Chretien de Troyes
(c. 1135–c. 1190)
France

The work of Chretien de Troyes (kra·tyən de trwā′) is important for several reasons. He created a new type of poetic narrative, the Arthurian romance. He also introduced the legend of the Grail into the Arthurian romances, and he influenced the techniques and themes of Arthurian literature that was to come.

Although he was one of the most famous medieval court poets, we have little definite knowledge of Chretien's life. He probably was born at Troyes, a city in northeastern France, and trained for a position in the Church. His education most likely included study of the classics, since early in his career he wrote verse adaptations of works by the Roman poet Ovid (see page 306). He soon became fascinated, however, by Celtic stories of King Arthur and his knights. He wrote five Arthurian romances, including one about the love of Lancelot and Guinevere. Perceval, ou le conte du graal (Perceval, or The Story of the Grail), like most other Arthurian romances, focuses not on King Arthur but on the adventures of other knights of the Round Table. Probably composed between 1180 and 1190, Perceval was dedicated to Philippe d'Alsace, a count of Flanders. The poem is divided into two parts. The first part presents the young Perceval's instruction in chivalry; the second part focuses on the quests of the knight Gauvain (Gawain). In Perceval, Chretien presented a new kind of medieval hero, a knight less interested in worldly glory than in such Christian values as penitence and charity. This hero's quest is not for the love of a lady but for spiritual perfection. He performs his great deeds for the love of God. Unfortunately, the outcome of Perceval's spiritual quest is never resolved; Chretien died before he could complete his poem.

Perceval is the earliest known version of the legend of the Holy Grail. The excerpt included here contains a celebrated episode from the poem: the procession of the Grail. In Chretien's story the Grail, a holy object, is described as some sort of dish used to carry a single communion wafer, an important element in Christian ritual. In later Arthurian romances the Grail is Christ's chalice at the Last Supper, the same cup that is later used to collect drops of Christ's blood at the Crucifixion. Many knights of Arthur's Round Table try—and fail—to find this holy object, which can be obtained only by a person who is absolutely pure.

Chretien wrote his romance in what was then the standard form for French narrative verse: couplets, or lines of rhymed verse, that contain eight syllables. He is quite skillful in his handling of dialogue. This verse translation by Ruth Harwood Cline follows the characteristics of the original text.
The Grail
from Perceval

Make the Connection
Quickwrite

Consider this quotation from the poem:
"... one can be too talkative, / but also one can be too still." Recall an experience in which your decision to be silent rather than to speak up turned out to be a mistake. Jot down what you learned.

Literary Focus
Romance

A medieval romance is a verse narrative about the adventures of kings, queens, knights, and ladies. These adventures take place in idealized settings and often include mysterious supernatural events. Knights in the romances are bound by the codes of chivalry and courtly love.

Arthurian romances are stories of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table. Some Arthurian romances, like Perceval, highlight Christian values above the ideals of chivalry and courtly love. Perceval’s devotion is to God, and he embodies Christian virtues, such as charity and humility, more than chivalric values. His quest for the Grail is a spiritual quest, not a quest for fame.

Background

Although Perceval is the son of a great knight, his mother has kept him from knowing anything about knighthood because she does not want her son to die young, as her husband and two other sons have. After meeting five wandering knights, though, Perceval gets a thirst for adventure and sets off for King Arthur’s court. After he defeats an opponent called the Red Knight and takes his armor and weapons, Perceval meets a nobleman, Gornemant, who teaches him how to fight. After conferring knighthood on Perceval, Gornemant advises him to show mercy to knights and avoid asking too many questions.

Worried about his mother, whom he regrets having deserted, Perceval decides to return home. He has just left the castle of Belrepeire, where he has fallen in love with the lady Blancheflor. As the excerpt opens, he comes to a river that he cannot cross.

Vocabulary Development

elated (ə·lä'tid) v. used as adj.: very happy.

forged (förjd) v.: made a metal object by heating and hammering.

tempered (tem'pard) v.: strengthened by heating and sudden cooling.

juxtaposed (juks'ta·pəzd') v. used as adj.: placed side by side.

undeterred (un·dē·tərd') adj. used as adv.: unobstructed; without restriction.
The youth began his journey from the castle, and the daytime whole he did not meet one living soul:
no creature from the wide earth's span,
no Christian woman, Christian man
who could direct him on his way.
The young man did not cease to pray
the sovereign father, God, Our Lord,
if He were willing, to accord
that he would find his mother still
alive and well. He reached a hill
and saw a river at its base.

