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PARZIVAL

Wolfram von Eschenbach

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Foreword

Parzival is the retelling and ending by one genius, Wolfram von Eschenbach (fl. c. 1195-1225), of the unfinished romance of another, the *Perceval* of Chrétien de Troyes, a poem otherwise known from its prologue as *Li contes del graal* or 'The story of the Grail'. Chrétien's poem is the earliest extant narrative of the Grail, though he tells us that his patron Philip, Count of Flanders, had lent him its 'book', presumably in one or other respect a source, but a work of absolutely unknown content.

Wolfram, whose great stature as a poet is known independently from his earlier love-poetry and his later epic *Willehalm* and elegiac *Titurel*, rose magnificently to the challenge of retelling and completing Chrétien's mystery story, achieving it in a very different and indeed inimitable style.

If, glimpsing the title 'Parzival', the reader picks up this book in the hope of finding the Story of the Grail, he will not find it. He will find instead the Story of *a* Grail, together with everything else he is entitled to expect of a story told by one of the world's great narrative poets and humorists. There never was a Story of *the* Grail, and never could be. On the other hand there were stories of as many different Grails as there were writers or syndicates exploiting the potent name.

Chrétien himself first speaks of *a* 'graal', and it is clear from the best (though not all) manuscripts of *Perceval* that he intended a vessel, some sort of dish like the one named 'gradalis' in Medieval Latin, from which the Old French 'gra(d)al' took its rise. After introducing *a* graal into his narrative, Chrétien logically refers to it as *the* graal when he has occasion to mention it again. In the present state of our knowledge the notion cannot be disproved that Chrétien, the originator of Arthurian romance in the higher courtly mode, also launched the subsidiary genre of Grail Romances in his *Perceval* of post 1181 A.D.;

Chapter I

If vacillation dwell with the heart the soul will rue it. Shame and honour clash where the courage of a steadfast man is motley like the magpie. But such a man may yet make merry, for Heaven and Hell have equal part in him. Infidelity's friend is black all over and takes on a murky hue, while the man of loyal temper holds to the white.

This winged comparison is too swift for unripe wits. They lack the power to grasp it. For it will wrench past them like a startled hare! So it is with a dull mirror or a blind man's dream. These reveal faces in dim outline: but the dark image does not abide, it gives but a moment's joy. Who tweaks my palm where never a hair did grow? He would have learnt close grips indeed! Were I to cry 'Oh!' in fear of that it would mark me as a fool. Shall I find loyalty where it must vanish, like fire in a well or dew in the sun?

On the other hand I have yet to meet a man so wise that he would not gladly know what guidance this story requires, what edification it brings. The tale never loses heart, but flees and pursues, turns tail and wheels to the attack and doles out blame and praise. The man who follows all these vicissitudes and neither sits too long nor goes astray and otherwise knows where he stands has been well served by mother wit.

Feigned friendship leads to the fire, it destroys a man's nobility like hail. Its loyalty is so short in the tail that if it meet in the wood with gadflies it will not quit a bite in three.

These manifold distinctions do not all relate to men. I shall set these marks as a challenge to women. Let any who would learn from me beware to whom she takes her honour and good name, beware whom she makes free of her love and precious person, lest she regret the loss of both chastity and affection. With God as my witness I bid good women observe restraint. The lock guarding all good ways is modesty - I need not wish

comfort him and guard his soul. The Baruc defrayed the expense. It cost him a rare emerald. We did all this without assistance from the infidel, since the Cross whose blessing the death of Christ conferred upon us, is not in the keeping of their rite. The heathen worship Gahmuret in all seriousness as they do their own estimable god, yet not to the glory of the Cross or because of Christian teaching that will loose our bonds at the Judgment, but because his manly loyalty, his confession and repentance give him a bright radiance in Heaven. In him, deceit and treachery were at a low ebb.

'Upon the Adamant, his helmet, they engraved an epitaph and fixed it to the Cross above his grave. The Inscription reads:

(56) 'Through this Helm a lance-thrust struck a noble Hero, Gahmuret by name, a mighty King who ruled three lands, each one of which conferred a Crown with its train of mighty Princes. He was born of Anjou and lost his life before Baghdad in the Baruc's cause. His fame shot up so high that none will ever reach its mark wherever men shall judge of knights hereafter. There is no mother's child to whom this Hero swore surrender, that is, within the Chivalric Order! He gave help and manly counsel to his friends and never failed them. For women he suffered bitter love-pangs. Baptized, he followed the Christian rite. It is no lie but truth to say that his death distressed the Saracens. The Hero strove for fair renown in all his conscious days and so died a renowned Knight. He won the victory over all that is perfidious. Now ask God's Mercy on the man that lies here.'

