



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

PERCEVAL OR THE STORY OF THE GRAIL

From Chrétien de Troyes

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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PERCEVAL, OR THE STORY OF THE GRAIL

A Retelling of Chrétien de Troyes' Romance

Chrétien de Troyes was a French poet writing for aristocratic courts in the twelfth century. His *Perceval, or The Story of the Grail*, composed in the 1180s, contains the earliest surviving literary Grail story. The poem is famously unfinished: the surviving text breaks off while both Perceval's and Gawain's adventures remain unresolved.

This retelling follows Chrétien's surviving poem and does not import endings from the later *Continuations*, the *Vulgate Cycle*, *Wolfram von Eschenbach*, or *Malory*. It has been checked against the public-domain Old French text, including Charles Potvin's nineteenth-century edition. What follows is modern Mythopouch prose, not a translation.

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

- **Perceval** - a Welsh boy raised in ignorance of knighthood who becomes the central hero of the Grail story
- **Perceval's mother** - a widowed lady of the Waste Forest who tries to keep her surviving son away from knighthood
- **King Arthur** - king of Britain and lord of the court Perceval longs to join
- **Kay (Keu)** - Arthur's sharp-tongued seneschal
- **The Red Knight** - an arrogant knight who humiliates Arthur's court and carries away the king's golden cup
- **Gornemant of Gohort** - the experienced knight who teaches Perceval how to bear arms and behave more wisely
- **Blanchefleur** - the besieged lady of Biaurepaire and Perceval's beloved
- **Clamadeu of the Isles and Anguingueron** - the enemies besieging Blanchefleur
- **The Fisher King** - the wounded ruler who hosts Perceval at the mysterious Grail castle
- **The Loathly Damsel** - the hideous messenger who publicly denounces Perceval for failing to ask the Grail question
- **Gawain (Gauvain)** - Arthur's nephew, whose adventures occupy much of the unfinished second half of the poem
- **Guigambresil** - the knight who accuses Gawain of treason and demands trial by combat
- **Ygerne** - Arthur's mother and Gawain's grandmother, encountered late in Gawain's adventures
- **Gawain's mother and sister** - both present at the Castle of Marvels; Chrétien does not give Gawain's sister the name Clarissant in the surviving poem

PART I: THE BOY IN THE WASTE FOREST

Once, in the wild country of Wales, there was a boy who knew almost nothing of the world beyond his mother's lands.

His father had been a knight of high standing. Wounded through the thighs and deprived of much of his lands, he declined into weakness. The boy's two elder brothers were knighted, but both were killed in combat, and their father died soon afterwards. Their mother, determined not to lose her last son to the same world of arms, withdrew with him into the Waste Forest.

The boy grew up among ploughmen, woods and hunting. His mother kept all knowledge of chivalry from him. He carried three javelins and knew how to cast them, but he had never seen a knight.

One spring morning he heard the clatter of armour in the trees and saw five armed knights. Their armour shone so brightly that at first he thought they were angels, then wondered whether the foremost might be God himself. The knight laughed at the mistake and told him plainly that he was a knight made by King Arthur. Again and again the boy ignored the knight's own questions about five knights and three maidens who had passed through the country and instead asked what a lance, shield, hauberk and helmet were for.

The revelation changed everything. The boy returned home announcing that he would go to Arthur and be made a knight.

His mother wept, but when she saw that she could not stop him, she gave him what guidance she could. He was to honour women, accept a kiss or a ring only in the proper spirit of courtesy, attend church, ask the names of those he met, and learn from worthy men. He promised to remember.

He rode away in his rough Welsh clothes. When he had gone a short distance he looked back and saw his mother collapse in a swoon at the end of the bridge by the gate. He did not return. He rode on into the forest, not knowing whether she had merely fainted or had died.

PART II: THE KISS AND THE RING

Perceval came to a rich pavilion beside a spring. Inside was a maiden, and his half-understood memory of his mother's advice immediately led him astray.

He forced kisses upon the maiden twenty times, despite her protests. Then he saw an emerald ring on her finger and decided that his mother had told him to take such a ring. He pulled it from her hand by force. Hungry, he ate and drank from the provisions in the pavilion before riding away, pleased with himself and unaware of the harm he had done.

