

# Perceval

*The Story of the Grail*



Chrétien de Troyes ♦ *Translated by Burton Raffel*



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*The Story of the Grail*

Chrétien de Troyes

*Translated from the Old French  
by Burton Raffel*

*Afterword by Joseph J. Duggan*

*Yale University Press*

*New Haven & London*



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Set in Simoncini Garamond type by Tseng Information Systems, Durham, North Carolina. Printed in the United States of America by BookCrafters, Inc., Chelsea, Michigan.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Chrétien, de Troyes, 12th cent.

[Perceval le Gallois. English]

Perceval : the story of the grail / Chrétien de Troyes ; translated from the Old French by Burton Raffel ; afterword by Joseph J. Duggan.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-300-07585-5 (alk. paper). — ISBN 0-300-07586-3 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Perceval (Legendary character)—Romances. 2. Romances—Translations into English. 3. Arthurian romances. 4. Grail—Romances. I. Raffel, Burton. II. Title.

PQ1447.E5R35 1999

84r'.1—dc21

98-18938

CIP

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

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

*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 befuddlement and befuddlement of M. Poirion's commentary is eloquent testimony to how little, as yet, we understand what Chrétien was up to—or whether, in fact, he was fully up to the task he appears to have set himself, in this his last poem. The final eight hundred lines or so, in my judgment, show a consistent and significant decline in Chrétien's *poetic* skills, his ability fully to focus on what he was creating. Aged or ill, he was still immensely superior, as a poet, to the “learned cleric” who finished *Lancelot*. But he was not entirely himself, and I have tried to allow the translation (like the last portion of *Lancelot*) to reflect this diminution in verse quality.

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

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

If you sow lightly, you reap  
Lightly. And a good crop  
Requires the kind of soil  
Where seeds sprout a hundred-  
Fold, for even good seed 5  
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, 10  
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, 15  
Count Philip is better, and I  
Can prove it, for Alexander  
Acquired all the evils  
And vices of which the count  
Was either free or innocent. 20  
The count permits no vulgar  
Joking, no wicked words,  
And is pained by malicious prattle  
Of anyone, no matter who.  
He's fond of even-tempered 25  
Justice, and good faith, and the Church,  
And despises everything immoral.  
His giving reaches in every  
Direction, but no one knows  
How far, for he gives without guile 30  
Or greed, as Matthew said,  
The left hand unaware  
What the right hand does, hidden  
Except from those who receive it  
And from God, who sees our secrets 35  
And can read our hearts and our bellies.  
Why else does the Gospel say:  
"Hide your good deeds from your left hand"?  
The left hand, according to this  
Tradition, is pompous pride, 40  
Hypocritical and false.  
And what does the right hand mean?  
Charity, which never  
Boasts, but conceals its goodness,  
Lets no one know except Him 45  
We call both God and Charity.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then those who’d been hanging back,  
Waiting for their chief, came hurrying  
Up the road, asking him  
Anxiously, “My lord, what  
On earth is this Welshman telling you?” 235  
“As God is my witness, his wits

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



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

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 305  
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. 310  
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, 315  
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 320  
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?" 325  
"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 330  
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 335  
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, 340  
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?" 345  
"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. 350  
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! 355  
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!" 360  
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, 365  
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 370  
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! 375  
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, 380  
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 385  
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— 390  
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, 395  
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." 400  
"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, 405  
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 410  
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. 415  
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 420  
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 425  
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 430  
 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, 435  
 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, 440  
 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 445  
 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 450  
 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, 455  
 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 460  
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. 465  
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 470  
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, 475  
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. 480  
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; 485  
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. 490  
“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!" 495  
 His mother did all she could  
 To hold him back, getting  
 Everything ready—a shirt  
 Of coarse hemp and breeches  
 Cut according to Welsh 500  
 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. 505  
 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, 510  
 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 515  
 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? 520  
 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 525  
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. 530  
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, 535  
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. 540  
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. 545  
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 550  
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— 555

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: 560  
 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 565  
 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 570  
 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 575  
 Of all living things."  
 "And a monastery?" "The same:  
 A beautiful, sacred building  
 That houses treasures and dead saints,  
 And where we consecrate 580  
 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, 585  
 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; 590  
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 595  
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 600  
Wept, as he sat in his saddle.  
His clothes were those the Welsh  
Peasants usually wear  
(Including their clumsy leather  
Shoes); wherever he went 605  
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 610  
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), 615  
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 620  
 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, 625  
 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. 630  
 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 635  
 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. 640  
 The tent was gorgeously made,  
 Half bright red, half  
 Embroidered with golden stripes,  
 And a gold eagle at the top.  
 The eagle glittered, clear 645  
 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 650  
 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 655  
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 660  
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, 665  
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 670  
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. 675  
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. 680  
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 685  
 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. 690  
 "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." 695  
 "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 700  
 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. 705  
 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 710  
 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." 715

“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 720  
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, 725  
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! 730  
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, 735  
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, 740  
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 745  
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, 750  
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." 755  
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. 760  
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 765  
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 770  
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 775  
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!” 780  
    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, 785  
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, 790  
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.” 795  
“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: 800  
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. 805  
“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.” 810  
“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. 815  
 "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, 820  
 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! 825  
 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, 830  
 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 835  
 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 840  
 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, 845  
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 850  
Have been fighting with King Ryon.  
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, 855  
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, 860  
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 865  
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, 870  
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, 875

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, 880  
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 885  
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 890  
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 895  
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 900  
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 905  
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, 910  
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, 915  
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, 920  
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 925  
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?” 930  
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! — 935  
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 940  
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, 945  
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, 950  
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. 955  
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— 960  
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 965  
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 970  
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; 975  
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 980  
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 985  
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!" 990  
"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, 995  
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." 1000  
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. 1005  
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! 1010  
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 1015  
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 1020  
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. 1025  
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— 1030  
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 1035