So rapid was the current's pace,
so deep the water, that he dared
not enter it, and he declared,
"Oh God Almighty! It would seem,
if I could get across this stream,
I'd find my mother, if she's living."

He rode the bank with some misgiving
and reached a cliff, but at that place
the water met the cliff's sheer face
and kept the youth from going through.

A little boat came into view;
it headed down the river, floating
and carrying two men out boating.
The young knight halted there and waited.
He watched the way they navigated
and thought that they would pass the place
he waited by the cliff's sheer face.

They stayed in mid-stream, where they
stopped
and took the anchor, which they dropped.
The man afore, a fisher, took
a fish to bait his line and hook;
in size the little fish he chose
35 was larger than a minnow grows.
The knight, completely at a loss,
not knowing how to get across,
first greeted them, then asked the pair,
"Please, gentlemen, nearby is there
a bridge to reach the other side?"
To which the fisherman replied,
"No, brother, for besides this boat,
the one in which we are afloat,
which can't bear five men's weight as
charge,
45 there is no other boat as large
for twenty miles each way and more,
and you can't cross on horseback, for
there is no ferry, bridge, nor ford."
"Tell me," he answered, "by Our Lord,
where I may find a place to stay."

The fisherman said, "I should say
you'll need a roof tonight and more,
so I will lodge you at my door.
First find the place this rock is breached
50 and ride uphill, until you've reached
the summit of the cliff," he said.
"Between the wood and river bed
you'll see, down in the valley wide,
the manor house where I reside."
60 The knight rode up the cliff until
he reached the summit of the hill.
He looked around him from that stand
but saw no more than sky and land.
He cried, "What have I come to see?
65 Stupidity and trickery!
May God dishonor and disgrace

54. the...breached: opening in the cliff wall.
the man who sent me to this place! He had the long way round in mind, when he told me that I would find a manor when I reached the peak. Oh, fisherman, why did you speak? For if you said it out of spite, you tricked me badly!” He caught sight of a tower starting to appear down in a valley he was near, and as the tower came into view, if people were to search, he knew, as far as Beirut, they would not find any finer tower or spot.

The tower was dark gray stone, and square, and flanked by lesser towers, a pair. Before the tower the hall was laid; before the hall was the arcade. On toward the tower the young man rode in haste and called the man who showed the way to him a worthy guide. No longer saying he had lied, he praised the fisherman, elated to find his lodgings as he stated. The youth went toward the gate and found the drawbridge lowered to the ground. He rode across the drawbridge span. Four squires awaited the young man. Two squires came up to help him doff his arms and took his armor off. The third squire led his horse away to give him fodder, oats, and hay. The fourth brought a silk cloak, new-made, and led him to the hall’s arcade, which was so fine, you may be sure you’d not find, even if you were to search as far as Limoges, one as splendid in comparison. The young man paused in the arcade, until the castle’s master made two squires escort him to the hall. The young man entered with them all and found the hall was square inside: it was as long as it was wide; and in the center of its span he saw a handsome nobleman with grayed hair, sitting on a bed. The nobleman wore on his head a mulberry-black sable cap and wore a dark silk robe and wrap. He leaned back in his weakened state and let his elbow take his weight. Between four columns, burning bright, a fire of dry logs cast its light. In order to enjoy its heat, four hundred men could find a seat around the outsized fire, and not one man would take a chilly spot. The solid fireplace columns could support the massive chimney hood, which was of bronze, built high and wide. The squires, one squire on either side, appeared before their lord foremost and brought the youth before his host.

He saw the young man, whom he greeted. “My friend,” the nobleman entreated, “don’t think me rude not to arise; I hope that you will realize that I cannot do so with ease.” “Don’t even mention it, sir, please, I do not mind,” replied the boy, “may Heaven give me health and joy.” The lord rose higher on the bed, as best he could, with pain, and said, “My friend, come nearer, do not be embarrassed or disturbed by me, for I command you to come near. Come to my side and sit down here.” The nobleman began to say, “From where, sir, did you come today?” He said, “This morning, sir, I came

111. a handsome nobleman: The castle’s lord is generally known as the Fisher King. He suffers from a mysterious malady.