The maiden's lover, the Proud Knight of the Heath, returned and assumed she had welcomed the stranger willingly. He punished her cruelly and swore she would remain in misery until he found the Welsh boy who had caused his shame.

Much later Perceval would meet the Proud Knight, defeat him, send him to Arthur's court and clear the maiden of the accusation against her. For now, however, he rode on with the dangerous innocence of someone who obeyed words without understanding their meaning.

PART III: AT KING ARTHUR'S COURT

Perceval reached King Arthur's court at Carduel. The king was sombre. A knight dressed in red had entered the hall, seized Arthur's golden cup and spilled its wine over the queen before riding away

with the cup and challenging anyone to follow him.

Perceval rode straight into the hall and demanded knighthood. When he heard about the Red Knight, he decided that he wanted the man's armour and no other.

Kay mocked him and told him to go and take it. A maiden who had not laughed for years suddenly laughed when she saw Perceval and foretold that, if he lived, he would become an outstanding knight. Kay struck her for speaking, and he also abused the court fool who repeated prophecies about the boy.

Perceval found the Red Knight outside and demanded his armour in Arthur's name. The Red Knight did not miss him in a charge. Instead he struck the boy hard across the shoulders with the shaft of his lance. Angered, Perceval aimed carefully and hurled a javelin through the knight's eye and into his brain, killing him.

Perceval then discovered that killing an armoured knight was easier than undressing one. He could not work out the helmet, sword belt or mail. Yonet, a squire from Arthur's court, came out and showed him how to remove the armour. Perceval put on the red equipment, mounted the dead knight's horse and sent Arthur's golden cup back to the king.

Before leaving, he also sent word that one day he would repay Kay for striking the maiden and kicking the fool. Then he rode away in red armour, still almost completely ignorant of knightly custom.

PART IV: GORNEMANT OF GOHORT

Perceval soon reached the stronghold of a courteous older knight named Gornemant of Gohort. Gornemant immediately saw that the boy possessed courage and natural ability but almost no training.

That same day he taught Perceval how to hold shield and lance, control a war-horse, charge properly and use a sword if his lance broke. Perceval imitated him so quickly that Gornemant marvelled at how naturally the skills came to him.

Gornemant also tried to teach him judgement. He warned him not to chatter foolishly or ask questions without measure, to show mercy to a defeated knight who begged for it, to aid women in need, and to honour God and the Church.

That night Gornemant asked Perceval to remain with him for a month, even a year, so that he could learn more. Perceval refused because he had seen his mother collapse when he left and did not know whether she lived or died. He wanted to return to her as soon as possible.

Gornemant clothed him more fittingly and, when Perceval left the next morning, sent him away better armed and far better instructed than when he arrived. The advice not to ask too many questions would later become the most costly lesson Perceval ever obeyed.

PART V: BIAUREPAIRE AND BLANCHEFLEUR

On the road Perceval came to Biaurepaire, a town wasting away under siege. Its people were hungry, its defenders exhausted, and its lady Blanchefleur was close to despair.

Blanchefleur received the stranger and told him of Clamadeu of the Isles and his seneschal Anguingueron, whose forces had reduced her people to misery. That night she came to Perceval in tears because she feared the town would fall and that she would be taken by force.

Perceval promised to defend her. He fought Anguingueron, overcame him and spared his life on condition that he go to Arthur's court as a prisoner and report who had defeated him.

The siege did not end at once. Clamadeu tried again to break the defenders, but his plans failed. At last he fought Perceval himself in single combat. Perceval defeated him too and required him to go to Arthur's court as a prisoner. Clamadeu also released the captives he had taken.

Biaurepaire rejoiced, and Perceval and Blanchefleur loved one another. Yet he still remembered the mother he had left behind. He promised Blanchefleur that he would return and once again took the road.

PART VI: THE CASTLE OF THE GRAIL

One evening Perceval reached a great river and saw two men in a boat, one of them fishing. He asked where he might find lodging. The fisherman directed him towards a nearby castle and told him that he himself was its lord.

For a time Perceval could see no castle and thought he had been deceived. Then the place came into view, rich and imposing, and he was received with extraordinary courtesy.

His host was unable to rise to greet him. Later Perceval would learn that the man had been wounded through both thighs and could no longer ride a horse. He could still be carried to a boat and fish with a line, and for that reason he was known as the Fisher King.

During the evening a white lance was carried through the hall. From its iron point a drop of blood ran down the shaft to the bearer's hand. Perceval wanted to ask why it bled, but remembered Gornemant's warning against excessive questions and stayed silent.

Then two young men entered carrying golden candlesticks, each holding at least ten burning candles. Behind them came a richly dressed maiden carrying a grail of fine gold set with precious stones. Its brightness dimmed the candlelight. Another maiden followed with a silver carving-platter.

The procession passed from one chamber to another. During the meal the grail repeatedly passed before Perceval, yet each time he kept silent. He wanted to know whom the grail served, but told himself he could ask in the morning.

After the meal the Fisher King had to be carried to his chamber. Perceval slept in the hall. When he woke, the castle seemed deserted. His armour had been laid out and his horse stood saddled. The drawbridge was down, so he rode across it. As soon as his horse cleared the bridge, it was raised behind him. He called back for someone to answer his questions, but no one replied.

PART VII: THE COUSIN, ARTHUR'S COURT AND THE LOATHLY DAMSEL

In the forest Perceval found a maiden mourning over the body of a beheaded knight. She questioned him and soon realised that he had slept at the Fisher King's castle.

When she asked his name, Perceval suddenly knew it: Perceval the Welshman. She told him that she was his cousin and gave him the news he had feared. His mother had died from the grief of his departure after falling in a swoon at the bridge. Perceval had seen her fall and had ridden on.

His cousin told him that his failure at the Grail castle was bound to that sin. Had he asked why the lance bled and whom the grail served, the wounded king would have been healed and great harm would have been prevented.

Perceval continued his wandering. He eventually met the Proud Knight of the Heath, defeated him and forced him to restore the maiden whom Perceval himself had wronged. Later, on a snowy morning, three drops of blood on the white ground reminded him so powerfully of Blanchefleur's colouring that he sat absorbed in thought. Arthur's men found him there. In the encounters that followed, Perceval fulfilled the old prophecy by breaking Kay's arm, avenging the maiden Kay had struck.

Gawain recognised Perceval and brought him peacefully to Arthur. The court rejoiced to have him at last.

On the third day a hideous damsel rode into the hall and publicly cursed Perceval for his silence at the Grail castle. She repeated the disasters that his unanswered questions had allowed to continue. She then announced dangerous adventures elsewhere, including the Proud Castle and a maiden besieged beneath Mont Esclaire.

Gawain immediately vowed that he would attempt to relieve the maiden beneath Mont Esclaire. Perceval made a different vow: he would not rest two nights in the same lodging, would seek difficult adventures, and would continue until he learned whom the grail served and why the lance bled.

Before Gawain could ride to Mont Esclaire, however, another knight entered Arthur's hall. His name was Guigambresil, and he accused Gawain of having killed his lord without challenge. Gawain denied treason and offered to prove himself in combat before the King of Escavalon.

PART VIII: GAWAIN ACCUSED

Chrétien's story now follows Gawain for a long stretch.

On his way towards Escavalon, Gawain came to a tournament arranged by Melianz de Liz against Tibaut of Tintagel. Tibaut's younger daughter, known as the Maiden with the Little Sleeves, had quarrelled with her elder sister over which knight was best. She asked Gawain to fight for her honour and sent him a sleeve to wear.

Gawain entered the tournament, unhorsed Melianz and other knights, and sent his winnings as courteous gifts to the young maiden and her household. The episode showed the kind of measured courtesy that Perceval had once lacked.

Gawain then continued to Escavalon. There, while he was under the protection owed to a guest, townspeople discovered who he was and attacked the tower where he had taken refuge. Guigambresil himself objected to allowing Gawain to be killed treacherously after he had been received as a guest.

The dispute was settled temporarily. Gawain's trial by combat with Guigambresil was postponed for one year. During that year Gawain swore to do everything in his power to find the lance whose point continually bled. If he failed, he was to return and face the delayed judgement.

PART IX: GOOD FRIDAY AND THE HERMIT

At this point Chrétien leaves Gawain and returns to Perceval.

Five full years had passed since the Grail castle. During that time Perceval had pursued adventure almost without rest. He had forgotten God, neglected church and sent fifty defeated knights as prisoners to Arthur's court.

One day he rode fully armed through a lonely country and met five knights and a group of ladies walking barefoot in penance. They were astonished to see him carrying arms on Good Friday and reminded him what day it was.

Their words broke through the hardness that had grown around him. Perceval began to weep and asked where they had been. They directed him to a holy hermit in the forest.

Perceval went to the hermitage, confessed his five years of forgetfulness and told the hermit about the bleeding lance and the grail.

The hermit recognised his name and revealed that he was Perceval's maternal uncle. He confirmed that Perceval's mother had died of grief after his departure, and he explained that this sin had contributed to Perceval's silence at the Grail castle.

Then he explained the family relationship behind the Grail mystery. The old man whom the grail served was the hermit's brother and also the brother of Perceval's mother. The wounded Fisher King was that old man's son. In other words, the old grail king was Perceval's uncle, while the Fisher King was Perceval's cousin.

The grail did not carry a feast for the old man. A single consecrated host was brought to him in it, and that alone had sustained his life for fifteen years.

The hermit gave Perceval penance and taught him how to return to religious life. Perceval stayed with him through the holy days and received communion at Easter.

Chrétien does not return to Perceval again in the surviving poem. His Grail quest therefore remains unresolved.

PART X: THE BED OF MARVELS AND THE UNFINISHED ENDING

After Perceval's Good Friday episode, the poem returns once more to Gawain.

Gawain's road leads through a series of difficult encounters, including a grieving maiden and another sharp-tongued woman whose hostility he patiently endures. Eventually he reaches the mysterious Castle of Marvels at the Rock of Champguin.

At the castle stands the Bed of Marvels. When Gawain sits upon it, bells ring and hidden mechanisms unleash a storm of bolts and arrows. He survives the attack. A great lion is then loosed upon him, and Gawain kills it. By enduring these marvels he wins extraordinary honour within the castle.

The castle contains two queens and a young maiden. The oldest queen is Ygerne, widow of Uther Pendragon and mother of King Arthur. The other queen is Gawain's own mother, the widow of King Lot. The young maiden is Gawain's sister. Chrétien does not give this sister the later name Clarissant in the surviving poem.

At first Gawain's own family does not recognise him. Across the river he later meets a knight named Grinomalanz, who reveals the identities of the women in the castle. Grinomalanz also explains that he hates Gawain because of an old family feud, yet he loves Gawain's sister and sends her a ring.

Gawain carries the ring back to his sister and secretly sends a messenger to King Arthur. He asks Arthur to come with his court to the region by the fifth day of the Pentecost feast, because Gawain has also agreed to meet Grinomalanz in combat.

The messenger reaches Arthur's court at Orcanie. Arthur is deeply distressed because Gawain is absent and, before the message can fully resolve the situation, the text breaks off.

That is where Chrétien's surviving Perceval ends: not with the Grail healed, not with Gawain's battles settled, and not with Arthur already travelling to the Castle of Marvels, but in the middle of unfinished business.

Later writers refused to leave the story there. Anonymous Continuations extended both Perceval's and Gawain's adventures, while other medieval authors transformed the Grail tradition in new directions. Those later endings are important works in their own right, but they are not Chrétien's ending, because no completed ending by Chrétien survives.

SOURCE NOTE

This account is original Mythopouch educational wording for readers aged 15 and up. It is not a translation of Chrétien de Troyes. It follows the surviving Old French text of Perceval, or The Story of the Grail, checked against public-domain nineteenth- and early twentieth-century editions, including Charles Potvin's edition. Later medieval Continuations and later Grail traditions have not been used to manufacture an ending for Chrétien's unfinished poem.