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Chretien De Troyes: A Feminist of Twelfth Century France

Ruth H. Shull

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CHRISTIAN DE TROYES:
A FEMINIST OF TWELFTH CENTURY FRANCE

by

RUTH HENDRICKSON SHULL

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
Department of English
Butler University

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In twelfth century France, in Troyes, capital of Champagne, was born Chrétien, later designated as Chrétien de Troyes. Little is known of his life, but it is supposed that his origins were humble. Possibly he went to school at Reims, there to receive a clerical education, the best that his times afforded. His familiarity with the phraseology of chivalry suggests that he may have been at one time a herald of arms. It is certain that he did not join any one of the clerical orders, but rather sought an allied interest along literary lines. Since a littératour, who received all epithets from a lapidary to a mendicant, had to have a patron in order to subsist, Chrétien attached himself to the brilliant court of Marie of Champagne, daughter of Eleanor of Aquitania, and wife of Count Henry the First of Troyes. Marie herself, being the literary daughter of a literary mother, provided for him the sympathetic background which he needed.

1. In a tourney scene in Lancelot, Chrétien says: "Il est venu qui aumerai!" "He has come who will measure at their value the worth of others!"
In addition to his observation of the rich pageantry of the life in the chateau, it is seen in his writings that he must have learned much from the activities about him, especially from the great fairs in his own industrial city and the neighboring towns of Arras, Bar, Lagny, and Provins.  

In such gatherings, took place most of the commerce in skins of cats, gray and black, rabbits, squirrels, sables, ermine, cloth of ecarlate (woolen), and of bure (fustian), dyes of alum, Brazil wood, and bright berries, gold and silver fringes, coverings, costly chessmen,—in fact a whole outlay of romantic accessories. He must have seen the streets on feast days hung with silken stuffs and tapestries, maybe from the cruel sweat shops of Arras. He observed costly imported armor, a shield from Limoges, another from Toulouse, still another from London, engraved with two swallows, ready to fly.  

Evidence shows that the poet had not mal voyagé, and that he may have gathered at first hand his Celtic material in Brittany. By his own word, we have it that he had visited

3. Ibid., Lancelot ou le Chevalier à la Charrette (vv. 5793-5812).  
4. Ibid., Cliges (vv. 15-23).
the celebrated library of the church of Saint Pierre at Beauvais. He may have journeyed even as far as England, for we find such names as Sorlin (Shoreham), Oxford, Wallingford, Southampton, and Winchester. He seemed well acquainted with the woes of seasickness, as if he may have made the rough Channel crossing. One historian, Pirenne, goes so far as to say that Chrétien may have visited the Orient because he knew of silks as yet undeveloped in France, and he wrote of a harem, and of Constantinople.

Round about him, the great Gothic churches were rising, with their ogival symbolism of a reaching towards Heaven. Notre Dame at Paris was consecrated in 1162; in the second half of the twelfth century the shadowy Chartres with its jewel-like windows was being built; and soon the refectory of Mont Saint Michel was to resound to the Song of Roland, sung by some minstrel to fire the knights of William the Conqueror. Although he may not have visited all, or any, of these monuments, the very nearness of their erection and progress showed the way men's minds were tending towards a more refined and spiritualized civilization. The growing worship of the Blessed Virgin tended towards a deification of all women.

In Marie's castle, where Chrétien de Troyes lived, and wrote, and, mayhap, loved, for the great part of his fifteen or twenty years of literary activity, dependent always on the bounty of his wealthy patron and her friends, life was very gay and essentially aristocratic. Seventy thousand men were gone to the Crusades, and there was only one man to every
seven women left at home. Chrétien, dealing with a written language only two hundred years old, no doubt read his stories, minstrel-fashion, somewhat as an entertainer, to his feminine audience in the great hall, before an oak log smouldering, dominated by the chimney with its heraldic devices.¹

No place here for serfs, or bourgeois, or merchants, even. Chrétien wrote of knights to please those who, perforce, must stay at home. There were long lists of names of those from Arthur's court, with catchy epithets, to sound imposing when read, such as Lancelot du Lac, Gornemant de Goort, le beau Couart, le laid Hardi, Méliant le Lis, Maudit le Sage, Dodinel le Sauvage, Ké le Sénéchal, Gale le Chauve, and Tristan "who never smiled." At Enid's wedding, there was a regular carnaval-esque procession, among the figures of which were the Lord of the Île of Glass, and David on Tintagel, and three hundred burgraves, the youngest aged one hundred and forty years, all with beards to their waists, and the king of the Antipodes, with an escort of dwarves, himself the tiniest of them all, and the Lord of Avalon, friend of Morgan the Fay.²

¹ Gustave Cohen: p. 162.
² Ibid., p. 130.
CHAPTER II
HIS AUDIENCE

In the rising tide of feminism, women learned new arts and new seductiveness. Feminine costume became more original and more gracious, following and fitting somewhat the lines of the figure. Over an undergarment with fancy sleeves, was worn a biaud (biaut), a double-crosed belt, and an ample manteau, on the shoulders of which hung the lady’s long tresses, partly covered with a swaying veil. In cold stone chateaux, these clothes were lined with ermine; and brocades were stiff with gold and silver threads. Collars were set with costly jewels.¹

The biaut² that Guinevere gave to Enid to replace the latter’s ragged array was of purple covered with cross-like designs in indigo, vermeil, persian, white, green, and yellow, with a collar of sable, bordered with gold, and hyacinth, and ruby more brilliant than burning candle, the ensemble being lined with white ermine.³

Physically, Philomena, in Chrétien’s early poem by that name, was the ideal of beauty of her time. She had the white, chartless forehead of youth, eyes clearer than a hyacinth,

¹. Cohen: p. 162.
². Cohen: biaut=manteau.
great width between the eyes, eyebrows plucked but not varnished (non fardés), high nose, full lips, small teeth, close-set and very white, neck and breast whiter than ermine, hands very long and slender, and a complexion like roses and lilies—within, a gorgeous, white-skinned creature to please the conquering northern aristocracy. ¹

Those long, slender hands were not idle hands; they knew how to play tric-trac, chess, six et as, or even the more strenuous pelote; they knew the age-old art of spinning, and the delicacies of painting on cloth. In her education, the young lady was informed on the writers of hers and classic times; she was acquainted with grammar, and could compose in prose and verse; she was musical and gifted on the psalterion, the lyre, the violin, the rota,² and the vielle;³ she could dance the rondes and the farandole.⁴ In other words, she had the education necessary to make her both interesting and charming.

To fulfill their part in the chivalric scheme, ladies were skilled in falconry, and could preen the haughty birds that rode with them to the chase. They were taught to dress and to nurse wounds, how to bathe a knight, and even to assist at the ritualistic bath of the knight. They knew the ceremony

². An instrument with Cretan strings.
³. A sort of small hurdy-gurdy, turned with a crank.
⁴. Cf. footnote 1: ibid.
attendant to arming a knight and could help adjust his metal thigh-pieces, his hauberker, his visor, his casque, and his sword, a truly Homeric heritage.

In manners and in the fine art of courtesy, for which we moderns owe our debt to those mediaeval courtly circles, these women were not amiss. As soon as a guest was announced, the repast was hastened, the candles were lighted, and water was placed for the hands. There were, on the white dinner cloth, carafes of red and white wine, for "good color for the ladies"; a fowl delicately prepared, and fish, brown and tasty. Those who chose their food at table were "monkeys who sniffed"; those who held their bones were little better than dogs. One was taught not to lean on the table, or spit under it; not to eat noisily, or toy with the napkin, or wipe the nose on it, or pick one's teeth with a knife.