Vocabulary
elated (ə-lät′id) v. used as adj.: very happy.
from Belrepeire, a for that’s its name."
"So help me God," the lord replied,
"you must have had a long day’s ride:
150 to start before the light of morn
before the watchman blew his horn."
"Sir, I assure you, by that time
the morning bells had rung for prime, 70
the young man made the observation.
155 While they were still in conversation,
a squire entered through the door
and carried in a sword he wore
hung from his neck and which thereto
he gave the rich man, who withdrew
the sword halfway and checked the blade
160 to see where it was forged and made,
which had been written on the sword.
The blade was wrought, observed the lord,
of such fine steel, it would not break
save with its bearer’s life at stake
on one occasion, one alone,
a peril that was only known
to him who forged and tempered it.
165 The squire said, “Sir, if you permit,
your lovely blonde niece sent this gift,
and you will never see or lift
a sword that’s lighter for its strength,
considering its breadth and length.

Vocabulary
forged (förjd) v.: made a metal object by heating and hammering.
tempered (tem’pard) v.: strengthened by heating and sudden cooling.

147. Belrepeire (bel-ra-pär’): castle of Perceval’s lady,
Blancheflor; before meeting the Fisher King, Perceval defended Belrepeire, which was under siege.
153. prime n.: in the Catholic liturgy the first hour of daylight.
Please give the sword to whom you choose, but if it goes to one who'll use the sword that he is given well, you'll greatly please the demoiselle."
The forger of the sword you see has never made more swords than three, and he is going to die before he ever forges any more. No sword will be quite like this sword."
Immediately the noble lord bestowed it on the newcomer, who realized that its hangings were a treasure and of worth untold. The pommel° of the sword was gold, the best Arabian or Grecian; the sheath's embroidery gold Venetian.

177. **demoiselle** (dem′wā-zel′) n.: damsel; young lady.
187. **pommel** (pām′əl) n.: knob on the hilt of a sword or dagger.

Upon the youth the castle's lord bestowed the richly mounted sword and said to him, "This sword, dear brother, was destined for you and none other. I wish it to be yours henceforth."

Gird on the sword and draw it forth."
He thanked the lord, and then the knight made sure the belt was not too tight, and girded on the sword, and took the bare blade out for a brief look.

Then in the sheath it was replaced: it looked well hanging at his waist and even better in his fist. It seemed as if it would assist the youth in any time of need to do a brave and knightly deed. Beside the brightly burning fire the youth turned round and saw a squire, who had his armor in his care,
among the squires standing there.

He told this squire to hold the sword and took his seat beside the lord, who honored him as best he might. The candles cast as bright a light as could be found in any manor.

They chatted in a casual manner. Out of a room a squire came, clasping a silver platter past the bed. All saw him bear, with measured tread, the pure white lance. From its white tip a drop of crimson blood would drip and run along the white shaft and drip down upon the squire's hand, and then another drop would flow. The knight who came not long ago beheld this marvel, but preferred not to inquire why it occurred, for he recalled the admonition the lord made part of his tuition,* since he had taken pains to stress the dangers of loquaciousness.° The young man thought his questions might make people think him impolite, and that’s why he did not inquire.

Two more squires entered, and each squire held candelabra, wrought of fine pure gold with niello° work design. The squires with candelabra fair were an extremely handsome pair. At least ten lighted candles blazed in every holder that they raised. The squires were followed by a maiden who bore a grail, with both hands laden. The bearer was of noble mien.°

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231. the lord made part of his tuition: Perceval was instructed by the knight Gornemant not to talk too much so that people will not realize how uneducated he is.

233. loquaciousness (lō-kwā'kəs-nis) n.: talkativeness.

239. niello (ni-el'o) n.: method of decorating with inlaid metals.

246. mien (mēn) n.: appearance.

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230. for he recalled the admonition the lord made part of his tuition,° since he had taken pains to stress the dangers of loquaciousness.°

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250. the grail cast such a brilliant light, as stars grow dimmer in the night when sun or moonrise makes them fade.

255. The grail, which had been borne ahead, was made of purest, finest gold and set with gems; a manifold display of jewels of every kind, the costliest that one could find in any place on land or sea, the rarest jewels there could be, let not the slightest doubt be cast. The jewels in the grail surpassed all other gems in radiance.

