended from both the biblical David and Joseph of Arimathea and belongs to the lineage of the Grail kings. At the beginning of the *Quest*, the newly knighted Galahad is led into Arthur's palace at Camaalot, where he passes the tests of the Siege Perilous and the Sword in the Stone, indications that as the best knight in the world he will fulfill the Grail quest. When the knights of the Round Table are seated in the hall, a clap of thunder sounds and they are all struck dumb as the Holy Grail, sent by God, floats into the room, and each guest is provided with whatever food he desires. Led by Gawain, each of the knights pledges not to rest until he is seated once again in a palace where such dishes are served daily. After a series of intertwined adventures in which most of the knights, including Lancelot and Lionel, fail in the quest because of their sinful lives, Galahad, Perceval, and Lancelot's cousin Bohort reach the Grail castle, Corbenic. There they participate with nine other knights in a Mass celebrated by Josephé, the son of Joseph of Arimathea, who has descended from heaven for the occasion, at a silver table on which the lance has been placed by angels alongside the Grail. The communion host
used in the Mass takes on the appearance of a child and the crucified Christ emerges from the Grail to give the knights communion. Galahad heals the wounded King Pelles by anointing him with blood from the lance. Having seen the beatific vision, Galahad, now king of the land, dies, to be followed by Perceval a year later. The various components of the knights’ quest for the Grail and the objects they encounter are assigned allegorical meanings in conformity with Christian ideas of grace and salvation, often articulated by monks dressed in the white habits of the Cistercian order whom the knights meet along the way and who expound ideas that can be linked to the writings of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux. The *Quest for the Holy Grail* is thought to have been written by a Cistercian or someone closely allied with that order.

Perceval’s story became in the Middle Ages the basis of literary works in languages other than French: in the thirteenth century the Norse *Parcevalssaga* and *Valvershatr* and the *Percevael* incorporated into a Flemish *Lancelot* in verse, and in the fourteenth century the English *Sir Perceval of Gales*, in which the Grail itself does not figure. Two adaptations, the Welsh *Peredur* and the Middle High German *Parzival*, are of special importance.

*Peredur, Son of Efrawg*, is one of three Welsh romances that appear to be influenced by Chrétien’s work. Romances in this period were often experienced aurally, read out loud to aristocratic audiences, and *Peredur* may be based on the Welsh author’s participation in such an event. Like the other Welsh romances, it incorporates Celtic motifs and incidents not found in French analogues. Among the differences from Chrétien’s nar-
rative are that the counterpart of the man who initiates Perceval into knighthood, Gornemant of Goort, is Peredur's maternal uncle. A second uncle has Peredur break a sword three times and put it back together twice. In the Grail procession, two young men bear the lance that bleeds profusely onto the floor. Most notably, the Grail itself, identified as a "salver" or serving dish borne by two young women, contains not a communion host but a man's head resting in a pool of blood, a sight that is accompanied by loud shrieking. After Peredur's visit to the equivalent of the castle of Beaurepaire and the scene of the blood drops on the snow, the Welsh romance departs radically from Chrétien's plot. Peredur falls in love with Angharad Golden-Hand and ceases speaking until she decides to give him her love. He then embarks on a series of adventures, including an encounter with a monster called the Addanc. Eventually he marries the empress of Constantinople and lives with her for fourteen years. Toward the end of the romance, he encounters a young man who declares that he had appeared to Peredur before in a number of guises, including that of one of the women in the Grail procession. The severed head, an element typical of Celtic tradition, belonged to an unnamed cousin of Peredur who was killed by the witches of Caer Loyw (Gloucester), who are also responsible for lame Peredur's uncle, the host of the Grail castle. With the help of Arthur's war-band, Peredur then kills the witches of Caer Loyw. This text dating from the end of the twelfth or the beginning of the thirteenth century was once thought to be a source of Perceval and may well contain elements that were a part of the original Celtic myth.

Wolfram von Eschenbach, a Bavarian knight who also wrote Willehalm and Titurel, drew upon Chrétien's Perceval and the First Continuation as well as other sources in writing his magnificent romance Parzival between 1200 and 1212. Although in
general Wolfram follows Chrétien's lead, he greatly embellishes and expands the story to almost 25,000 lines. Wolfram characterizes the Grail as a stone, carried by a chaste young woman: when a communion wafer is placed on it, it is able to furnish food in abundance for those in its presence. Two silver knives are also carried in the Grail procession. A number of characters who are anonymous in Chrétien are named by Wolfram, such as the Fisher King (Anfortas), Parzival's mother (Herzeloide), his father (Gahmuret), his cousin (Sigune, whom he encounters four times rather than once as in Chrétien), and his hermit uncle (Trevrizent). Parzival manages to return to the Grail castle, Munsalväsche, and succeeds Anfortas as Grail king. Wolfram mentions Chrétien at the end of his romance, but gives greater credit for the tale to another author, a problematic "Kyot the Provençal" who may be fictive. Parzival was extremely popular in the Middle Ages, as is testified by its survival in more than seventy manuscripts.

From its origin in Chrétien's Perceval, the Grail myth was taken up by an astonishing number of authors writing in a variety of languages, a practice that was continued by such figures as Alfred, Lord Tennyson and T. S. Eliot and persists up to the present day. That each has given the mysterious object new interpretations and a new symbolism only confirms Chrétien de Troyes's power as one of the master storytellers of Western tradition.
Recommended for Further Reading

Medieval Texts


Critical Studies


Perceval
The Story of the Grail
Chrétien de Troyes
Translated by Burton Raffel
with an afterword by Joseph J. Duggan

One of the most influential storytellers in Western literature, French poet Chrétien de Troyes brought the legend of King Arthur to an audience that has remained enthusiastic for more than eight centuries. Of his five surviving romantic Arthurian poems, the last is Perceval, an unfinished work that introduces the story of the Grail—a legend quickly adopted by other medieval writers and taken up by a succession of authors that continues to the present. In Chrétien’s romance, Perceval progresses from naive boyhood to highly respected knighthood in Arthur’s court. Rejecting the worldly adventures the other knights choose, Perceval resolves to search for important answers in Grail castle and explores a variety of issues relating to spirituality, human desires, lineage, and family.

Acclaimed for his sensitive and faithful translations of the poems of Chrétien, Burton Raffel completes the Arthurian series with this rendition of Perceval. Raffel conveys to the modern English-language reader all the delights of Chrétien’s inventive storytelling, perceptive characterizations, and vividly evoked emotions.

Burton Raffel is distinguished professor of humanities at the University of Southwestern Louisiana. His publications include six books and chapbooks of poetry, three texts on the translation process, and translations of many works, including the five Arthurian romances of Chrétien de Troyes.

Other available translations of Chrétien’s poems by Burton Raffel:

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