Such was the squire's account. Many men of Wales wept for all to see. They had good cause for their sorrow.

The Lady was carrying a child that was already quickening in her womb, but they let her lie unaided. The child had been alive for eighteen weeks,* and its mother the Queen Herzelayde was wrestling with Death. It was witless of those others not to help the woman, for she carried in her womb one destined to be the flower of chivalry if Death will but pass him by. But then a wise old man who had come to condole with her bent

* Life was reckoned from the first quickening in the second half of pregnancy.

over her as she fought Death. He forced her teeth apart, and they splashed water into her mouth. She returned to her senses at once.

'Ah me, what has become of my darling?' she cried, wailing in lamentation for him. 'The noble fame of Gahmuret was what filled my heart with joy, but his reckless ardour took him from me. I was younger than he by far, yet I am his mother and his bride, bearing as I do himself and his life's seed here, which we in our love did give and receive. If God is steadfast in his purpose, may he allow this seed to come to fruit, for I have suffered too great a loss in my consort. How cruelly Death has dealt by me! Gahmuret never shared a woman's love but he rejoiced in her joys and was saddened by her sorrows. It was manly devotion moved him in this, for he was devoid of all villainy.'

Now hear another thing the Lady did. She clasped her belly and the child within in her hands and arms, and said: 'I pray God to send me the noble fruit of Gahmuret! This is the prayer I cherish in my heart - God keep me from foolish desperation! If I were to kill myself while carrying his love-seed it would be the second death of Gahmuret, who was as true to me as a man can be.'

The Lady did not care who saw it - she tore her shift from her bosom and busied herself with her soft white breasts. With a woman's instinct she pressed them to her red lips. 'It is yours to hold a babe's nourishment,' said this woman grown wise, 'and you have sent it on ahead ever since I felt the quickening.' It was just what she wanted to see, this food above the heart, the milk within her breasts! Queen though she was, she pressed it out. 'Milk, how loyal of you to have come! Were I not baptized already you would have marked my christening! Often, now, I shall sprinkle myself with you, as with my tears, both alone and in the presence of others, for I shall mourn for Gahmuret.'

The Lady asked them to bring the bloody shift in which Gahmuret had lost his life at the head of the Baruc's company and met a warrior's death with the élan of a man of courage. She also asked after the lance that had done him to death.

Wolfram's Apology

If any speaks better concerning women than I, he may do so without my resenting it. It would please me to learn of their great pleasure. From one alone would I withhold my loyal service – having found her unfaithful, my anger towards her does not change.

I am Wolfram of Eschenbach and something of a minnesinger. Like a tongs I clench on my anger for a woman who has so mishandled me that I cannot choose but be her enemy. For this I suffer the hostility of others. Oh, why do they behave so? Yet although I deplore their enmity, it is womanly feeling that prompts them, since I said something I ought never to have said,* and wronged myself as well, which will scarce ever happen again. On the other hand, they should not gallop ahead of themselves and charge at my palisade – they will meet stiff opposition there! I have not lost my ability to judge shrewdly of their ways and behaviour. Yet I will champion any woman of modest character, touching her good name – any pain she suffered I should take very much to heart.

When a poet cries 'Check-mate!' to all ladies to advance his own particular one,† his praise limps of the spavin. Whichever lady cares to inspect my patent – and not only see but hear it – I shall not mislead her. My hereditary Office is the Shield! I should think any lady weak of understanding who loved me for mere songs unbacked by manly deeds. If I desire a good woman's love and fail to win love's reward from her with shield and lance, let her favour me accordingly. A man who aims at love through chivalric exploits gambles for high stakes.

Unless the ladies thought it flattery, I should go on offering

* Wolfram must have attacked his Lady in a love-song which has not survived, see pp. 175 and 438.

† Reinmar, the favoured poet at the court of Vienna, had done so and had also attracted the shafts of Walther von der Vogelweide for his sally.

you things as yet unheard of in this story, I would continue this tale of adventure for you. But let whoever wishes me to do so, not take it as a book. I haven't a letter to my name! No few poets make their start from them: but this story goes its way without the guidance of books. Rather than that it be taken for a book, I should prefer to sit naked in my tub without a towel – provided I had my scrubber!

* See p. 10.