265. They went the same way as the lance: they passed before the lord’s bedside to another room and went inside. The young man saw the maids’ procession and did not dare to ask a question about the grail or whom they served; the wise lord’s warning he observed, for he had taken it to heart. I fear he was not very smart; I have heard warnings people give: that one can be too talkative, but also one can be too still. But whether it was good or ill, I do not know, he did not ask. The squires who were assigned the task of bringing in the water and the cloths obeyed the lord’s command. The men who usually were assigned performed these tasks before they dined. They washed their hands in water, warmed, and then two squires, so I’m informed, brought in the ivory tabletop, made of one piece; they had to stop and hold it for a while before the lord and youth, until two more squires entered, each one with a trestle.° The trestles had two very special
rare properties, which they contained since they were built, and which remained in them forever: they were wrought of ebony, a wood that’s thought to have two virtues: it will not ignite and burn and will not rot; these dangers cause no harm nor loss. They laid the tabletop across the trestles, and the cloth above. What shall I say? To tell you of the cloth is far beyond my scope. No legate,² cardinal, or pope has eaten from a whiter one. The first course was of venison, a peppered haunch, cooked in its fat, accompanied by a clear wine that was served in golden cups, a pleasant, delicious drink. While they were present a squire carved up the venison. He set the peppered haunch upon a silver platter, carved the meat, and served the slices they would eat by placing them on hunks of bread. Again the grail passed by the bed, and still the youth remained reserved about the grail and whom they served. He did not ask, because he had been told so kindly it was bad to talk too much, and he had taken these words to heart. While he remembered, he was still much longer than was suitable. At every course, and in plain sight, the grail was carried past the knight, who did not ask whom they were serving, although he wished to know, observing in silence that he ought to learn about it prior to his return. So he would ask: before he spoke he’d wait until the morning broke, and he would ask a squire to tell, once he had told the lord farewell and all the others in his train. He put the matter off again and turned his thoughts toward drink and food.

They brought, and in no stingy mood, the foods and different types of wine, which were delicious, rich and fine. The squires were able to provide the lord and young knight at his side with every course a count, king, queen, and emperor eat by routine. At dinner’s end, the two men stayed awake and talked, while squires made the beds and brought them fruit: they ate the rarest fruits: the nutmeg, date, fig, clove, and pomegranate red. With Alexandrian gingerbread, electuaries³ at the end, restoratives, a tonic blend, and pliris archonticum⁴ for settling his stomachum. Then various liqueurs were poured for them to sample afterward: straight piment,⁶ which did not contain sweet honey or a single grain of pepper, wine of mulberries, clear syrups, other delicacies. The youth’s astonishment persisted; he did not know such things existed. “Now, my dear friend,” the great lord said, “the time has come to go to bed. I’ll seek my room—don’t think it queer—and you will have your bed out here and may lie down at any hour. I do not have the slightest power over my body anymore and must be carried to my door.” Four nimble servants, strongly set, came in and seized the coverlet by its four corners (it was spread beneath the lord, who lay in bed) and carried him away to rest. The others helped the youthful guest. As he required, and when he chose,
they took his clothing off, and hose, and put him in a bed with white, smooth linen sheets; he slept all night at peace until the morning broke. But when the youthful knight awoke, he was the last to rise and found that there was no one else around. Exasperated and alone, he had to get up on his own. He made the best of it, arose and awkwardly drew on his hose without a bit of help or aid. He saw his armor had been laid at night against the dais head a little distance from his bed. When he had armed himself at last, he walked around the great hall past the rooms and knocked at every door which opened wide the night before, but it was useless; juxtaposed, the doors were tightly locked and closed. He shouted, called, and knocked outside, but no one opened or replied. At last the young man ceased to call, walked to the doorway of the hall, which opened up, and passed through there, and went on down the castle stair. His horse was saddled in advance. The young man saw his shield and lance were leaned against the castle wall upon the side that faced the hall. He mounted, searched the castle whole, but did not find one living soul, one servant, or one squire around.

He hurried toward the gate and found the men had let the drawbridge down, so that the knight could leave the town at any hour he wished to go. His hosts had dropped the drawbridge so the youth could cross it undeterred. The squires were sent, the youth inferred, out to the wood, where they were set to checking every trap and net. The drawbridge lay across the stream. He would not wait and formed a scheme of searching through the woods as well to see if anyone could tell about the lance, why it was bleeding, about the grail, whom they were feeding, and where they carried it in state. The youth rode through the castle gate and out upon the drawbridge plank. Before he reached the other bank, the young man started realizing the forefeet of his horse were rising. His horse made one great leap indeed. Had he not jumped well, man and steed would have been hurt. His rider swerved to see what happened and observed the drawbridge had been lifted high. He shouted, hearing no reply. "Whoever raised the bridge," said he, "where are you? Come and talk to me! Say something to me; come in view. There's something I would ask of you, some things I wanted to inquire, some information I desire." His words were wasted, vain and fond; no one was willing to respond.

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377. hose n.: tightfitting, stockinglike outer garments worn by men during medieval times.
390. dais (dä'is) n.: raised platform.

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444. fond adj.: foolish.