This growing sense of refinement established certain conventions and made it unseemly for a young girl to seek out her lover, or to be even frank in the early stages of her affection for him. She must learn to be coy, shy, coquettish even, charming, and seductive at all times. All this idea of love as an art permeated from the warmer, less vigorous ideas of the Midi into the gloomy north country, where Viking traditions and masculine ascendancy had been the rule.

1. Cohen: p. 121
2. Charles V. Langlois: La Vie en France au Moyen Age.
   Robert de Blois: Chastellement des Dames.
   Bishop of Rennes: Book of Manners.
and a wife had been chaste and incapable of adultery. Woman became a more complex creature: she began to see the delights of voluptuousness from which the rigors of the early Church had turned her eyes.

The surface delicacy was often a shield for philandering and pecadilloes that sometimes assumed grave importance. Such moral freedom was experienced by those whom marriage had liberated, in keeping with the Provençal influence. Often the husband, the real financial patron of the poet, looked on at the adultery, which was at least of the mind, of his Mona Lisa and her lover. The Bishop of Rennes,¹ part of the entourage of Henry II Plantagenet, wrote one brief poem in the vulgar tongue, describing a pitiless flirt of the times. She was one "sold to her husband, using cosmetics, such as mutton-gall, grease of dog, depilatory paste of quicklime, and orpiment, and a rouge box." Making use of a confidante, as did Vergil's Lavinia or Shakespeare's Juliet, she held clandestine meetings with a lover, any lover, at the dark church door. A little later, Robert de Blois² wrote the first counsel on morals and behavior of the period. He exhorted women "to walk with dignity, be chary of their kisses, of looks, even, since some could pierce like the falcon's eye, avoid decolletages, and gifts of jewels from men, forego swearing, and intemperance in wine and food, keep face covered when riding, and move slowly out of church."

¹. Cf. footnote p. 7.
². Cf. footnote p. 7.
One person especially was set to mind the spiritual welfare of the court of Marie of Champagne, and that was André le Chapelain, so-called because he wore the traditional capella of the grand-almoner of France. André's advice seems to have been along worldly lines as well as spiritual, and he hearkened to his mistress of southern extraction who declared that love could not exist between two people married to each other. In his treatise, De Arte Honestae Amandi, he states the Twenty Statutes of Love of the more effete southern Provence, and indirectly a legacy from Ovid and the classics.

These Twenty Statutes\(^1\) were as follows:

A. Laws of the Kingdom of Love.
   I. To be true to the King and Queen of Love.
   IV. To stir up others to love.
   XIX. "Each other day see that thou fast for love."

B. Rules of Chivalrous Love.
   II. Secretly to keep counsel of love.
   III. To be constant to one's lady.
   VII. To be patient.
   IX. To be meek and afraid of being overbold.
   X. To be conscious of inferiority to one's lady.
   XII. To think nothing of pain for her sake.
   XIII. To be thoughtful to please her.
   XIV. (b.) To believe no evil of her
   XV. (a.) To defend her honor and reputation at all costs.

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1. Quoted from Neilsen's work: Courts of Love.
XVIII. To keep one's person and dress neat and clean.

C. Lover's Symptoms.

V. To be sleepless when the lady is cruel.

VI. To wander alone musing on her.

XIV. (a.) To dream of enjoying her love.

XVII. To be interested in love even when one is old.

XX. To be wretched in her absence.

D. Precepts of Seduction.

VIII. To be persistent in one's suit.

XI. To know how to make love by coughs, smiles, sighs, etc.

XV. (b.) "Her appetyt folow in all degree."

XVI. "Seven sith at night thy lady for to please, And seven at midnight, seven at mornor-day."

The ideas of Group B pervaded chivalrous, mediaeval society, the thought, pains, money offered to please lady were a part of a cult, quasi-religious, and more chivalrous than sensual.

In connection with his book, De Arte Honeste Amandi, André wrote a description of the Castel d'Amour. He said it existed somewhere in stellar or inaccessible regions and had four doors as follow: the first, to the East, most beautiful, reserved for the God of Love himself; the second, to the South, always open for those who love according to laws; the third, to the West, not open to the common crowd, and liking not banal lovers; the fourth, in the frozen North, for those who had repulsed love. In a vision, this priest-confessor had seen a procession in a

solitary forest, headed by knights and amazons and the God of Love with many beautiful people round about; then dishevelled women whose bodies had become a torment; and third the disdainful ones who had denied love. Another scene was the Champs-Elysées where Venus sat upon a throne of gold, with Cupid beside her, and the world's great lovers at her feet, while voluptuous music played continually. Foolish virgins must wander over lands wet with icy waters, and those insensible to love must be perpetually beaten.

Further, André wrote a manual or a handbook to accompany his original text, the plan of which was taken from Ovid's Ars Amatoria. There were three aims to the book, telling whom to love, how to win her, and how to keep her. Chapter V of Book I had conversations between lovers of varying ranks. One chapter dealt with love of clerks, nuns, rustics, courtesans. Almost always the clerk was given the advantage over the soldier as a constant lover, quite naturally since the book was written by one of a clerical order. He pointed out love decisions, and discussed vices of women. He gave twelve precepts of love:

- Generosity I
- Constancy to One Only II
- Truthfulness V
- Secrecy VI
- Obedience VII
- Modesty VIII

1. Quoted from Neilson: Cf. footnote p. 9.
Somewhere the Chaplain has said he thought that wise women were as scarce as red geese, which is scarcely in keeping with his tenets of sanctified marriage. Did he write his rather worldly advice for the convents, themselves familiar with the world, or did he merely seek to codify and justify the carnal temptations that he saw at work around him?
An Ovidian conception of Cupid as a feudal lord was markedly seen in a version of Aeneas, written by some unknown clerk contemporary with Chrétien, who made use of a technique new to northern France, and enlightening no doubt to the alert and ingenious Champenois. As in the classical version of the story, the impetuous, half-mad Amata is opposed to the newcomer Aeneas as a suitor for her daughter Lavinia. The French tale has been elaborated by long discussions of Love and its symptoms, brought out in conversations between the young Lavinia and her mother. Amata advises ruses, tricks, glances, winks, "detours," as the first guide posts to Love, adding that one's heart will teach her how to love. Further, she defines Love as full of pain and anguish, a malady like a four-day, intermittent fever, malignant, attended by sweats, chills, trembling, sighs, yawns, nausea, agitation, shivering, change of color, pallor, moaning, fretfulness, dreaming, sobbing, wailing, insomnia—in a word, a malady not like other ills. To offset all this grief, she prophesies great joy in fulfillment of love, such as laughter; the voluptuousness of the swooning fit; kisses born of yawns, and embraces, of insomnia; the great gaiety of the sigh
(almost one foresees the antics of the Précieuses Ridicules); and the warm color flooding the erstwhile pallor. Amata even evokes the picture of Cupid, arrows in one hand, and a box of healing unguent in the other. Like a person reading the patent medicine advertisements, Lavinia immediately begins to feel all these symptoms: she turns faint, she wails, heat suffuses her body, her heart-beats quicken, she loses sleep, she is bewildered, she covers and uncovers, tosses from side to side, on her stomach, on her back, curls up her head to her feet, tears her hair, and beats her chest. The mother, discovering that all this emotional upset is because of Aeneas and not Turnus, as she had wished, is very angry and bursts forth in a flood of vulgarities, untranslatable today, but understood by the fine ladies of the château. However, the love affair pursues its destined course, by which naturally, Aeneas, too, must suffer all this anguish of passion, tinged sometimes a bit by a lover's jealous suspicions. Turnus finally yields the field, and the predestined founders of the Latin race assuage their sufferings in one long round of wedding festivities. In this French version of an old tale rise the beginnings of a study of amorous psychology, destined to a long fortune through the ensuing years of Madame de Sévigné, the fortunes of the Hôtel de Rambouillet, and the soul conflicts of Balzac.¹

¹. Cohen: p. 60.
Cupid, a part of the heritage of Antiquity, continues to work his powerful magic over the lovers in Chrétien's story of Cligés. There, the heroine, though for some time untouched by his spell, falls prey to his arrow, so well aimed that it pierces straightway to her heart. At first unwilling, she rails at Love and at her wayward eyes that no longer obey her will. Seeking from Queen Guinevere the explanation of Love's conquest over her, the heroine Soredamor learns that Cupid's dart entered through those treacherous eyes of hers, and went straight to her heart, without leaving the slightest outward wound. "The eye is the mirror of the heart," which is itself the burning candle within the lantern, which is the body. There follows an allegory even further pursued which explains the symbolism of the shaft of the arrow and its feathers and even of the quiver that carries the weapons. This is an indication of some of the labored figures to appear the next century in the Roman de la Rose.
CHAPTER IV
EREC AND ENIDE

The first of Chrétien's great works drawn from the matter of Brittany, and written about 1164, was Erec and Enide. Erec, a young and handsome knight of Arthur's court, clad in full hunting array, is diverted from the chase of the White Deer to avenge a wayside insult to Guinevere. He comes upon Enide, simple but beautiful, at the home of her father, a brave vassassieur. Erec learns from the father that Enide's only hope for fortune lies in a successful marriage, since they themselves are greatly impoverished. Erec eyes with favor the modest, blushing Enide, who unsaddles and grooms his horse, and prepares his bed, with a tapia, and a warm couvre-pied. He is even so interested as to fight for her favor at a joust in the village, from which, victor, he claims her as his own and leads her away to Arthur's court, there to make her his bride. There, too, she casts aside her tattered garments to be given away for charity's sake and dons Guinevere's costly gifts.

1. The reference text for this, and all poems that follow, is that of Gustave Cohen, who acknowledges the use of a translation by W. Foerster, professor of the University of Bonn, edition Romanische Bibliothek, Niemeyer, at Halle. (Cohen: p. 17)
2. Vassal holding of a vassal.
There, she receives the kiss of King Arthur for being the most beautiful in the Chase of the White Deer, while all the knights rise to do her homage and to make their bow on a literary stage where they will hold sway for three hundred years to come. The feasts and entertainments and presentations of wedding gifts last for days. Later, in their new home at Carnant, Ereo succumbs to uxoriousness, forgets his knightly prowess, and becomes a recreant, much to his wife's humiliation. He is roused from his inertia by Enide's report of public opinion and her own hot tears of self-reproach and disappointment falling at dawn upon his bared chest.

There follows a long recital of trials through which the patient and submissive wife must follow him, though he acts very badly and more like a sulky schoolboy than a knight bound to be worthy of his spurs. He forces her to follow him, wounded both in pride and in body, until a last offense and attack upon his wife rouse him to real valor for her sake. Through all this, Enide remains his adoring wife, fearful always of his wrath; suffering all in silence; forcing back her tears; panic-stricken lest he may not love her; watching by the bivouac at night while he sleeps; blaming herself, not him; calling upon all her composure and wits to save him by a ruse; defenseless in a crisis except for the sustaining power of a pure love; and

courageous in the face of a separation necessary to her knight’s crowning exploit. In reasoning at last with the beautiful demoiselle whom Erec had befriended in this final exploit and whose amorous advances he had chastely repulsed, Enide speaks for the poet himself when she defends hers and Erec’s wedded love against the uncertainties of a free union.

The work Erec and Enide was yet too early to bear the stamp of the courtly love of the South. Chrétien sought in this story to prove that marriage, love, and prowess were compatible, and he pictured in Enide his ideal woman, intuitive, wise, and unselfish. The technique of the long monologue permitted of analysis of Enide’s thoughts, as she sat and gazed on her sleeping lover, fallen idle from her fault, or watched beside him under the stars, and knew that his old spirit of valor was not really dead.
By the author's own statement, we know that he found his material for his next romance, Cligès, in a book at the library of the Church of Saint Pierre at Beauvais, sometime near 1164. Strangely enough, no reference is made to Henry I of Champagne, who that year married Marie, then only nineteen years of age, and destined to become the sponsor of Chrétien.

The poem, Cligès, is divided really into two parts, the first dealing with the love affair of Alexandre and Soredamor, the parents of the hero, Cligès. Alexandre, of Constantinople, is the type of chevalier errant, so popular in the days of the Crusaders. The court of Arthur is his goal, where he meets Soredamor, in company with Arthur's queen, Guinevere. Soredamor, meaning "blond sweetheart," the almost inevitable type of heroine, after some tremors yields her maidenly spiritual independence to the insidious power of Love, and becomes forthwith gentler to those around her, but quite subtle and experienced in the matter of intriguing and holding her lover. She determines not to be the first to seek love from the other, even though he be the appointed sweetheart out of all the world, a victim, like herself of Cupid's dart.
With this decision, there enters into courtly literature and courtly life, and into all polite life that followed, the theory of feminine reserve. There is not even the freedom of the love letter that Lavinia sent to Aeneas. But Guinevere, their hostess, and ever watchful over the budding love affair, sends Alexandre into battle for Arthur's cause, bearing with him a hand-woven shirt with some of the sunny hairs of Soredamor intermingled with the real gold threads. True to chivalric form, Alexander accomplishes a deed of prowess and proves his worthiness of his lady's love. Upon his return, while resting in the Queen's tent with Soredamor beside him, he sits moody and silent, and quite un-loverlike. This taciturnity was a characteristic of courtly love, since it indicated that the lover was lost in his daydreams. The wise and discriminating queen intervenes with a hint as to the identity of the golden hairs woven in the shirt worn by Alexandre. At this revelation, Alexandre is ready to fall upon his knees before the beautiful white-skinned creature that he loves. With difficulty he restrains himself, but all that night he clasps to his bosom her blessed token.

After another trial of bravery, in which Alexandre heroica-

1. MS., pp. 13, 14.
2. Such idolatry of women has developed enormously since the chanson de geste, some sixty years previous. Roland dies without any mention of his sweetheart Aude, the snow-white sister of the faithful Oliver.
ally, but narrowly, escapes the death reported to have overcome him, Guinevere takes a definite hand in affairs and urges Alexandre to declare himself. The latter shows himself to be the first truly courtly type of man that Chretien has created. He is sensitive, delicate, a bit shy, in his approach and offer of love and marriage to this proud young virgin, Soredamor. Chretien seems to be attempting to reveal a new world of duty, moral scruples, and delicacy. The Queen urges marriage as the only course worthy of sacred and beautiful love, probably thus making a side-thrust at illicit love, such as the parents of the ill-starred and unsmiling Tristan had experienced. Briefly, Soredamor, though still chastely reserved, her eyes starry with ecstasy, yields herself to the stalwart Alexandre, and acknowledges him as her mate. Of their union Cligés is born. Their love affair served only as an introduction to the real hero, but Soredamor remains a rare fragrance of youth and purity, giving herself in a first rapture to a noble lover.

This son Cligés next is shown travelling from Constantinople to Cologne in company with his uncle Alis. Foresworn never to marry, Alis is breaking faith and is determined to gain, by force if need be, the hand of one Fenice. Her name, meaning Phoenix, signifies her gorgeous rarity, so beautiful that were the poet to live a thousand years, he would fail of words to describe her. Cligés, though only fifteen years of age, is

1. Quite different from the passionate importunity of the earlier Erec. Gaston Paris says that such diffidence is out of place between two young people so well assorted.
as beautiful as Narcissus himself. Drawn to each other, as if by fate, these two gaze into each other’s eyes and each knows the other for his own. Chrétien, going a little further in psychological analysis, says that even by this exchange of glances, each has promised his heart to the other. After having written "promised" or "given," Chrétien hesitates, wondering what would happen if for some brief moments in that amorous transaction, two hearts resided in one body and none in the other. Patently, that is impossible, and, over this slip in his reasoning, critics have wrangled.¹ The haste with which these two become so fatefully united in each other’s minds may seem out of place to us in the twentieth century, but not to the poet’s listeners in the Moyen Âge. Such beautiful souls in such beautiful bodies were predestined for each other.

Enters now the "go-between" or confidante in the person of Thessala, so-called because she came from Thessaly, famed for its necromancy. She quickly diagnoses Fénice’s symptoms,² and hears from the young girl the ringing statement, theme of the tale, "Qui a le coeur ait le corps." Fénice makes mention, with extreme revulsion, of the adulterous love of Tristan and Isolt, whose tragic and immortal story was known by every member of the court of Marie of Champagne. Knowing that

¹ Myrrha Lot-Borodine says that the poet is struggling with a popular opinion that even his sentimental notions are too rational to admit.
she herself is about to be forced into a marriage with the older man, the uncle Alis, him of perjured faith. Fénils begs of Thessala an answer to her difficulty. Thessala promises a love philter, to be administered to the unsuspecting uncle on their wedding night. Alis quaffs the loaded drink proffered to him by Cligés own hand at the marriage feast. By its power, Alis thinks himself married to Fénils, while she in reality, remains a virgin, saving herself for Cligés. Though opportunity offers for Cligés to declare his love, the growing spirit of courtoisie demanded his silence.

The hero departs, seeking adventure, not knowing certainly that Fénils has guarded her innocence for him, but loving her still. On his return from Brittany, Fénils adroitly questions Cligés as to his conquests both in arms and in love, and draws from him an impassioned avowal of his constancy to her. In return, she discloses frankly the secret of her wedding night and of her purity saved for Cligés. Again arises the discussion on the whereabouts of the two loyal hearts during the long absence, each from the other. The writer seems more definitely to settle it this time by saying that doubtless their hearts were interchanged, but not both in one body. Firm

1. Gaston Paris finds it shocking to see Fénils, a lie in her heart, pass to such a bridal bed, especially after it had been blessed by the highest men of the church.
2. Her lengthy speech (vv. 5176-5208) is a piece of subtle artistry.
in her resolve not to share her body with both the so-called husband and her lover, and fearful always of public opinion if she should forsake wedlock for free love, she, with Cliges knows that some further strategy must be found by which to consummate their love.

Again calling upon Thessala, they decide on a feigned death for Fenice, which will free her from her status as empress. From the living tomb, she will rise to fulfill the symbolism of her name. Since she is to run so great a risk, she demands a like sacrifice from her lover. He is to give up his brilliant, free, roving, chivalric life. In the manner of the new gentility, he cannot but agree. Heartlessly cruel to her solicitous husband, submitting herself later to terrible tortures at the hands of doctors called into revive her, she pursues with determination her purpose, until like Juliet, she is laid in her tomb. Unlike the hapless Juliet, she is claimed, revived, loved, and cherished, by her faithful Cliges. A hasty denouement removes the raging husband from the scene, and restores Fenice to her place as sovereign beside the rightful ruler, Cliges.

Chrestien has gone further in this poem than in Erec and Enide in the attempt to prove the compatibility of perfect love with marriage. A provencal touch is hinted at in the love, though technically pure, of the hero for a married woman; also in the woman's power to soften the warrior's roving instincts and to bind him to rest at home with Love. The writer has made of this marriage a brilliant affair, a culmination of a long series of
trials and disasters. Fenice proves that one who has not suffered cannot truly love, having sought by her own choice her calvary. She represents the full flowering of feminine love.

Perhaps the author's powerful reiteration of the theme of married sanctity, wholly northern and somewhat bourgeois as it then may have seemed, is proof that he had not yet been accepted, or completely swayed, by his powerful patroness, Marie. Women, in general, dream of exclusive love, and he wrote to please mostly a feminine audience. But Marie was different. She was one of the great literary triads sponsoring the provençal movement, composed of her mother, Eleanor of Aquitania, now in London, as wife of Henri II Plantagenet, and her sister Alix at Blois, and herself at Troyes. The seeming deceit of Fenice who dragged her husband on their wedding night, but gave herself to her lover who rescued her from her living tomb, was not unreconcilable to the mind of Marie or her ladies, since mediaeval peoples reasoned that her descent into the tomb had permitted her to rise again, a regenerated individual.

1. Cf. MS., p. 3.
CHAPTER VI

LANCELOT OU LE CHEVALIER À LA CHARRETTE

The next great work, Lancelot or the Chevalier à la Charrette is dedicated to Marie of Champagne and bears all the marks of her provencal influence. In fact, it has been called the triumph of courtly love. Its main theme is to show the supremacy of woman over man, differing from the northern trend of thought, as evidenced hitherto in northern France and thereafter in Germanic literature. The southern writers pictured the heroine always as married, hence always inaccessible as a permanent possession, but always intriguing, alluring, enigmatic as something precious and unattainable. Gustave Cohen thinks that such an intangible ideal is near to the spiritual, and approaches even the religious angle of the cult of feminism, evidenced in the worship of the Blessed Virgin. Certain it is that the rising power of women tended to offset and soften the cruelty of feudal Europe.

Previous mention has been made of the hero Lancelot in the first list of Arthur's knights when Breo presented to them his modest Enide. He was Lancelot du Lac, so called because

he had been reared by the Lady of the Lake. We know, according to Chrétien, that Lancelot sat third from Arthur at the Round Table, Gauvain, Arthur's nephew sitting first, then Erec, then Lancelot. But Gaston Paris says that Chrétien was the first to make of Lancelot the lover of Arthur's wife. Certainly, he was by no means the last. Tennyson figures the idyllic approach to Camelot of the trusted emissary, bringing to his king and dearest friend the plighted Guinevere, "when all the world was white with May." Edward Arlington Robinson strikes the tragic note in the closing scene of his Lancelot, when the knight, bidding farewell to the penitent and dying Guinevere,

"...crushed her cold white hands and saw them falling away from him like flowers into a grave."

The incident that starts the action in this courtly romance is the usual chivalric challenge to rescue persons in distress. This time, however, the challenge is particularly significant because the Queen must accompany the knight who is to decide by single combat the fate of the distressed. The seneschal Keu (Kay), by a ruse worked on Arthur, secures the commission and starts out with Guinevere. No sooner have they left, than all the court, prompted by Gauvain's concern, starts after them. First they find Keu's horse riderless; then Gauvain yields a charger to a knight whose own horse is falling from fatigue. The poet names this unknown as Lancelot, who next is seen by

1. There was a prose account of Lancelot written in the early XIIIth century, translated in Italian by Galeotto, and mentioned by Dante in the Divina Commedia.
Gauvain riding in a cart, driven by a dwarf. This cart is a symbol of the greatest degradation. Lancelot, his mount gone, is forced to ride thus in order to reach the Queen, who, now he knows, is in distress. This is the greatest possible humiliation to the proud knight, since it gains for him the epithet of Lancelot à la Charrette, than which nothing could be more contemptuous.

Arrived at a certain château, Lancelot braves with great equanimity the trial of the lit merveilleux. The action advances a step when, the next morning, he sees the Queen pass following a litter in which lies Keu, wounded by his challenger, Meleagant. Lancelot and Gauvain, newly equipped with chargers and lances, set out to follow the Queen. In order to do so, great hazards must be met and overcome. After he and Gauvain separate, Lancelot proceeds, meeting with one encounter after the other. First, there is the vicious guardian of the ford, then a distressed demoiselle who attempts, but fails to seduce him, since too strong is his love for Guinevere. There is the finding of the token of Guinevere at the fountain, her golden hairs within a comb, to be worshipped with ecstatic adoration. He lifts the heavy tomb-stone; he crosses the Stony Pass, having called for aid upon his magic ring, gift of the Lady of the Lake. He achieves the crossing of the fateful Bridge of the Sword.

1. Cf., the pillory.
guarded by two lions and two leopards, who prove really only an illusion. At last he arrives at the dungeon tower of the King Bademagu, the righteous father of the impious son Meleagant, who holds Guinevere a prisoner. Through blind devotion, absolute fidelity, ecstatic adoration, and chivalric valor in the service of love, Lancelot has arrived to rescue his Queen.

This rescue must be accomplished by trial of single combat between the rivals, which battle Guinevere watches from her tower. Lancelot, still sustained by his great love, succeeds, after much difficulty, in drawing a provisional truce from Meleagant. Led by the good king Bademagu to the queen to recognition, Lancelot receives only coldness and disdain. This seems inexplicable at first, especially to Lancelot. Later, he learns from her lips that she was angry because he hesitated for one little minute, the length of two steps, before entering into the disgraceful cart to come to her rescue. So distressed is he at her indifference, that he attempts suicide, but is deterred by friends from such an act. She, too, revealing her real sentiment, attempts suicide when false news of the death of Lancelot is sent by Meleagant.

All this grief is dispelled by great joy when, her prison doors having been opened, her lover comes to claim his fond welcome. He learns that to her his ride in the cart of shame was no disgrace, but that all deeds, whether high or low, done

I. Crowds gather for the tourney such as gather to hear the organ music at Pentecost or Noel. This is the earliest literary reference to organ music.
for one's loved one, and done spontaneously and without re­
gret, should be a source of happiness for the doer. Lancelot, submit­
ning, acquiescing, to all this, has arrived at the very pinnacle of courtly love. He has been made by the author to love as no other has ever loved. Such passion knows its re­ward, for Guinevere, as moved as he, consents during their clandestine meeting at her chamber window that he bend the bars by his mighty strength and enter into her room. The perfect lover always, he kneels before her that night and again at dawn, as one would before a saint. The tell-tale stains from his injured hands precipitate a scandal about her and her guardian Keu. This can be denied only by further combat between Meleagant and Lancelot. With Lancelot the victorious champion, Guinevere is definitely freed.

Gauvain appears to take Guinevere home, while Lancelot by a snare languishes in prison. Released by his jailer, he ap­pears clad in red armor, a high symbolism of Christ's blood, at a tourney where Guinevere is present. She, fairly sure of his identity, makes of him the request of a final sacrifice, dishonor even: first, that he allow himself to be beaten for her sake; and then, likewise for her sake, that he rise and vanquish the field. Here with the complete obedience, abase­ment even, of the man to the woman, Chrétien turns over this story, distasteful, painful maybe, to another to finish.

Such love as herewith portrayed, being furtive and un-
lawful as it was, was not consistent with the Argo and Cligés characteristics in the stories so lately written. In the Lancelot poem, the woman, safe within her marriage ties, can withdraw her favor, at any time, from her chosen lover. Such a knowledge makes of her a coquette, capricious and often unjust. Indeed, not only was such a love unknown in any previous writings of Chretien, but also was it practically unknown in the French language until this story of Le Chevalier à la Charrette. Provençal stories, with more sophisticated Italian flavor, had been written in Latin.

"Without going so far as disapproving openly the conduct of Guinevere, he [Chretien] makes us feel, however, that he has not for her the sincere admiration, evidenced in his first courtly heroines who incarnate in his eyes the type of the 'sweetheart' (amie): Guinevere is only the 'mistress' (dame), for she does not exist by reason of the tenderness that she gives, but by reason of the homage that she receives. Such is the line of demarcation that separates the mistress from the sweetheart.

"The one abandons herself completely and for always, the other lets herself be taken for one night of voluptuousness. The one loves her lover, because he is he, and, besides, she loves love, because it is the flowering of all her being.

"The other loves her lover, because she is loved by him, further, she loves love because it marks the triumph of her charms, her glory, and her pleasure. In a word, for the sweetheart love, supreme desire, is the sun of life; for the mistress, love is sensual caprice, nothing but fleeting lightning."

2. Ibid.: quoted from her own writing for *Romania*, tome XII, p. 517ff.
"And it is this woman, who, for the first time, in the work of Chrétien, is elevated high above the man by the very adoration of that man and reigns in divine sovereignty in the realm of earthly loves." ¹

It has even been hinted that Chrétien's powerful patroness Marie, not yet turned to her maturer, more pious years, bore such a relation to the poet himself. ²

Looking back to the Rules of Chivalrous Love, as codified by André le Chapelain, and influencing strongly the social customs of the period, we see that Lancelot obeyed these rules in every respect. He kept secret "counsel" of love; he was constant; patient; meek; conscious of his inferiority; willing to bear pain; thoughtful; believing no evil of his lady; defending her honor; meticulous of his garb.

As a hero, he cannot be disregarded. By a daring piece of symbolism, Chrétien clothes him for the tournament in red, the color of Christ's blood. We have said that he worshipped Guinevere, unworthy though she may have been, as one would have worshipped a saint. May it not be that he, destined to be the father of Galahad, the knight without sin, failed of saintliness himself only in that his goal was unworthy and touched with carnal weakness? As for loyalty to his Queen, amounting to blind adoration, there was no doubt. One may reason even further in

1. Quoted from Myrrha Lot-Borodine, pp. 191, 192.
3. MS., pp. 9, 10.
Lancelot’s favor to condone his fault, and say that all was done for love, which is, after all, the highest Christian teaching. He was not a true provengal, courtly lover, because he was too grave, too serious, even sad, always a bit of the grey-eyed Celt about him. Lancelot stands as a type of the young men of his time, childishly eager, burning with ardor, obsessed by the impossible.

Gustave Cohen puts a more northern and more essentially masculine interpretation upon the enouement of Lancelot’s long quest for the Queen. He grants that woman rules for a long time by love, by simulated gentleness, by subterfuge, but that man, indomitable, bides his hour, when the flesh will have its due and caprice yield to the deep currents of life that cannot be denied.
CHAPTER VII

YVAIN OU LE CHEVALIER AU LION

That Chrétien in 1173 had not exhausted his literary ideas, but sought a theme more compatible with his tastes, is seen in his next work, Yvain ou le Chevalier au Lion. Herein he seeks to make the lawful wife the arbiter of love in a tale told to a pattern more nearly courtois than that of the earlier Erec and Enide.

The scene opens with Arthur’s court assembled and discussing some of the fine points of their favorite topic, Amour. Stories, legends some of them, are being passed about and Calogrenant undertakes to tell one. It is the usual knightly tale of adventure, only this time the exploit leads through the forest of Broceliande wherein is a magic fountain, protected by a mighty chevalier who at one time has banished the intruder, Calogrenant. Yvain, a cousin, is seized with a burning desire to attempt the same expedition. His efforts meet success and he not only routs the chevalier but pursues him, mortally wounded, to the very portals of his chateau. There, Yvain finds himself trapped, but befriended by Lunette who is

1. Reference is made at the outset in a speech of Keu the Senechal, to Nour-ed-Din, a Saracen, living at that time.
the advisor in Love to the lady of the chateau. Lunette gives Yvain a magic ring which makes him invisible to the lady Laudine whom he has so lately and unwittingly bereft of her mate in the encounter at the fountain. The only hint of the murderer's presence is that the dead man's wounds reopen and bleed again as his bier is carried past the invisible Yvain. In the light of subsequent events, it will be interesting to remember that the widow here pours out a flood of invectives against the assassin.

By the now accepted courtly routine of Love's d'art passing through the eyes to the heart, Yvain finds himself caught by the beauty of the bereft lady. He conjectures to himself how he can woo her away from her grief to himself, murderer though he may be. His bold thoughts lead him to make advances to Laudine, since he reasons that Semper mutabiles femina. His is quite a different attitude from that of the blindly adoring Lancelot. The author is letting crop out some of his cynicism that has been growing in these years of contact with ladies, both fine and rich at court.

In his wooing Yvain is materially aided by Lunette who is wise and tactful in her dealings with her mistress and does not force this new marriage upon her, but leads her by easy stages to the idea. As far as Chrétien offending his audience by this hasty re-marriage was concerned, that was not likely, since speedy second marriages were not uncommon in those days of the Crusades when hazards were great and distances were far.

1. Cf., MS. p. 19
Such a literary tradition we find reappearing in the expeditious marriage of the Queen mother Gertrude to the murderer following the death of Hamlet's own father.

At any rate, Laudine reasons out that she must have a defender for her magic fountain, since none at her court is strong enough to hold it. Yvain's glowing declaration wins for him her acceptance. Though worded in somewhat forced and stilted rhetoric, the speech shows Chrétien's ambitions towards style. Yvain says of his feeling of love:

"Telle que ne peut être plus grande,
Telle que de vous ne s'écarter
Mon cœur et qu'ailleurs ne le trouve,
Telle que je ne puis penser à autre chose,
Telle que tout à vous je m'octroie,
Telle que vous aîne plus que moi,
Telle, si vous voulez, qu'à votre guise
Pour vous je veux mourir ou vivre."

Such a solution to the protection of the marvellous fountain is pleasing to all her court.

All of Arthur's train comes to see the wonder of this gushing spring, arriving in such splendor as Chrétien knew and loved to describe. Over streets covered with carpets and hung with beautiful stuffs, and canopied against the sun, Arthur arrives amid ringing of bells and sounding of horns, to be welcomed at the chateau with flutes, and cymbals, and tambourines, and dancing maidens.

2. Cf. footnote on p. 1, MS.
Yvain, with his new wife, has been content till the arrival of his old comrades who begin to chide him about his recr...
Chrétien forces his hero to undergo still severer trials, worst of all being significantly named the encounter for a damsel at the Chastel de Pesme (Passima) Aventure. There, two monsters demand, Minotaur-fashion, each year the tribute of thirty maids. Awaiting their doom, these maids sit miserably, furiously, plying their needles in great tapestries, destined for costly adornments.¹ Aided again by the lion, Yvain vanquishes the monsters and liberates the maids. Lastly, comes a deadly combat between Yvain and GeVain, two of the bravest knights of all that brave confrérie, fighting this time in closed field, and unknown to each other. Exhausted both, but valiant still, they decide to call truce, and, penitent upon their mutual recognition, they repair to Arthur's court. Yvain, still unhappy, departs to seek again a reconciliation with his wife. He finds the magic fountain out of all bounds, and about to wreak destruction on all in the chateau. He alone is able to check its force. His reward is the forgiveness of Laudine, obtained by the now reinstated intermediary, Lunette.

The wife, Laudine, is, according to our standard, a woman profoundly selfish, sensual, a widow quickly consoled. She is, however, la dame courtoise, haughty, pitiless, and hard, who loves on only one condition: she must be adored. She is the veritable belle dame sans merci. She is much closer to the

¹. Gustave Cohen interprets that this work typified that of the early sweat-shops of Arras and of Troyes, and that Yvain symbolized, in some way, a deliverer.
Guinevere just pictured than to the early, patient wife, Enide. She, like Guinevere, is the cause of all the action of the poem. Unlike Guinevere she is a wife, not a mistress. Yvain struggles, but in vain, to maintain his chivalric life independent of this woman. The closing scene finds him, as did the first, upon his knees before her, the woman with the burning eyes and the cruel smile.

Sensual though the heroine may have been, Chrétien, in making her a lawful wife, and in restraining himself from voluptuous scenes, such as found in Erec, Cligès, and Lancelot, shows an approaching chastity of later years. Though elevated by intellect, and by his aristocratic associations, to a surface snobbishness, Chrétien is essentially bourgeois in his notions. This is shown in his efforts always, with one exception, to make married love paramount.

Already he is seeing in the court the debasing of the high ideal of love of which he has written. He says in Yvain that many of his time proclaim to love, but they lie. Hence, he seeks to draw from the idyllic past of Arthur's court, some examples of really courtly love, saying, as has been translated:

"I'd rather be a gourtier dead Than be a rustic2 stout and red."

1. Evidence in his hatred of mobs and violence.
2. French: vilain. Also, note that André le Chapelain had a great contempt for the idea of vilain. (Article by Gustave Cohen in Nouvelles Littéraires, Feb. 11, 1928.)
Growing in restraint and analytic power, Chrétien, though still calling up the mythological Cupid with his darts and inroads to the human heart, is becoming more and more interested in the psychological approach to character. We have Yvain wandering, mad, naked, and shameless, in the forest. In another instance, the writer stands off, as an observer, and ponders how love and hate can co-inhabit in one bosom when he has set two friends, such as Gauvain and Yvain, one against the other. Psycho-analysis is elementary still, but shows a great development over anything in the chanson de geste where love strikes a minor note and Roland goes to his death, heroically but Spartan-like. The poet Chrétien may not show deep religious feeling, but he has an ethical sense, as shown in his sympathy for the sweat-shop toilers.

The popular raconteur of Champagne is growing older; his patroness has lost her brilliant husband, Henri of Champagne; and all that court has become more somber. The writer, with all his love of color and warmth and light and gayety, and absolute need of having a patron, has cast about and attaches himself to Philippe of Alsace, Count of Flanders, regent of France during the minority of Philippe-Auguste. Sponsored by this new and wealthy patron, the poet profits by largess from the rich holdings among the drapers at Arras, the weavers at Ypres, the bourgeois of Gand, and the merchants of Bruges, dealers all in wool, silk, linen, rich purple stuffs, marten skins, ivory, silver, and gold. To some unestablished book in the possession
of Philippe of Alsace, Chrétien owes the source of his final work,

*Perceval ou le Graal.*
CHAPTER VIII
PERCEVAL OU LE GRAAL

In the beautiful frame of spring, dwelling in a great forest, with his mother, stands Perceval, a youth untutored of the world. Upon his astonished eyes, bursts the vision of a knightly train, "beautiful as angels." The youth's fate is settled; he announces to his sorrowing, widowed mother that he is leaving to become a knight. She, a very noble mother and, in truth, the only mother in the stories of Chrétien, counsels him to honor and serve woman; to take from a maiden a kiss and no more, unless it be some token such as a ring from her finger; to associate with the gentility that are gentle of heart; and to attend holy services in a church. All of this he promises, though she has to explain to him what a church is. Downcast for the sake of his tender mother, he turns back once, only to find her swooning with grief. But the inexorable grip of his mission, symbolic maybe of the power of the Church, is upon him, and he resolutely sets out à l'aventure.

Arrived at Arthur's court, the young man rides straight into the great hall, without even dismounting, and brusquely demands a suit of armor. The court fool sees in this stranger a knight who will outshine all the rest of the brotherhood and is kicked
by Keu for saying so. No sooner is Perceval told that he must literally "win his spurs" than he is off to accomplish the deed. Now clad in armor taken from his first conquest, the youth arrives at the castle of Gornemant de Goort, who, a knight himself, completes the adoubement of Perceval. The counsel given by the older man is similar to that of the noble mother, but adds an injunction of reserve in speech, and advice not to mention again his mother as his chief counsellor. A touch of steel has entered into the training and the character of the inexperienced youth of the woods.

Though the thought of his mother is still with him, it is another woman, a first love, who now enters into his life. In his travels, he finds himself at the chateau of Beau-Repaire, the dwelling of Blancheflor. Everything is in a state of abject misery, against which background the beauty of the chatelaine stands out with startling clarity. Of each heroine, Chretien has attempted to create a paragon of pulchritude, but this time he practically says that, after God made Blancheflor, he threw away the pattern. Despite the apparent poverty of his hostess, Perceval, maintaining always his newly-gained reserve, is given for supper a piece of game killed on the grounds, and provided with a good bed, with handsome covers and a luxurious pillow. Blancheflor, restless and disturbed by the terrible condition in which she and her retainers are situated, goes by night to

1. In the early Parzival of Wolfram von Eschenbach, she was called Condwiramurs.
the room of the young Perceval, primarily, the poet says, to bespeak his counsel and his aid in her difficulties. Her tears, falling on his face waken him, and he, Perceval, called the "nice," until now unacquainted with any women save his mother, invites her into the bed with him. The next morning, for the sake of the promise of her love, he goes forth and wins his combats, first with Anguingeron, the seneschal of the foe besieging the castle, and, later, with Clamadeu, the foe himself.

Still thinking of his mother, and promising to return with her if she still lives, Perceval again departs on the great quest. This leads him first to the chateau of the Roi-Pecheur, the lord of the Grail. Perceval is relieved of his armorment, offered a rich scarlet mantle, and conducted to the great hall, where the infirm chatelain, enveloped in furs, is reclining before a huge fire. The host presents Perceval with a beautiful sword, whose fragments, though it were to be broken, would magically mend,—a symbol of the youth's high destiny. Before his astonished eyes, a procession passes, headed by a servant carrying a bleeding lance, two others with lighted candles, and, finally, a demoiselle with a Grail in her hands. Both stupefied and shy, Perceval allows the blessed image to pass without ever questioning its significance. Only on the next day, riding on through the forest, does he learn from a distressed damsel just

1. This is King Amfortas, Perceval's maternal uncle. (From the text Parzival of Wolfram von Eschenbach.)
2. The only allusion that Chrétien makes to the sacred vessel.
who his host was and how he should have behaved. The young woman proves to be a cousin of Perceval, who informs him also of his mother's death.

Nothing now, not even this sad news, can deter the hero from his destiny. He meets again the young girl from whom, as his very first exploit, he had stolen a kiss and a ring. She is being mistreated by her lover, L'Ourguilleux de la Lande, who doubts her innocency. Here Chrétien slyly inserts a side-remark, saying that probably the lover had cause for doubt, since a woman who so easily had given her mouth might also have given the rest. However, Perceval vanquishes her oppressor, and orders them, as he had done with his previous victims, to report at Arthur's court, bearing the respects of the Chevalier Vermeil. The court, greatly roused by reports of this unknown warrior, resolve to go out in search of him.

Perceval, awaiting dawn and "aventure," alone on a snow-covered prairie, sees at the first streak of a light, a flock of wild geese flying. A falcon in pursuit has wounded one of them, and it falls upon the snow, staining it with three drops of its crimson blood. Perceval, leaning on his lance, gazes long at these drops, in which the poet sees some symbolism, if it be only the cruel souvenir of the bright color in the face of his lost, deserted Blancheclor.

1. Gustave Cohen sees some possible connection between these drops of blood and those on the bleeding lance in the procession at the castle of the Roi-Pocheur.
The first to break in upon his revery is Gauvain, who begs to conduct to the court of Arthur, Perceval, this far-famed Chevalier Vermeil, clad in the color of blood, of health, of sacrifice, of life itself. Though Chrétien says nothing of it, it is probable that he meant for it to be taken for granted that, at this point, Perceval was made one of the knights of the Round Table. Whatever his personal emotions and desires may have been, or his wish to return to the beautiful Blancheflor, Perceval's quest is not yet ended. There appears at Arthur's court an ugly maiden, riding upon a mule, and uttering maledictions against Perceval whose silence had cost him the knowledge of the mystery of the Grail and the deliverance of the Roi-Percheur. Now she lays before the noble order three valiant challenges, one to go to Mont Esclaire, another to the Chateau Orgueillex, and a third to the Chateau of the Grail. This last, Perceval accepts and drops from sight for five years in the quest.

In so long a period of wandering, he comes to forget his God, even to forget Good Friday, when no knight should be traveling, carrying arms. Reminded, by the appearance of a band of pilgrims, of his remissness, Perceval seeks absolution from a venerable hermit of the forest, who reveals himself to be another uncle of Perceval and brother to the Roi-Percheur. From this holy man, Perceval learns that the greatest forfeit he has made in his life was the abandoning of his mother. From this ascetic

1. As in the German Parzival.
person, the knight receives the third and final step of his training—the spiritual, following upon the first, the early, maternal advice; and the second, the chivalric counsel of Gornemant de Goort.

With the words of the hermit in his ears, "Trust God, love God, worship God," and prepared for the supreme experience, Perceval fails of reaching his goal because the thread of the story breaks. The culmination that Chretien may have planned is lost in the confusion of the ideas of others who took up the tale. Possibly, before death arrested his hand, the author saw and wrote into this poem the decadence of woman's power and of courtly love. The warrior had abandoned earthly love for the spiritual quest, drawing after him all that brilliant assembly that had been the Knights of the Round Table.
CHAPTER IX

CHRÉTIEN, THE FEMINIST

If we are to regard Chrétien de Troyes in the light of our modern understanding and to call him an early feminist, we must go back and consider his training for the task. To have said that his education was clerical, does by no means convey that it was of the cloistered type. The life of those in training for the orders was much more free and worldly than it later grew to be. His travels, his reading of secular books, his life at Marie's court, all fitted him to know and analyze all types of people.

Certain ones stood out for him as especially interesting, and he re-created them in his stories. Among the women, which sex he seemed to prefer to portray, he drew as types, Enide, the patient wife; Soredamor, amorously idolatrous; Fénice, fiercely virginal; Guinevere, caught in adultery; Laudine, too quickly consoled; Blancheflor, abandoned and pathetic; and the mother, wise in counsel, but pitifully deserted.

We catch snap-shots of them at significant moments in their lives, revealing mental states and reactions, characteristic of them as individuals. Enide, musing by her sleeping husband at the campfire, blames herself as follows:
«Elle se blâme et se maudit 
de la phrase qu'elle a proférée; 
elle se dit qu'elle a bien mal agi / 
et qu'elle ne récolte pas la moitié 
du mal qu'elle a mérité. 
'Helas,' fait-elle, 'pour mon malheur, 
J'ai vu mon orgueil et mon outré cuidanc, 
Je pouvais bien savoir à n'en pas douter 
que tel chevalier ni meilleur 
ne connaissait-ce que mon seigneur, 
je le savais, je le sais mieux, 
car je l'ai vu sous mes yeux 
ne craindre trois ni cinq hommes armés. 
Honne soit ma langue toute 
qui a dit outrage et orgueil 
qui m'ont précipitée en telle honte.»¹

The blonde Soredamor, disdainful of love until the coming 
of Alexandre, shows pronouncedly her chaste, feminine reserve 
and resentment against the first inroads of amour.

«N'ai-je pas tout pouvoir sur mes yeux? 
J'aurais donc perdu toute force 
et je m'estimerais bien peu, 
si je ne puis dominer mes yeux 
et les faire regarder ailleurs... 
Et en quoi ont donc forfait mes yeux 
s'ils regardent ce que je veux? 
Quelle faute et quel tort ont-ils? 
Dois-je les en blâmer? Non pas. 
Et qui alors? Moi, qui les ai en garde. 
Mon oeil ne contemple rien. 
S'il ne plaît et convient à mon cœur. 
Chose qui fit ma peine 
n'est pas dû mon cœur la vouloir. 
C'est la volonté qui me tourmente. 
Tourmente? Ma foi, je suis donc folle...»²

Fénice, the fiercely virginal, is also fiercely jealous, 
but adroit enough in her questioning to guide the conversation 
into the desired channels and make the man appear the plaintiff 
and herself the grand lady, conferring the favors.³ Having gain-

ed from him a renewed and impassioned avowal, she promises him that in her feigned death, and then alone, will she be his:

"Un pauvre gîte, obscur et sale,
me sera plus clair que toutes ces salles,
quand vous serez avec moi."

Guinevere, traitress to her husband though she is, shows real grief when she thinks her lover dead, not only from a sense of her own selfish personal loss, but also from a tardy sense of gratitude that she owes him for his protection:

"Hélas! de quoi me souvint-il
Quand mon ami devant moi vint,
et je lui eusse dû faire fête,
et ne voulus même pas l'entendre!
Quand mon regard et ma parole
lui défendis, ne fus-je folle?
Folle? Que Dieu m'aide plutôt
si je n'agis en faulonne et en cruelle.
Je pensais le faire par plaisanterie,
mais lui ne le prit pas ainsi,
et ne me l'a pas pardonnée.
Nul autre que moi ne lui donna
le coup mortel, que je sache..."

The widow "too quickly consoled," Laudine, little foreseeing the rapid change of heart she is to have, shows her violent and unstable disposition in her outbreak against the unseen murderer:

"Ah! Dieu! ne trouvera-t-on donc point
l'homicide, le traître,
qui m'a tué mon bon seigneur?
Bon? Non, le meilleur des bons;
Dieu véritable! la faute sera tiemme,
si tu le laissez ainsi échapper;
autre que toi je n'en dois blâmer,
car tu le dirobes à ma vue."3

2. Ibid., Lancelot ou le Chevalier à la Charrette, vv. 4215-4277.
3. Ibid., Yvain ou le Chevalier au Lion, vv. 1206-1213.
To the pure young knight Perceval, comes Blancheflor, exceedingly beautiful and in great distress, sincere in all she says:

"Ah! gentil chevalier, grace, au nom de Dieu, vous prie et de som fils, de ne pas me tenir plus vile par ce que je suis ici venue. quoique je suis presque nue, je n'y ai point conçu folie ni méchanceté ni vilenie, car il n'y a au monde être qui vive, si malheureux et si chétif, que je ne sois plus malheureuse...."¹

Singing in Perceval's ears for many a long day, were the parting words of his noble mother:

"Vous serez chevalier d'ici peu, fils, s'il plaît à Dieu, et je le permete. Si vous trouvez près ou loin dame qui d'aide ait besoin ou pucelle dans le malheur, que votre aide prête leur soit, si elles vous en requièrent, car tout honneur leur est du. Que aux dames honneur ne perte ² Son propre honneur il voit périr.

Knowing his audience so well, and aware of their womanly foibles, since it was mostly for women that he wrote, he must have considered quite closely just which stories would find receptive ears. No doubt he meant Enide, Soredamor, Blancheflor,—and maybe Fenice,—for the young girls, who sentimentalized themselves always as the most coveted creatures of all the world. The more mature types, with their more complex sit-

2. Ibid., vv. 511-520.
uations, Guinevere and Laudine, were meant for the wives and widows who had hearkened too closely to the teachings of Andre le Chapelain. The mother of Perceval was in a class by herself, and a sure proof that fine and noble women existed in those days, as always.

The weaknesses of Chrétien's work were a part of the inheritance of his time. From the chanson de geste, he had acquired the chronological order and the custom of relating at great length, with some tedium, the exploits of his knights. There is a quality of sameness among his heroines: all are blonde, all are beautiful, and all experience the same symptoms of love. The men are all handsome and brave, though there is some variety to their deeds. Woman seems always the legitimate prey of man, even after long evasion, as in the case of Guinevere.

Chrétien's use of the magic and the grotesque to enhance his stories was also a touch in keeping with his period. There were superstitions, love philters, "witch women," fake doctors from Salerno who tortured their victim, magic rings, dangerous enchanted passes and bridges to be crossed. The knights adored some token of the loved one, were it golden hairs woven into a shirt, or golden hairs, still in a comb by the mirror-like fountain's edge. There were strange, abnormal, and uncouth shapes in even the most festive processions, and their ugly

1. Fenice in her feigned death (Cligès).
faces served as foils to the bright beauty of the flower of chivalry with whom they rode.

Aside from his ability to pick out interesting types and their most interesting characteristics and analyze them, Chrétien showed considerable style and polish in his writings. There are some exquisite little sketches in each of his poems: Fenice from her living tomb, longing for the freshness and beauty of an orchard; a beautiful, tempting bed, with its cover of yellow samite, starred with gold, but forbidden to Lancelot; the naive description of a horse, "fat and round as an apple"; the story of another mighty charger that ground beneath his feet the stones as a millstone grinds the grain; the likening of retarded love to a green log's burning; and the picture of Yvain and Gauvain as two-fisted fighters ("square-fisted") with nerves of iron, and strong, hard bones.

The poet's skill has been such that he has been almost Shakespearean in his ability to create great universal types, representing in striking fashion some great abstract virtue or human weakness. In his works are examples, real today, of patience, chastity, grief, perversity, and great loyalty, if we can count it from the standpoint of the masculine figures of Lancelot and Yvain.

To draw a conclusion as to why the theory of courtly love, seen at its height in Cligès, Lancelot, and Yvain, seemed to fail and break down before the mysticism of the later Perceval, would be to say that passion surfeited feeds upon itself.
Woman, greedy for power, grown soft, and selfish, and voluptuous, had yielded her birthright of sacrifice and service and self-denial. No longer could even the beautiful Blancheflor hold the knight bound on the quest of the Holy Grail.

The importance of Chrétien de Troyes rests upon his great advance over his predecessors in style, in character analysis, and in definite development of a theme. In the newness of the language with which he was working, the newness even of some of the ideas he was trying to develop, he seems today like a breath of springtime blowing across a weary world.
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