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, 1040  
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 1045  
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 1050  
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 1055  
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 1060  
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 1065  
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 1070  
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 1075  
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). 1080  
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!” 1085  
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 1090  
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 1095  
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, 1100  
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, 1105  
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 1110  
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 1115  
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 1120  
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 1125  
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, 1130  
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, 1135  
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 1140  
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 1145  
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 1150  
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 1155  
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!” 1160  
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 1165  
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 1170  
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. 1175  
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 1180  
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 1185  
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 1190  
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 1195

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 1200  
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 1205  
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, 1210  
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 1215  
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 1220  
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? 1225  
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?” 1230  
“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 1235  
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 1240  
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, 1245  
“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 1250  
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: 1255  
“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 1260  
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 1265  
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 1270  
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 1275  
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 1280  
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 1285  
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, 1290  
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 1295  
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!" 1300

    Thus the king lamented,  
His face showing his sadness,  
But knowing how helpless he was  
He said nothing more.  
Meanwhile, the boy was spurring 1305  
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 1310  
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 1315  
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 1320  
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 1325  
(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. 1330  
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 1335  
Wall (fashioned of quarried  
Rocks) were four low  
Towers, beautifully shaped  
And strong. The location was perfect,  
The whole castle built 1340  
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 1345  
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 1350  
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 1355

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 1360  
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, 1365  
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." 1370  
"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. 1375  
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 1380  
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. 1385  
"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 1390  
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, 1395  
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, 1400  
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, 1405  
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?" 1410  
"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." 1415  
"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 1420  
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 1425  
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 1430  
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 1435  
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 1440  
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. 1445  
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 1450  
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, 1455  
 “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 1460  
 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. 1465  
 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, 1470  
 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 1475  
 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 1480  
 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 1485  
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. 1490  
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? 1495  
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 1500  
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 1505  
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 1510  
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 1515

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 1520  
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 1525  
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. 1530  
“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,” 1535  
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,” 1540  
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, 1545  
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. 1550  
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 1555  
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. 1560  
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 1565  
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 1570  
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 1575  
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, 1580  
 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. 1585  
 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 1590  
 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, 1595  
 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, 1600  
 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 1605  
 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. 1610  
 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 1615  
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 1620  
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 1625  
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 1630  
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 1635  
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 1640  
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, 1645  
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 1650  
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, 1655  
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, 1660  
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. 1665  
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." 1670  
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 1675

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 1680  
(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?" 1685  
"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, 1690  
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, 1695  
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 1700  
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, 1705  
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 1710  
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 1715  
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 1720  
(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?" 1725  
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." 1730  
"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 1735  
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 1740  
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 1745  
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 1750  
Nothing was any better,  
And everywhere one went  
Were empty, deserted streets  
And abandoned houses, falling  
To pieces, no men, no women 1755  
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 1760  
Rich nor lovely, their walls  
Full of cracks and falling  
Apart, their towers roofless,  
Their doors hanging open  
And unlocked both night and day. 1765  
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. 1770  
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 1775  
 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, 1780  
 While others led his horse  
 To a stable that offered little  
 Fodder or grain, having  
 Almost none to give.  
 And others conducted the visitor 1785  
 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 1790  
 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, 1795  
 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 1800  
 With thick, perfect ermine.  
 Her cloak was hemmed with black  
 And silver sable, neither



Particularly long nor wide.  
Whatever descriptions I've given 1805  
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 — 1810  
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 1815  
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, 1820  
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 1825  
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. 1830  
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, 1835

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 1840  
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!" 1845  
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 1850  
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 1855  
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 1860  
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 1865  
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 1870  
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 1875  
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 1880  
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 1885  
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, 1890  
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. 1895  
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: 1900  
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 1905  
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 1910  
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 1915  
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. 1920  
    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, 1925  
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 1930  
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 1935  
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. 1940  
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, 1945  
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, 1950  
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 1955  
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 1960  
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 1965  
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. 1970  
    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 1975  
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 1980  
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. 1985  
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 1990  
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 1995

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 2000  
Are left: the rest—two hundred  
Men and more—have been taken  
Away, imprisoned or killed  
By Anguinguerron, steward  
Of Clamadeu of the Islands, 2005  
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. 2010  
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. 2015  
His army grew larger and larger,  
While ours kept getting smaller,  
And our stores of food kept shrinking,  
Until we hadn't enough  
To feed a hungry bee! 2020  
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— 2025  
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, 2040  
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 2045  
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, 2050  
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. 2055  
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 2060  
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 2065  
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 2070  
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 2075  
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 2080  
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 2085  
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 2090  
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." 2095  
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, 2100  
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 2105  
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 2110  
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 2115  
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 2120  
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, 2125  
"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 2130  
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, 2135  
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 2140  
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, 2145  
May God be with you, today,  
And bring the very worst luck  
To Anguinguerron, the steward,  
Who's burned and ruined these lands."  
They stood there weeping, both women 2150  
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 2155

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!" 2160

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 2165

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 2170

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 2175

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?" 2180

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, 2185

"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," 2190  
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 Anguerron. "Ah me! 2195  
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 2200  
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, 2205  
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 2210  
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. 2215  
Their arms were so strong, their hearts  
So filled with fury, that this time  
The lances completely shattered,  
Splintered down the middle.

But only Anguiguerron 2220  
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, 2225  
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 2230  
A very long time, and they fought it  
Fiercely, until at last  
Anguiguerron fell to the ground  
And the boy came at him so hard  
That he begged for mercy. The boy 2235  
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 2240  
Any knight, once the battle  
Was over and the man had been conquered.  
And Anguiguerron said, "My good friend,  
Don't treat me so harshly. I've begged you  
For mercy. Grant it. You've taught me 2245  
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 2250  
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, 2255  
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 2260  
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 2265  
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 2270  
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.” 2275

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, 2280  
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. 2285  
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 2290  
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— 2295  
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, 2300  
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. 2305  
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 2310  
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, 2315  
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, 2320  
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.” 2325  
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 2330  
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, 2335  
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 2340  
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, 2345  
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 2350  
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." 2355  
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, 2360  
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 2365  
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 2370  
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. 2375  
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, 2380  
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, 2385  
"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?" 2390  
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 2395  
Knight came forward. This  
Was Clamadeu's master of arms.  
"What stupid advice!" he said.  
"Our lord requires better  
Counsel than this. Following 2400  
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? 2405  
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. 2410  
 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. 2415  
 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 2420  
 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 2425  
 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!" 2430  
 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." 2435  
 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. 2440  
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. 2445  
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 2450  
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 2455  
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 2460  
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, 2465  
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. 2470  
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. 2475  
Archers posted above  
The gates shot arrows into  
The mob as it tried to push  
And shove its way inside,  
And one group got 2480  
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. 2485  
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 2490  
Outside, helpless, watching  
As his hasty, disorganized soldiers  
Fell. His grizzled adviser  
Consoled him, glibly: "These things  
Happen to the bravest, my lord. 2495  
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 2500  
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! 2505  
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 2510  
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, 2515  
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, 2520  
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 2525  
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 2530  
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 2535  
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 2540  
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 2545  
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 2550  
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 2555  
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 2560  
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 2565  
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 2570  
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. 2575  
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 2580  
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, 2585  
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, 2590  
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 2595  
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 2600  
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 2605  
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 2610  
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. 2615  
"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 2620  
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 2625  
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 2630  
Fear either Clamadeu  
Or his men. But nothing could move him—  
A fact exceedingly strange,  
Considering how well she blended  
Caresses with sorrow, weeping 2635  
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 2640  
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. 2645  
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 2650  
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, 2655  
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, 2660

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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 2665  
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 2670  
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. 2675  
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, 2680  
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 2685  
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 2690  
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 2695  
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 2700  
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, 2705  
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. 2710  
    So Clamadeu rode off  
Homeward, and as soon as he got there  
Ordered all his prisoners  
Unconditionally freed,  
Released without restrictions. 2715  
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, 2720  
Nothing and no one held back.  
And Clamadeu himself  
Set off on his lonely road.  
In those days (these rules can be read

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In books) the custom required 2725  
A conquered knight to proceed  
Into prison straight from combat,  
Dressed exactly as he was,  
Removing not a single  
Garment nor adding one 2730  
To what he was wearing. Armored,  
And bearing his weapons, Clamadieu  
Followed Anguinguerron,  
His steward, to Disnadaron,  
Where Arthur was holding court. 2735  
Meanwhile, back in the castle,  
They celebrated the captives'  
Return, set free at last  
After long suffering in miserable  
Cells. And every lodging 2740  
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. 2745  
People were dancing up  
And down the streets, and everywhere.  
But those in the castle sang  
Loudest, now safe from attack.  
Meanwhile, Anguinguerron 2750  
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 2755  
Straight to Disnadaron,

Where Arthur's court was in session.  
So Clamadeu arrived,  
Traveling alone and just  
As he was, and his steward—already 2760  
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 2765  
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 2770  
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, 2775  
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. 2780  
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. 2785  
    It was Pentecost. The queen  
Was seated at King Arthur's side  
As he sat at the head of the table.

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Below him sat counts and kings,  
 Countesses and queens, 2790  
 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 2795  
 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 2800  
 His beauty—but his cruel, malicious  
 Tongue tarnished and blemished  
 His looks and his courage alike.  
 His tunic was made of rich  
 Multicolored silk; 2805  
 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 2810  
 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 2815  
 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 2820



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, 2825  
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, 2830  
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, 2835  
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. 2840  
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. 2845  
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 2850  
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?" 2855  
"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 2860  
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 2865  
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 2870  
Deserves a broken arm,  
Or maybe a broken neck!  
And he's going to get it!" Hearing  
This charming prattle, Kay  
Barely kept himself 2875  
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 2880  
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,

Girflet rose to his feet, 2885  
    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 2890  
    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 2895  
    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 2900  
    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 2905  
    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 2910  
    At court the rest of his life.  
    But he who'd fought that knight —  
    Snatching Blanchefleur,  
    His beautiful beloved, and her lands  
    From Clamadeu's grip — he lived 2915  
    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 2920  
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 2925  
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 2930  
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 2935  
To return, leaving his lovely  
Blanchefleur (and everyone  
Else) both very angry  
And also very sad.  
And as he rode away 2940  
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, 2945  
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, 2950  
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. 2955  
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 2960  
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, 2965  
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 2970  
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. 2975  
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 2980  
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 2985  
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, 2990  
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 2995  
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 3000  
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, 3005  
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 3010

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 3015  
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, 3020  
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 3025  
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 3030  
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.” 3035  
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. 3040  
“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 3045  
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, 3050  
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 3055  
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 3060  
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. 3065  
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; 3070  
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, 3075  
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 3080  
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. 3085  
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 3090  
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 3095  
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 3100  
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, 3105  
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." 3110  
"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 3115  
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, 3120  
And the knight inquired, "My friend,  
Where have you come from today?"  
"Sir," was the answer, "this morning  
I started from Beaufort castle."  
"My Lord!" said the knight. "How long 3125  
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 3130  
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, 3135  
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 3140  
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 3145  
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. 3150  
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 3155  
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 3160  
Easily worth a fortune)  
To the stranger, his guest. The sword's  
Rounded pommel was fine  
Greek or Arabian gold;  
The scabbard bore Venetian 3165  
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. 3170

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 3175  
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, 3180  
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. 3185  
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 3190  
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 3195  
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 3200  
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 3205  
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 3210  
Might well be vulgar or rude,  
And so he held his tongue.

And then two other servants  
Entered, carrying golden  
Candleholders worked 3215  
With enamel. They were wonderfully handsome  
Boys, and the candleholders  
They each clasped in their hands  
Bore at least ten  
Burning candles. A girl 3220  
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, 3225  
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 grail (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 3230  
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 3235  
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, 3240  
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 3245  
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 3250  
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 3255  
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 3260

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, 3265  
As the two noblemen watched,  
While two other servants  
Brought in wooden supports  
(Fashioned, we're told, of timber  
Made totally indestructible 3270  
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 3275  
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. 3280  
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 3285  
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. 3290  
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 3295  
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 3300  
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 3305  
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. 3310  
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. 3315  
    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. 3320  
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 — 3325  
Figs and dates, nutmeg,  
Cloves, pomegranates,  
And finally a healthy honey  
Paste of Alexandrian  
Ginger and other digestive 3330  
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 3335  
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, 3340  
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 3345  
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. 3350  
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 3355  
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 3360  
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 3365  
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, 3370  
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, 3375  
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, 3380  
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: 3385  
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 3390  
Could leave, whenever he liked,  
Needing no permission.  
The household servants, he thought,  
Had probably gone to the woods,  
Checking snares and traps, 3395  
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 3400  
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 3405  
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 3410  
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 3415  
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,  
Something I want to know." 3420

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, 3425  
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 3430  
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!” 3435  
She cried. “Some evil star  
Cursed the hour of my birth,  
Bringing me into existence  
To suffer every sort  
Of pain, and escaping none! 3440  
I wouldn’t have lived to see  
My beloved dead, had God  
So willed; He should have decreed  
That Death, who brought me such sorrow,  
Left him alive and killed me. 3445  
Why leave me without my beloved?  
What is life worth, when all  
I love best is dead? With him  
Gone, both my life  
And my body mean nothing to me. 3450  
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 3455

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 3460

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 3465

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), 3470

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 3475

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 3480

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: 3485  
 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. 3490  
 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 3495  
 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, 3500  
 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, 3505  
 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 3510  
 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 3515  
 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, 3520  
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 3525  
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, 3530  
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, 3535  
"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 3540  
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." 3545  
"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 3550  
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, 3555  
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?" 3560  
"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." 3565  
"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?" 3570  
"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 3575  
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 3580



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, 3585  
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. 3590  
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, 3595  
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, 3600  
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 3605  
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 3610  
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?” 3615  
“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! 3620  
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. 3625  
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 3630  
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 3635  
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, 3640  
Replied, “My lord, nothing  
Could make me go with you,  
Or leave him, until  
I see him properly buried.

Take my advice and ride 3645  
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 3650  
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, 3655  
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! 3660  
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 3665  
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, 3670  
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, 3675  
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. 3680  
 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 3685  
 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 3690  
 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. 3695  
 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, 3700  
 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 Vulcan. 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 3705  
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, 3710  
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, 3715  
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 3720  
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 3725  
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. 3730  
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 3735  
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! 3740  
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 3745  
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 3750  
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, 3755  
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, 3760  
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, 3765  
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. 3770  
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. 3775  
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!" 3780  
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." 3785  
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— 3790  
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 3795  
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 3800

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 3805  
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. 3810  
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.” 3815  
“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 3820  
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 3825  
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 3830  
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, 3835  
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, 3840  
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. 3845  
    "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 3850  
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, 3855  
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 3860  
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 3865  
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 3870  
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, 3875  
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. 3880  
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 3885  
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. 3890  
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 3895  
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, 3900  
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, 3905  
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: 3910  
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, 3915  
Confessing your sins as you have.”

“Perhaps my death is not  
So close,” said Perceval.

Without another word  
They galloped their horses, smashing 3920

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, 3925  
Drew their swords and began  
Delivering mighty blows.

They fought fiercely, and hard.

But why tell it all?  
 I've no interest in wasting 3930  
 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 3935  
 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 3940  
 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 3945  
 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." 3950  
 "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 3955  
 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 3960

Tell him you come from the Knight  
In Red—knighted by him  
On his steward, my lord Kay's,  
Advice. And tell the king,  
In front of all the court, 3965  
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 3970  
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. 3975  
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— 3980  
And that should make her happy.”  
The beaten knight declared  
He'd gladly go, and say,  
And do exactly as ordered,  
Without delay, neglecting 3985  
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 3990  
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.” 3995

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, 4000  
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 4005  
Court, in sign of which

The king was attended by only  
Three thousand worthy knights.  
Everyone saw the captive

Come, leading his lady 4010  
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, 4015  
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. 4020

“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 4025  
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 4030  
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 4035  
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, 4040  
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 4045  
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, 4050  
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 4055  
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 4060  
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 4065  
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 4070  
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, 4075  
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. 4080  
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, 4085  
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 4090  
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 4095  
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 4100  
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 4105  
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. 4110  
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 4115  
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.’ 4120

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 4125  
 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 4130  
 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, 4135  
 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. 4140  
 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 4145  
 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 4150  
 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, 4155  
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. 4160  
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, 4165  
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, 4170  
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 4175  
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 4180  
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 4185  
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. 4190  
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 4195  
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 4200  
Created a fresh color,  
Just like his beloved's face,  
And as he stared he forgot  
What he was doing and where  
He was. The red stain 4205  
Against the white snow  
Seemed just like her complexion.  
The more he looked, the happier  
He grew, seeing once  
Again the exact color 4210  
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 4215  
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 4220  
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, 4225  
"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." 4230  
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 4235  
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 4240  
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 4245  
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, 4250  
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 4255  
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 4260  
By surprise. Looking up,  
Perceval saw him coming  
And putting his thoughts aside  
Galloped directly at him.  
The shock of their smashing together 4265  
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 4270  
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 4275  
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!" 4280

“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 4285  
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. 4290  
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, 4295  
“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 4300  
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 4305  
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 4310  
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, 4315  
 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. 4320  
 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 4325  
 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, 4330  
 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— 4335  
 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 4340  
 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 4345  
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, 4350  
"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 4355  
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. 4360  
The stranger knight might  
Be thinking of someone he's lost;  
His belovèd might have been stolen,  
And his heart grieving and sad.  
But if you like, I'll go 4365  
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 4370  
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 4375  
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 4380  
 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— 4385  
 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 4390  
 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, 4395  
 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: 4400  
 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 4405  
 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, 4410  
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. 4415  
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 4420  
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 4425  
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, 4430  
And Perceval's thoughts were not  
So tightly gripped as before.  
Gawain approached him, carefully  
Letting his horse amble,  
Showing no sign of hostility, 4435  
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. 4440

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 4445  
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 4450  
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 beloved's 4455  
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, 4460  
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, 4465  
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, 4470  
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 4475  
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, 4480  
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." 4485  
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 4490  
The idea displeases you."  
"Sir," said my lord Gawain,  
"That pleases me no less  
Than you, or even more!"  
Then Perceval said, "By God, 4495  
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 4500  
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 4505  
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. 4510  
“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 4515  
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 4520  
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 4525  
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 4530  
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 4535  
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 4540  
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, 4545

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, 4550  
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," 4555  
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." 4560

"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 4565  
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. 4570  
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 4575  
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 4580  
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; 4585  
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 4590  
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!” 4595  
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 4600



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 4605  
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 4610  
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, 4615  
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 4620  
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, 4625  
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, 4630  
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 4635  
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 4640  
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: 4645  
“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 4650  
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 4655  
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 4660  
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. 4665  
You're that unlucky man  
Who watched opportunity  
Arrive, and held his tongue.  
What an unlucky fool!  
How wrong to sit there, silent, 4670  
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 4675  
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, 4680  
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: 4685  
"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 4690  
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— 4695  
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 4700  
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 — 4705  
If he dares make the attempt.  
Just down from the peak of Mount  
Esclair a young lady's besieged:  
Whoever can lift that siege  
And free the girl will win 4710  
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." 4715

    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 4720  
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," 4725  
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 4730  
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 — 4735  
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 4740  
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 4745  
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, 4750  
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. 4755  
Guinganbresil knew and correctly  
Greeted the king, but gave  
No greeting to my lord Gawain,  
Accusing him, instead,  
Of a crime: "Gawain, you killed 4760

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 4765  
Know these words to be true."  
Hearing this, my lord  
Gawain leapt up, deeply  
Shamed, but Agrevain  
The Proud, his brother, stopped him: 4770  
"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." 4775  
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 4780  
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. 4785  
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 4790  
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 4795  
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. 4800  
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 4805  
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! 4810  
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 4815  
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 4820  
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, 4825  
 "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." 4830  
 "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 4835  
 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 4840  
 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 4845  
 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 4850  
 Daughter, who told him he couldn't  
 Have her love until

\* *Tornoient* 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. 4855  
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, 4860  
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 4865  
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, 4870  
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. 4875  
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, 4880  
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, 4885  
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 4890  
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 4895  
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, 4900  
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 4905  
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, 4910  
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, 4915  
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. 4920  
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, 4925  
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 4930  
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 4935  
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 4940  
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 4945  
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 4950  
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 4955  
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, 4960  
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, 4965  
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. 4970  
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! 4975  
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 4980

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, 4985  
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 4990  
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 4995  
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, 5000  
"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 5005  
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, 5010  
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 5015  
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 5020  
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, 5025  
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 5030  
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 5035  
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, 5040  
“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 5045  
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. 5050  
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, 5055  
"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, 5060  
"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 5065  
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." 5070  
"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 5075  
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." 5080  
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 5085  
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. 5090  
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. 5095  
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, 5100  
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, 5105  
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 5110  
Blows. Till evening the fighting  
Raged, outside the gates.  
Whatever anyone won  
Would be brought to some safer place.  
The ladies saw a tall 5115  
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 5120  
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 5125  
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. 5130  
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 5135  
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 5140

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 5145  
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. 5150  
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, 5155  
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; 5160  
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. 5165  
    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 5170  
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 5175  
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, 5180  
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, 5185  
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. 5190  
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 5195  
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. 5200  
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, 5205  
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. 5210  
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, 5215  
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 5220  
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. 5225  
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. 5230  
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 5235  
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. 5240  
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, 5245  
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, 5250  
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. 5255  
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 5260  
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 5265  
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." 5270  
"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 5275  
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, 5280  
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 5285  
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, 5290  
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 5295  
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 5300

Gawain, and sat beside him.

Then Tibault, lord of that castle,  
Politely inquired Gawain's  
Reason for merely watching  
Their combat, all that day, 5305  
Instead of joining in.

Without denying his actions  
Were strange, and could have been shameful,  
Gawain replied by explaining  
That he had been accused 5310  
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?" 5315

"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 5320  
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 5325  
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. 5330  
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, 5335  
 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!” 5340  
 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, 5345  
 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?” 5350  
 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, 5355  
 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 5360  
 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, 5365  
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, 5370  
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." 5375  
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? 5380  
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. 5385  
    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. 5390  
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 5395  
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 5400  
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 5405  
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  
Meliant of Lis— 5410  
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 5415  
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." 5420  
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 5425  
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, 5430  
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 5435  
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! 5440  
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 5445  
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. 5450  
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, 5455  
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 5460

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. 5465

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, 5470

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 5475

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. 5480

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 5485

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 5490

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, 5495  
“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. 5500  
And once again all  
The ladies climbed the tower,  
And watched brave and worthy  
Knights forming their ranks.  
And Meliant of Lis 5505  
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, 5510  
But cried out, “Ladies, see!  
Here comes the pride and glory  
Of knightly chivalry!”  
And Gawain spurred his horse  
Directly at him, as fast 5515  
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, 5520  
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 5525  
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 5530  
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 5535  
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, 5540  
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 5545  
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, 5550  
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, 5555  
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, 5560  
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 5565  
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 5570  
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 5575  
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; 5580  
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, 5585  
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. 5590  
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 5595  
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 5600  
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 5605  
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 5610  
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 5615  
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 5620



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 5625

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 5630

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.” 5635

And he asked, again, if Gawain

Would stay, but Gawain persisted,

Refusing all invitations.

And then the girl, neither

A fool nor wicked, bent 5640

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 5645

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, 5650

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, 5655

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, 5660

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, 5665

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 5670

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, 5675

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. 5680

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 5685  
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, 5690  
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, 5695  
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 5700  
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. 5705  
Those leading the way  
Were wearing short clothes—boys  
On foot, with packs of dogs.  
And then came huntsmen, carrying  
Sharpened spears. And then 5710  
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 5715  
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. 5720  
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 5725  
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 5730  
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, 5735  
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 5740  
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, 5745  
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 5750  
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 5755  
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, 5760  
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, 5765  
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; 5770  
Weavers of cloth, and finishers,  
Those who card, and those  
Who shear; smelters of silver  
And gold; makers of beautiful  
Things, goblets and cups 5775  
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— 5780

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 5785  
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, 5790  
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 5795  
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. 5800  
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." 5805  
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. 5810  
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." 5815

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, 5820  
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— 5825  
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, 5830  
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. 5835  
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, 5840  
"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, 5845  
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. 5850  
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, 5855  
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 5860  
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, 5865  
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 5870  
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, 5875  
"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! — 5880  
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 5885  
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 5890  
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: 5895  
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, 5900  
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 5905  
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 5910  
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 5915  
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, 5920  
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 5925  
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, 5930  
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, 5935  
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. 5940

The town crier called them  
To arms, and everyone came,  
The town bell ringing  
To remind them not to stay home.  
Every single rogue 5945  
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. 5950  
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, 5955  
“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! 5960  
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 5965  
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. 5970  
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; 5975  
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 5980  
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, 5985  
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, 5990  
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, 5995  
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. 6000  
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, 6005  
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 6010  
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 6015  
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, 6020  
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 6025  
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, 6030  
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) 6035  
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. 6040

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 6045  
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 6050  
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 6055  
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 6060  
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 6065  
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 6070  
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, 6075  
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 6080  
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 6085  
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 6090  
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 6095  
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. 6100

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 6105  
 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 6110  
 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, 6115  
 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 6120  
 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 6125  
 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. 6130  
 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 6135  
To show it by trembling or changing  
Color. Guinganbresil  
Came forward, greeting the girl,  
Who'd become extremely pale,  
Then speaking these empty words: 6140  
"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 6145  
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 6150  
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 6155  
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, 6160  
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 6200  
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, 6205

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. 6210

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* 6215  
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 6220

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 6225

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, 6230  
And proved his courage over  
And over; nothing he started  
Was ever left unfinished.  
In those five years he sent  
Fifty worthy knights 6235  
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, 6240  
Riding, as he usually rode,  
Armored from head to foot,  
When he met with five knights,  
Along with ten ladies,  
Their heads completely covered, 6245  
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 6250  
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, 6255  
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 6260

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 6265  
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, 6270  
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. 6275  
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 6280  
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 6285  
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, 6290  
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, 6295  
 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 6300  
 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 6305  
 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. 6310  
 “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.” 6315  
     Hearing these words, Perceval  
 Wept, and wanted to speak  
 With the holy hermit himself.

\* Poirion claims that “the invective against the Jews is *surprisingly* violent” (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. Flannery, “Medieval anti-Semitism left a mark on both Jew and Christian” (*The Anguish of the Jews* [New York: Macmillan, 1964], 144).

“That’s where I want to go,”  
He said, “to this hermit, if only 6320  
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, 6325  
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 6330  
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 6335  
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 6340  
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), 6345  
Just beginning the most beautiful,  
The sweetest service the sainted  
Church can celebrate.  
Perceval dropped to his knees  
The moment he entered that chapel, 6350

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 6355  
Of having offended God,  
Clasped the hermit's feet  
And, bending low, his hands  
Joined in supplication,  
Begged for help, for his need 6360  
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 6365  
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, 6370  
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, 6375  
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 6380  
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 6385  
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." 6390  
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 6395  
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, 6400  
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 6405  
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 6410  
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. 6415  
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. 6420  
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, 6425  
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 6430  
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!" 6435  
Said Perceval. "With a willing heart!  
My mother having been your sister,  
I am truly your nephew, and you  
My uncle, and well beloved."  
"Indeed, good nephew. Now repent! 6440  
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. 6445  
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. 6450  
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 6455  
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 6460  
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. 6465  
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. 6470  
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?" 6475  
"Entirely willing," said Perceval.  
"And now I'd like you to remain  
With me for two whole days,

And in penitence dine with me,  
Eating the foods I eat." 6480  
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 6485  
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 6490  
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. 6495  
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, 6500  
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. 6505  
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, 6510

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 6515

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, 6520

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.

6525

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,

6530

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,

6535

\* In fact, in the remaining pages that Chrétien lived to write, we never return to Perceval

And could have climbed this hill. 6540  
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, 6545  
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 6550  
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 6555  
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 6560  
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 6565  
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 6570  
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 6575  
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.” 6580  
“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 6585  
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 6590  
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.” 6595  
“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 6600  
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 6605  
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 6610  
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 6615  
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, 6620  
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," 6625  
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, 6630  
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— 6635



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 6640  
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 6645  
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, 6650  
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, 6655  
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 6660  
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 6665  
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. 6670  
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 6675  
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. 6680  
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, 6685  
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." 6690  
"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, 6695  
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, 6700  
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 6705  
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. 6710  
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 6715  
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." 6720  
"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 6725  
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. 6730  
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— 6735  
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: 6740  
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 6745  
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 6750  
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 6755  
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 6760  
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, 6765  
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 6770  
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 6775  
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, 6780  
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 6785  
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, 6790  
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, 6795

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 6800  
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, 6805  
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 6810  
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 6815  
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." 6820  
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, 6825  
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 6830  
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 6835  
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."  
6840  
"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, 6845  
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! 6850  
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 6855  
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, 6860  
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, 6865  
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 6870  
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 6875  
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: 6880  
"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 6885  
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 6890  
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!" 6895

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 6900

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. 6905

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. 6910

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. 6915

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 6920

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 6925  
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, 6930  
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 6935  
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 6940  
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. 6945  
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 6950  
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." 6955

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, 6960  
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 6965  
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 6970  
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 6975  
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. 6980  
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 6985  
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 6990  
 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 6995  
 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 7000  
 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 7005  
 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." 7010  
 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 7015  
 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, 7025  
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, 7030  
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 7035  
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 7040  
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, 7045  
“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, 7050  
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, 7055  
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 7060  
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, 7065  
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, 7070  
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. 7075  
Gawain watched him galloping  
Up and down the hill,  
Shocked and amused at once,  
And finally said, laughing,  
"By God, good knight, this 7080  
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." 7085  
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." 7090  
"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, 7095  
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 7100  
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 7105  
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, 7110  
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 7115

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 7120  
 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, 7125  
 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, 7130  
 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 7135  
 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!" 7140  
     And then Gregorias left him,  
 And the girl who loved Gregorias  
 Followed him on her palfrey,  
 Riding very rapidly,  
 Which made the other girl 7145

\* 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 7150  
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, 7155  
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: 7160  
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 7165  
Chops couldn’t get closer  
Than two whole fingers of touching  
Each other—a scrawny, feeble  
Beast, with cloudy eyes,  
Clawlike hooves, its flanks 7170  
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, 7175  
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. 7180  
“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 7185  
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! 7190  
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 7195  
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.” 7200  
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, 7205  
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, 7210  
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, 7215  
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 7220  
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 7225  
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 7230  
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: 7235  
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 7240  
Its like, a palace built

Entirely of brown marble  
And set in native rock.  
More than five hundred windows  
Were open, filled with ladies 7245  
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, 7250  
Though some were wearing tunics  
Of many different colors,  
And gold-embroidered silk.  
    The girls stood in those open  
Windows, displaying their shining 7255  
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 7260  
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 7265  
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 7270  
Heart that beat in her belly —  
And her palfrey got in, too,  
For he'd done this many times.

“You,” she said to Gawain.  
“Get in here, hurry up, 7275  
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 7280  
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.” 7285  
Then Gawain quickly turned  
His head and, seeing a knight  
Riding across the fields,  
Fully armed, asked  
The girl, “Tell me, if you please, 7290  
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 7295  
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 7300  
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 7305  
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 7310  
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," 7315  
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! 7320  
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 7325  
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 7330  
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 7335

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 7340  
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 7345  
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 7350  
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 7355  
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 7360  
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, 7365  
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, 7370  
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. 7375  
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. 7380  
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 7385  
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, 7390  
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: 7395  
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 7400  
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 7405  
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 7410  
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 7415  
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 7420  
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 7425  
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, 7430  
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 7435  
 No more fighting, badly  
 Wounded and bleeding freely.  
 As Gawain came cautiously toward him  
 He said, terribly frightened,  
 "Sir, to tell you the truth, 7440  
 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. 7445  
 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 7450  
 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 7455  
 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, 7460  
 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 7465  
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, 7470  
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 7475  
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 7480  
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, 7485  
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. 7490  
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 7495

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, 7500  
And they stood together in a little  
Tower, looking out  
Its windows. Gawain stared  
At the lovely country around them,  
Seeing forest and fields 7505  
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.” 7510  
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, 7515  
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.” 7520  
“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 7525  
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. 7530  
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 7535  
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, 7540  
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 7545  
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 7550  
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, 7555  
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, 7560  
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, 7565  
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, 7570  
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, 7575  
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, 7580  
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 7585  
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 7590  
Knights. But oceans will turn

To ice before any  
Such knight will ever appear,  
Able to be at once  
Wise and generous, quite 7595  
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, 7600  
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.” 7605  
    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: 7610  
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 7615  
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, 7620  
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 7625  
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 7630  
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." 7635  
"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 7640  
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 7645  
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 7650  
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 7655



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 7660  
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, 7665  
Do you know who this cripple is?"  
"His wooden leg isn't wood,  
By God," Gawain replied,  
"And it's quite incredibly lovely!"  
"Oh Lord," said the boatman, "he's rich, 7670  
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!" 7675  
Then on they went, together,  
Until they came to the palace;  
The entryway was high,  
The gates beautiful and rich,  
Every nail and every 7680  
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 7685  
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 7690  
Extremely beautiful, carefully  
Worked, beautifully polished.  
And there in the great hall  
Was a bed, made without wood,  
Fashioned only of gold— 7695  
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 7700  
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, 7705  
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 7710  
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, 7715  
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, 7720  
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. 7725  
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. 7730  
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- 7735  
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 7740  
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, 7745  
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 7750  
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 7755  
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: 7760  
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, 7765  
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 7770  
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?" 7775  
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, 7780  
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, 7785  
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 7790  
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, 7795  
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 7800  
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, 7805  
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 7810  
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 7815

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. 7820

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 7825

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. 7830

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 7835

The hail of falling missiles  
Created a ghastly racket,  
And for no amount of gold  
Would Gawain have wanted to be there. 7840

And then the windows reclosed  
Themselves, without any human  
Help, and Gawain began  
To remove the arrows stuck  
In his shield, many of which 7845

Had pierced his skin as well;  
His wounds bled quite freely.  
But before he'd cleaned his shield 7850  
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, 7855  
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, 7860  
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 7865  
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, 7870  
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 7875  
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 7880  
 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!" 7885  
     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 7890  
 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 7895  
 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 7900  
 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, 7905  
 But Nature itself had tinted  
 Her cheeks the purest red.  
 Truly, she was perfectly made,  
 Slender, and lovely, and straight.  
 And many noble, beautiful 7910  
 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, 7915  
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 7920  
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 7925  
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 7930  
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, 7935  
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 7940  
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, 7945  
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 7950  
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 7955  
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, 7960  
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, 7965  
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 7970  
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 7975

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 7980  
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, 7985  
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 7990  
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 7995  
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 8000  
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 8005  
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 8010  
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 8015  
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 8020  
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." 8025  
"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 8030  
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, 8035  
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. 8040  
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 8045  
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, 8050  
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, 8055  
"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, 8060  
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: 8065  
"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, 8070  
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 8075  
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 8080  
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, 8085  
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. 8090  
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, 8095  
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. 8100  
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 8105  
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, 8110  
Finely embroidered with close-stitched  
Golden thread. Seeing  
The lady, Gawain didn't  
Delay, but went to greet her.  
And she greeted him: "Sir, 8115  
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." 8120  
"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, 8125  
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, 8130  
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. 8135

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 8140  
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, 8145  
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." 8150  
"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 8155  
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, 8160  
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 8165  
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. 8170  
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 8175  
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. 8180  
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 8185  
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. 8190  
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 8195  
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?” 8200  
“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 8205  
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; 8210  
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. 8215  
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: 8220  
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.” 8225  
“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.” 8230  
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 8235  
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, 8240  
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- 8245  
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, 8250  
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 8255  
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 8260  
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 8265  
Of silk and ermine. His boatman-  
Host appeared beside  
His bed, that morning, to help him  
Rise, and wash, and dress.  
And Clarissant, beautiful, 8270  
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 8275  
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 8280  
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, 8285  
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 8290  
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, 8295

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, 8300  
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, 8305  
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?" 8310  
"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: 8315  
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. 8320  
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: 8325  
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. 8330  
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! 8335  
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.” 8340  
“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,” 8345  
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. 8350  
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,” 8355  
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 8360  
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 8365  
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 8370  
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 8375  
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 8380  
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 8385  
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. 8390  
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, 8395  
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 8400  
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 8405  
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, 8410  
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 8415  
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 8420  
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 8425  
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: 8430  
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 8435  
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, 8440  
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 8445  
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 8450  
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 8455

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 8460  
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 8465  
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. 8470  
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. 8475  
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, 8480  
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 8485  
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?" 8490  
"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 8495  
As the Perilous Ford, and no  
Merely ordinary knight  
Can hope to get across it."  
Quickly, my lord Gawain  
Rode to the river bank, 8500  
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 8505  
Ditches; he also recalled  
Hearing it said, here  
And there and often, that whoever  
Leapt the Perilous Ford  
And crossed so deep a stream 8510  
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 8515  
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 8520  
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 8525  
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 8530  
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 8535  
And mounted, riding slowly  
Along until he saw  
A solitary knight  
Hunting with a hawk. Three bird dogs  
Lay in the meadow beside him. 8540  
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 8545  
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 8550  
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 8555  
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." 8560  
"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, 8565  
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. 8570  
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, 8575  
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 8580  
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, 8585  
 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 8590  
 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— 8595  
 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: 8600  
 She’s full of the devil, all right.  
 She certainly hates you, that’s clear,  
 And hoped it was you who would drown  
 Down in that deep and treacherous  
 Water—may God confound her! 8605  
 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, 8610  
 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.” 8615

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 8620  
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. 8625  
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, 8630  
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?" 8635  
"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, 8640  
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 8645  
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, 8650  
 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 8655  
 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 8660  
 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, 8665  
 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!" 8670  
 "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, 8675  
 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! 8680  
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: 8685  
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— 8690  
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, 8695  
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, 8700  
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, 8705  
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 8710  
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, 8715  
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, 8720  
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 8725  
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, 8730  
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," 8735  
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. 8740  
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 8745  
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 8750  
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, 8755  
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— 8760  
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 8765  
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: 8770  
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, 8775

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 8780  
 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 8785  
 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 8790  
 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 8795  
 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." 8800  
 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, 8805  
 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, 8810  
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, 8815  
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 8820  
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?" 8825  
"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 8830  
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." 8835  
"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 8840  
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! 8845  
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, 8850  
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 8855  
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 8860  
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, 8865  
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 8870

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. 8875  
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 8880  
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, 8885  
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, 8890  
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, 8895  
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 8900  
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 8905  
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: 8910  
“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 8915  
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, 8920  
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 8925  
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 8930  
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. 8970  
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 8975  
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 8980  
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, 8985  
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, 8990  
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 8995  
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 9000  
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 9005  
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 9010  
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." 9015  
"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. 9020  
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, 9025  
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 9030

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 9035  
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. 9040  
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, 9045  
And the old queen, seated  
Beside her daughter, said,  
"Dear daughter, how do you like  
That gentleman there, sitting  
Next to your lovely daughter? 9050  
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 9055  
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!" 9060  
"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!" 9065  
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, 9070  
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 9075  
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, 9080  
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 9085  
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. 9090  
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 9095  
 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. 9100  
 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 9105  
 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. 9110  
 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 9115  
 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 9120  
 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, 9125  
 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 9130  
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. 9135  
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 9140  
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, 9145  
Well-rested horses, one  
Of whom was completely ready  
To travel wherever was wanted,  
Not only newly shod  
But saddled and bridled as well. 9150  
"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!" 9155  
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 9160  
No obstacles at all,  
For the boatman had many men  
At the oars. The youngster hurried  
On toward Orcanie,  
Well aware that knowledge 9165  
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. 9170  
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. 9175  
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 9180  
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 9185  
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 9190



So fast that he'd reached the city  
Of Orcanic, where King Arthur  
Held court in royal style.  
Cripples and beggars, watching  
As he galloped by, exclaimed, 9195  
"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 9200  
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 9205  
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, 9210  
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. 9215

    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. 9220

    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 9225  
 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, 9230  
 Hurriedly, just in time  
 To find the queen arriving,  
 Distraught like everyone else,  
 And seeing my lady Lorre  
 Guinevere asked if she . . . . . 9235

*EXPLYCYT PERCEVAX LE VIEL*

[“Here ends the old *Perceval*”]\*\*

\* 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 attempts 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 concerning 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 talismans are the spear of the god Lug that made its holder unconquerable, 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 Chrétien,

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 *Valversthattr* and the *Perchevael* 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 Efracwg*, 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 laming 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, Munsalvæsche, 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.





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# Perceval

*The Story of the Grail*

Chrétien de Troyes

Translated by Burton Raffel

with an afterword by Joseph J. Duggan

Literature

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.

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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.

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Cover illustration: From *Le Livre de Lancelot du Lac*, part III, c. 1290. Yale Collection of Early Books, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

Yale University Press  
New Haven and London

<http://www.yale.edu/yup/>

ISBN 0-300-07586-3



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