Vocabulary
juxtaposed (juks'ta-pöz'pd) v. used as adj.: placed side by side.
undeterred (un-'där-turd) adj. used as adv.: unobstructed; without restriction.
Response and Analysis

Reading Check
1. Why is Perceval unable to cross the river?
2. What is special about the sword the castle's lord gives to Perceval?
3. What objects are carried in the procession through the hall?
4. How does Perceval plan to find out about the Grail?
5. When Perceval awakes and finds everyone gone, what does he conclude?

Thinking Critically
6. Perceval, following Gornemant's advice not to speak, refrains from asking questions about the strange things he sees during the Grail procession. What comments does the narrator make about Perceval's failure to speak up, and what do these comments reveal about the narrator's judgment of Perceval's behavior? What might the narrator's observations foreshadow about the future consequences of Perceval's silence?
7. Medieval romances often include mysterious and fantastic events. How is this aspect developed in the Perceval excerpt? Are these supernatural elements essential to the plot of the story, or do they merely serve to build atmosphere? Explain.
8. Explain what you think is the meaning of the mysterious Grail procession. What might be the significance of the lance and the Grail?

Extending and Evaluating
9. In medieval tales, heroes often have to pass various kinds of tests. What test does Perceval undergo in this episode? Do you think he passes it? Why or why not?
10. What moral, or lesson about life, is implied by the fact that Perceval fails to speak up during the Grail procession and then cannot get answers to his questions the next morning? How does Perceval's failure to ask questions tie in with the experience you wrote about in your Quickwrite?

Literary Criticism
11. One view of Perceval is that it represents a conflict between the ideals of Arthurian chivalry and the religious ideals inspired by the quest for the Grail. Considering what you have seen of the conventions of courtly love and chivalry in other works, do you think that the two sets of ideals are incompatible? Explain.

WRITING
Writing a News Report
Later in the story, after leaving the castle, Perceval learns that had he asked about the lance and the Grail, the lord of the castle would have been healed. Perceval vows to find the Grail, but since the poem was left unfinished, the outcome of his quest is unclear. Write a newspaper article or television news script that reports on the final outcome of Perceval's quest. Write in a contemporary journalistic style, using the 5W-How? method, which answers the questions who? what? when? where? why? and how? Your report may be serious or humorous.

Vocabulary Development
Summarizing the Narrative
- tempered
- elated
- forged
- juxtaposed
- undeterred

Using the Vocabulary words listed above, write a summary of the excerpt from Perceval. Not every sentence you write must contain a Vocabulary word. You may use a word more than once.

Chrétiens de Troyes
Grammar Link

Avoiding Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers
Modifiers make sentences lively and specific. Putting a modifier in the wrong place, however, or in a position where it modifies nothing, can make your sentence a riddle or, even worse, an unintended joke. A misplaced modifier accidentally modifies the wrong word, usually because the word it is intended to modify is too far away. To avoid this problem, place the modifier as close as possible to the word it should modify.

MISPLACED Perceval is a young knight of the famous King Arthur who doubts his abilities. [Perceval, not King Arthur, doubts his abilities.]
CLEAR Perceval, who doubts his abilities, is a young knight of the famous King Arthur.

While a misplaced modifier modifies the wrong word, a dangling modifier does not logically modify any word in the sentence. A modifying word, phrase, or clause at the beginning of a sentence should modify the noun or pronoun that comes directly after it. If the modifier does not, you can fix the problem by (1) placing the correct noun or pronoun immediately after the opening modifier, (2) adding words to the modifier to make its meaning clear, or (3) rewriting the entire sentence.

DANGLING Peering from the cliff, the nobleman's castle is not visible at first. [Was the castle peering from the cliff?]
CLEAR Peering from the cliff, Perceval cannot see the nobleman's castle at first.

Practice
Correct any misplaced or dangling modifiers in the following sentences. You may need to add or change words or rewrite sentences.
1. Cursing, the mysterious fisherman who gives directions perplexes Perceval.
2. Seeing the castle at last, a warm reception has been prepared for Perceval.
3. Perceval marvels at the sumptuous banquet on the table laid out before him.
4. Warned not to speak out of turn, the Grail passes through the hall several times without comment.
5. Perceval resolves at dinner first thing in the morning to ask a squire about the Grail.

Apply to Your Writing
Review a writing assignment you are working on now or have already completed. Revise any sentences to correct misplaced or dangling modifiers. Pay special attention to sentences that begin with a modifying word, phrase, or clause.

For more help, see Placement of Modifiers, 5g-h, in the Language Handbook.

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European Literature from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment