

HUMOR AND IRONY AND STRUCTURE IN

205

SIR PERCEVAL OF GALLES

by

Charles Watterson Davis

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Approved by:

William Brundage  
Major Professor

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Somewhere beyond the mass of the poetic edifices of established Arthurian romance, Sir Perceval of Galles stands as a northern English outpost. Modern visitors to the mighty bildungsroman of the German Parzival and to the high chivalrous adventure of Chrétien's romances may be taken aback by this almost uncivilized country poem. Such visitors are unused to the heavy carpet of broad humor and the continual alteration of irony and humor in Sir Perceval. Certainly the early scholarly opinions of the work were not entirely complimentary, and only lately has criticism begun to note the thematic and structural ingenuity of the romance.<sup>1</sup> One important aspect of Sir Perceval which has not received much attention is the role of the humor and irony in the development of the work's artistic themes; with this development the overarching structural and generic plans show us both the work's sustained artistry, and the north English version of the Arthurian ideal in the late fourteenth century.

Before we can approach Sir Perceval directly we must distinguish between the various earlier, continental Perceval redactions, chiefly Chrétien de Troyes's Conte du Graal and Wolfram von Eschenbach's Parzival, and those other Arthurian and chivalric romances of the north of England, which are analogous to Sir Perceval and which belong to the same milieu. So that there will be a thematic and structural context for a discussion of the techniques of humor and irony in Sir Perceval, the second section of this paper will deal with the use of themes, motifs, structures, and techniques in certain of the romances of the same milieu as Sir Perceval. Those romances must suggest themselves either by reason of their literary importance and Arthurian setting,



or by their appearance with Sir Perceval in the Thornton manuscript. I have presented these romances of Northern England in order of their significance to this study. In the third section I will analyze the nature and roles of irony and humor in Sir Perceval. As this section deals with essential elements in the telling of the story of Perceval, the possible variants in the narrative and the action become important, and so I will refer to the themes, motifs, structures, and techniques of the most important redactions of the Perceval story, namely those of Chrétien and Eschenbach. In the fourth section of the study I will synthesize the material of the first three sections and advance several conclusions about the poetic purpose of Sir Perceval and this romance's relationship to the romance tradition.

## II. THE ROMANCES OF THE MILIEU

Like all other medieval romances, Sir Perceval is the story of a knight who encounters adventure during his life. The action of the story is simple enough. Perceval's father marries Acheflour and holds a tournament to honor the marriage, but the Red Knight who jousts with him is wounded and swears revenge. Soon after this, Perceval is born, and another tournament is held to honor the marriage. This time the Red Knight has his revenge by killing Perceval's father. Acheflour renounces the chivalric world and runs away with her son to the forest, vowing to raise him in such a way that he will be ignorant of chivalry and deeds of arms. He grows up ignorant, therefore, but as the poet suggests, his "kynde" will "springe forth." Later, Perceval encounters three knights of Arthur's court and determines to seek out Arthur himself. This he does; but on the road to the court he stops at a hall he sees by the way and finds a lady alone. There he eats and drinks and trades rings with the sleeping lady. Then, at Arthur's court, he witnesses an act of brazen thievery by the Red Knight. A chase ensues, and Perceval unknowingly kills the killer of his father. Donning the Red Knight's armor, since he has none of his own, Perceval encounters an Uncle of his, who flees him briefly for fear of the Red Knight. Reunited with part of his family, Perceval is present at the Uncle's castle to hear a messenger plead for relief of a siege of the city and for protection of Lufamour, its queen. Perceval journeys there alone and vanquishes two of the besieging Sultan's armies, and then the Sultan himself. Lufamour and Perceval marry

then, and she teaches him courtly manners. After a year, Perceval remembers his mother, whom he has left alone in the forest, and determines to find her again. On his way he encounters the lady of the hall again; she is in a desperate plight because her husband has suspected her of adultery since discovering the lost ring. Perceval remedies the consequence of his action, by confessing his role in the ring exchange and by forcing the Black Knight to treat his wife well. Subsequently, Perceval again seeks his mother in the land of a giant, brother to the Sultan. There he meets the giant in battle and defeats him. Then the giant's porter tells him where his mother has gone and that she runs away from all armored men. Perceval discards his armor, journeys to the well where he had been raised and is reunited with his mother, and both return to Lufamour.

Like many romance heroes, Perceval in this story grows and develops. There are conventional motifs, such as the Besieged Lady episode, and conventional patterns of action, such as the journey to Arthur's court. Some of the themes are familiar, such as the need to grow in knowledge of the world and the need to keep family together. Even the circular structure is familiar, as many romances end approximately in the scene where they began. More specifically, Sir Perceval contains much that is familiar from other romances of its milieu. I shall describe those romances now, in order to place Sir Perceval in its genre and milieu, before turning to Sir Perceval's distinctive qualities.

#### A. The Alliterative Morte Arthure

The Alliterative Morte Arthure is both a significant Arthurian

romance and also a romance in the Thornton manuscript. On the one hand, though, it is itself unlike what we think of as Arthurian romance, since it takes the pseudo-historical tradition that Arthur not only united England but also conquered Rome before falling to rebellion at home.<sup>2</sup> Morte Arthure retains some of the traits of earlier, heroic poems. Nevertheless, it is important for this study. First of all, the scope of the romance is very broad, covering many miles and many characters. Arthur is seen fighting for his people against a giant and against the Roman imperialists, as Perceval does against a giant and the Sultan's forces. The battle with the giant is almost a typical Arthurian adventure, wherein a lone knight struggles against the superior force of an unnatural creature; as the Sir Perceval poet states, the fight with the giant is a "Metyng . . . seldom sene" (1. 2049). But there is a difference between the typical romance and the episode in Morte Arthure. Eric Auerbach defines the knightly adventure in romance as the "story of a solitary knightly adventure in a setting detached from any political or historical reality. Its purpose is to test a knight's personal perfection in chivalric virtue, in deeds of arms or courtly love."<sup>3</sup> When Arthur battles the giant near St. Michael's Mount, a romantic natural setting, in hopes of rescuing a captive lady, he acts as a great Christian hero and the defender of his people, killing a murderer of children. The killing is both a political and a social act, and the giant is not romantically fantastical but natural.<sup>4</sup> So it is with almost the rest of the romance, and all those miles and characters: Arthur travels the former and fights the latter to defend his kingdom, rather than to seek adventure.

If tragedy is the downfall of a great man, and of a great idea, then the tragedy of the Alliterative Morte Arthure evolves from the turning point of the romance, when Arthur turns imperialistic and shows hubris, and when Gawain leaves the army, with which all the battles had been fought, in order to find a worthy knight to battle.<sup>5</sup>

The result of this politicization of knightly adventure is partly generic. In the Arthur adventure, romance themes are subordinated to the heroic mode; in the later Gawain episode, romance is opposed to the heroic.<sup>6</sup> Two corollaries of this process are evident. One is the importance of society and the elevation of social responsibility above merely individual pursuits. The social emphasis is clear in Arthur's development; and particularly in a speech by Cador who rallies his outnumbered men, just as Bryhtnoth did in The Battle of Maldon.<sup>7</sup> Such social emphasis is like that in Sir Perceval, when Perceval fights against the imperialistic Sultan and the Black Knight, who mistreats his wife. The second corollary is more specific: for the individual knight in society, the key to his social function is knowledge of his purpose, and the selection of a good purpose. Just as Arthur's purpose in fighting the giant is crucial, so his intent in fighting Lucius--to preserve England--is distinct from his intent to subjugate the Duke of Lorraine. Similarly, Perceval's knowledge in fighting the Sultan is distinct from his lack of knowledge in trading rings with the Lady of the Hall. And with the knowledge of the knight's purpose comes the knowledge of how to pursue the proper end, just as misknowing leads to an improper end. Arthur besieges Metz, in his war of aggression, with great cruelty (ll. 3036-43), and after a series

of victories he is offered the imperial crown. Thus, while Arthur pursues an improper end, Mordred plots at home, in an uncivil response appropriate to Arthur's hubris and imperialism. After Lucius is defeated, Arthur buries his own dead with ceremony; but in response to the demand for tribute he sends the Roman dead home with insults, as "treasure coffins" (ll. 2342-51). In contrast to these excesses, which seem replete with pride, Arthur had been capable of honoring those who had given their lives on his side; and after all his knights have fallen at the end of the romance, he likens himself to a widow longing for her man (l. 4285). Widowhood is an apt analogy for what has happened to Arthur's initial romance ideal; the same kind of image, one of the union of a marriage and the reunion of a family, is present in Sir Perceval. The simile itself is unusual, because similes are not very common in Morte Arthure, and because the sentiment is strikingly unselfish. In its appropriateness to the social theme of Morte Arthure this simile is a particular instance of that which all good poems must achieve: that the style and structure suggest the theme. That goal is the one Sir Perceval strives toward in its use of humor and irony in the overall structure.

Likewise, Arthur fights the giant in a socially and religious formulaic manner, while he is still full of good purpose. So Gawain fights Priamus after the immediate conflict with Lucius, in a different formulaic manner reminiscent of romance, where Gawain maintains he is of low birth and later the wounds are cured by a magic balm. These single adventures, which frame the war against Lucius, signal thematic progression, and thus signal clear structural divisions,

just as the breaks from adventure do in Sir Perceval. Likewise, structural parallels in Morte Arthure contrast Arthur's fight against Saracens and pagans, who are allied with Lucius, and his fight later against the Church and the non-combatant Duke of Lorraine. The theme also is developed by formulaic phraseology, techniques common in Sir Perceval and in all alliterative poetry, such as the use of irony to qualify a character or idea, and the creation of atmosphere. Formulas in Morte Arthure serve either an ironic purpose, as when it is said of a dead bear, let him "fleete whare hym lykes" (l. 803), or a solemn and elevated purpose, in the formula's retardation of narrative pace, amplification of graphic details, and stylization of action.<sup>8</sup>

#### B. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, though it is not in the Thornton manuscript, is important enough literarily to deserve some study here. In its general pattern it is more like Sir Perceval than the Morte Arthure, since it and Sir Perceval are decidedly romances, and Morte Arthure is a mixture. Gawain is clearly in the continental romance tradition, however, even showing considerable French influence in its language. Another striking feature of the romance is its original combination of the old, traditional beheading game motif with the exchange of winnings and temptation game motifs. The motifs are structurally interlinked in three stages, covering three days, two distinct kinds of hunts and a progression of moral penalty. Partly due to this complexity, the Gawain story is very striking in its narrative tension. Another principal quality of the story is also

interesting--its newness. The story of Gawain is not present in other extant, earlier stories of Gawain. Just as striking as the story itself is the theme it carries. When the green giant issues his challenge, it is as an answer to Arthur's desire to hear of an adventure before he will eat (ll. 91-4), and Gawain's very willingness to give the giant the hardest blow he can is ironically rebuked by the giant's reminder of their bargain, after he picks up his head (ll. 448-56).<sup>9</sup> Arthur, of course, is guilty here of exactly the fault the Morte Arthure places on Gawain, that of placing the experience of adventure before the proper functioning of society. Gawain in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is again the paramount Arthurian knight who fails his ideal through a lack of understanding of the purpose of knightly adventure and of the nature of the temptation game. Whether he somehow learns his lesson in this failure, or remains constant in his inconstancy, does not affect the ultimate effect of this shortcoming. The king of the court and his most adventurous knight are fallible, even slightly laughable. Though Gawain is hardly an anti-romance, it does, like Sir Perceval, contain a view independent of the courtly romance ideal--the view of a country lord who is not part of the court. The origin of this independent view may lie both in church (the green chapel) and in a northern, rustic opposition to southern, courtly claims of superiority.

The key events in Gawain are obviously the three days of hunting at the castle. This castle episode is unusual partly because of the number of interlocking threes. There are three visits by the lady of the castle, Gawain receives three gifts from her, Bercilak goes



on three hunts, Gawain receives three prizes from him, and Gawain gives Bercilak three in return. Even the days are divided into the morning temptation, the hunts during the day, and the nightly exchange of winnings. Only the exception to the threes makes this series imperfect: Gawain keeps the girdle to protect himself. That difference points out the series's other principal quality, though. The number of temptations increases from day to day--from one to two to three kisses (and the girdle)--and the quality of the prizes from Bercilak's hunt decreases--from a deer to a boar to a fox. In a similar manner, at the end of the poem, the beheading game is in three distinct actions. As Gawain waits, Bercilak's first blow misses, his second stops short and his third merely nicks Gawain's neck. The progression of the penalty Gawain receives is directly parallel to the progression of his transgression in the temptation. This progression is not the usual romance practice. Neither is the subtle way in which Lady Bercilak tempts Gawain. The lack of physicality is also present in the third stage in Sir Perceval, where Perceval must abandon his armor and aggressive ways. Despite the reader's usual identification with the main character and his wariness of apparently incidental events in a tightly controlled fiction, the romance undermines the reader's full-fledged support of Gawain. Just as the Green Giant could ironically fulfill Arthur's wait-before-eating attitude by appearing, and the giant's survival could turn Gawain's willingness to fight and kill the giant into a disability, so Gawain's famed courtliness is turned against him by the lady of the castle, and his instinct for survival, beyond the bounds of his code, is turned against him by

Bercilak's cutting his neck in response. The reader must respond with a smile to see Gawain squirm to avoid violating a guest's code on the one hand and offending the lady on the other. Even Gawain's first fortunate success at the beheading scene near the green chapel, when Bercilak's first swing misses him, is due directly to Gawain's start, as if from fear and trembling. Importantly, humor and irony help to bring the Arthurian knight down from his height, and from the extended pretence of his courtly speeches, and to humanize him. It is of course this humanizing effect of irony and humor that Sir Perceval of Galles exhibits.

### C. Ywain and Gawain

Among the other northern romances, one of the most prominent is a redaction of Chrétien's Yvain, Yvain and Gawain. Perhaps the most obvious feature of Yvain is its excision of the French refinements of courtly love and chivalry, especially in the story-telling after the Whitsunday feast. Instead of bemoaning love's low state as happens in Yvain, the guests "carped and curtaysly / of dedes of armes and of veneri" (ll. 25-6).<sup>10</sup> Unlike a similar situation in Chrétien's romance, where Yvain must psychologically grapple with his attraction to Landine, Yvain falls in love with Alundyne simply by looking at her through the window. The English poet avoids discussion of any moral difficulty Yvain may have had about loving the widow of a man he had killed.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, the narrative is so tight that Alundyne does not have the opportunity to consider the moral implication of a marriage to Yvain; rather, as her steward says, "weman may maintene no stowre, thai most nedes have a governowre" (ll. 1221-2).<sup>12</sup> It is

as if, in one critic's words, the English poet had "a sterner temperament and more strenuous preoccupations."<sup>13</sup>

There are some more subtle differences between the English and French texts as well. Episodes have been excised and condensed, but the overall pattern of the French romance remains. The result is a tight structure with little excess and a rapid pace, as rapid and streamlined as Sir Perceval. Few of Chrétien's allusions, little of his ceremony and decor, and not much of his suspense remains. Naturally enough, considering these other suppressions, Chrétien's irony is also diminished in translation. For example, Ywain does not tell Alundyne, while in disguise, that his lady's anger forces him to stay away from her court, and Lunete does not tease Ywain. Moreover, Chrétien's use of similes as decoration is lost.<sup>14</sup> The English poem focuses on its hero in a different manner than does Chrétien's narrative. Ywain, like Sir Perceval's father, is still introduced in his social setting at Arthur's court, from which he must emerge in order to find adventure and to marry. Although many of Ywain's actions are the same (e.g., he still must wear a defensive ring similar to Sir Perceval's ring), he is not eloquent like Yvain, but blunt like Perceval. He may not even have love in mind when he proposes marriage, as the alliance is more convenient than inspired. Ywain generally is direct, honest and forward. Given such a simple mind-set, as uncomplicated as Perceval's, it is natural that his madness after Alundyne rejects him seems not to be psychologically reasonable. Later, he returns to the well in a manner similar to Sir Perceval (where "he thinks for to dwell," l. 3838) and he immediately casts

water on the stone. This action must mean that the well and Alundyne's lands are one and the same. In another episode, unlike Yvain's politic promise to the Lord of the Chastel de Pesme Avanture to return, which Yvain makes in bad faith, Yvain is plain, blunt and honest in refusing the hand of the lord's daughter.<sup>15</sup> The English poet clearly wishes to present a hero who is consistent in his basic qualities, one who does not have the wiles and superficial civility of Chrétien's Yvain. Yvain is sterner and more preoccupied than Yvain, even to the detriment of psychological complexity. Again, a comparison with Sir Perceval, who is plain and honest and consistent, is useful.

#### D. Sir Degrevant

One romance apparently prominent in its own day is Sir Degrevant, which is in two manuscripts.<sup>16</sup> One of its copies is preserved in the Thornton manuscript. It is written in the same tail-rime stanza of sixteen lines (aaab), as that of Sir Perceval and The Avowing of Arthur. Verbal stanza linkings are less common in Sir Degrevant than in Sir Perceval, but still serve to emphasize the narrative flow. Though the stanza-linkage is ornamental, yet it does serve an obvious narrative function: it creates a sense of the progression of small, distinct segments of the story. In Sir Degrevant the choice of episodes is not unusual, though a significant alteration is made in the villain, who is changed from the usual husband to a father. The basic story is that of a knight of low degree who loves a high-born lady, whose father interposes difficulties. There is a wicked steward/forester to report to the father, a loyal squire and a waiting maid, and a three days's joust. The love of the apparently low-born knight and

the lady, and the three stages of the fight for her, are motifs also present in Sir Perceval. However conventional the father/husband motif is, it is still true that the poet alters it, sometimes in small ways, to suit his overall purpose. The alteration from husband to father removes an awkward moral problem, of course, but it also reinforces the poet's apparent bias toward the proper family. For instance, as in Sir Perceval, marriage must be by choice: Sir Degrevant fights against his rival the Duke of Gerle, with Melidor as prize; she approves of the result (ll. 1317-20). Just as significant as Melidor's approval and her commitment to fidelity between man and wife, is the poet's genealogical note: after the marriage, Sir Degrevant succeeds to the Earl's lands, the two live a long life, and they have several children. Likewise, there is a concluding statement about Perceval's future life, and his death in the Holy Land, in Sir Perceval.

In Sir Degrevant, however, these familial pictures may be contrasted with passages of combat that are very direct and vigorous, as when "The styward Syre Eymere / Com a lytyl to nere, / Hys hede by the colere / He kerues away" (ll. 1649-52). There is more decorative imagery used in the descriptions of the bower (e.g., the green trees) and other passages than is common in Middle English alliterative poetry,<sup>17</sup> but it is probably significant that embellishment is more consistent in the combat scenes than in the love scenes.<sup>18</sup> Unlike the main characters in Sir Perceval, the characters are stock: Melidor is shrewish, except for the lone occasion when she sides with Sir Degrevant, in the battle scene noted above. It is in the poet's manipulation of these characters, and the careful handling of the loose ends of the plot, that he shows his skill. He alludes to courtly

sentiment and embellishes his details, which makes the poem appeal to the cultivated, and yet he makes much of the combats, the love stories and the wedding feast, which appeals to a less cultivated awareness.<sup>19</sup> The dual appeal is present in Sir Perceval for almost the same reasons.

#### E. The Erle of Toulous

It is somewhat difficult to separate discussion of Sir Degrevant from discussion of another Thornton romance, The Erle of Toulous, which is very close to it in plot and action. Still the differences are significant for the purpose of this study. The Erle is based on the Persecuted Wife theme, but that theme becomes quite similar to Sir Degrevant's squire of low degree theme. Both stories begin with an invasion of the hero's lands by his feudal superior; in both the aggressor's wife protests the wrong. The Erle loves his enemy's wife, where Sir Degrevant loves his enemy's daughter. Both men visit their love's castles in disguise, with one companion, and both men are led into an ambush, but both defeat their ambushers. Both return to the castles to fight for their ladies; and in the end, the heroes triumph over all, the parties are reconciled by the intervention of a woman, and marriage takes place. The length of married life and the number of children are mentioned. At the same time, despite these similarities, it is also clear that there are large differences: the Persecuted Wife theme itself is obviously different from the low degree, overly protective father themes. Unlike the Erle, Sir Degrevant is high-born and is made the equal of Perceval and Gawain in arms, and is one of the knights of Arthur's table, though one who

usually was not accorded much status by the French.<sup>20</sup> The Persecuted Wife theme occurs in Sir Perceval, of course, and Perceval is made the equal of Gawayn.

#### F. Sir Eglamour of Artois

Of more popular interest was Sir Eglamour of Artois. In one obvious sense it is like the Alliterative Morte Arthure; the scope of action is very broad, and the hero thereby gives himself rope enough to hang--or at least suffer--by. In many other sense the two stories are different enough to preclude further comparison. Sir Eglamour is clearly a romance, since the hero takes on adventures as part of his personal test, to prove himself a suitable husband for Christabelle. The test may of course also have a beneficial social impact. In test number one, he kills a hart in the forest, sounds a horn there, and kills the giant who responds. The giant's brother, very like the giant's brother in Sir Perceval, is besieging the city of Sidon as suitor for the king's daughter, and Sir Eglamour kills him. Eglamour refuses the land and the daughter's hand. Eglamour marries Christabelle on the sly and begets a child, and then is promptly summoned on his next mission to slay a dragon, after which he recuperates from injuries for a year in Rome. After this, the action shifts to the Middle East, where the son grows up separated from the mother, and then wins her hand in a tournament. All is saved when Sir Eglamour arrives and re-wins Christabelle from their son. Then Sir Eglamour lives out his life, and his son marries the king of Sidon's daughter.

Though Sir Eglamour belongs to no specific romance tradition, it is important because it not only is copied in the Thornton manu-

script but also has several similarities to Sir Perceval. In both works, a bachelor loves a beautiful lady and rescues her. In both, the warrior promises to see a lady again, though Sir Eglamour does not make the promise to the one he will marry. In Sir Eglamour the father leaves a ring to his son who will use it in his adventures. In Sir Perceval the father leaves a "short spere." In both, the mother and child are left in the forest, without those things to which the mother, at least, had become accustomed. In both the son grows up to show great prowess. In both the hero delivers a lady from a besieging sultan. In Sir Eglamour the mother and son relationship is discovered just in time, just as Perceval fights with a close relative but discovers the relationship in time. In both the conclusion is largely the reunion of the family. There is in Sir Eglamour a wife-winning motif, a jealous father motif, and a jealous husband/Persecuted wife motif. Of all of these, only the jealous father is not present in Sir Perceval. Although the lovers dominate the overall structure in Sir Eglamour, the story deviates sufficiently from them to emphasize the mother and her plight,<sup>21</sup> similar to the divergence in Sir Perceval in the last third of the poem. In Sir Eglamour, similar in form to Gawain's series of tests, and to the progression of adventures in Sir Perceval, Sir Eglamour's fights are graded. The first is a deer hunt and a one-day fight with a giant. The second fight is a three-day hunt of a boar, and another one-day attack on a giant. The third fight is against a dragon, combining the hunt and the attack, but this fight takes a year to recover from. The year's absence is similar to that of Yvain and Ywain, of Sir Perceval, and perhaps of Gawain's



wait of four seasons too.<sup>22</sup> Also of note in Sir Eglamour is the fact that much of this romance, like Yvain and Ywain and Sir Perceval and Sir Degrevant, revolves around issues of the family and marriage. The poet uses the repeated offer of daughters' hands to further narrative tension early in the romance; but the later reversal of just that convention, when Christabelle is offered to her son, ironically makes the marriage-offer motif abhorrent. In a sense, Eglamour becomes the rival and jealous husband who wishes to prevent a young knight's success; that the young knight who is his son may also wish his own defeat increases the irony of the inverted romance episode. Similar to these uses of irony, the poet carefully juxtaposes Eglamour's Roman success with the loss of his love, and then his son's safety with the mother's grief.<sup>23</sup> The juxtaposition of Perceval's marriage to Lufamour and his victory over the Sultan with his mother's loneliness is likewise ironic. That it is the woman who suffers the most both times in Sir Eglamour probably indicates a social emphasis, very much like that in Sir Perceval, where women must be allowed freedom of choice. Yet no thematic development guides this adventure story--not the series of combats, nor the long pursuit (?) of happiness.

#### G. Northern Romance Trends

In these romances there are several similarities to Sir Perceval, which outweigh the exceptions. Most generally the tendency in the Thornton romances and Sir Gawain and Morte Arthure is to humanize the romance tradition--to make it less a story suited only for high lords and ladies, to include more action or a faster pace to the action, and to counter the romance ideal with irony and low touches.

These romances also invent new episodes, or new combinations of motifs and episodes. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight gives us the model of the last, in the beheading exchange and the winnings exchange, but it is just as true of Sir Eglamour. The Morte Arthure shows how carefully similar episodes can be contrasted to thematic advantage. The experimentation with narrative techniques is clear in the different uses of the series of combats in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Eglamour, when irony dramatically undercuts the ideal. The appeal to a broader audience is evident in Sir Degrevant and Eglamour. The careful use of traditional romance details serves Morte Arthure and Sir Degrevant well. The many possible themes and their possible combinations are clear in Morte Arthure, Gawain, Ywain, Sir Degrevant, The Erle, and Eglamour. The reduction of the superhuman image is strongly present in Morte Arthure, as in Sir Perceval, though the capability of greatness is still there. In Gawain the members of Arthur's court try to participate in Gawain's public shame, after all, but can only do that by wearing a ribbon which cannot mean contrition or repentance to them. Possibly in Ywain this same reduction of the ideal takes place, in the departure of the hero from Arthur's court to another court; the same movement occurs in Sir Perceval. Arthur and his court are perhaps reduced by their absence in Eglamour. What is perhaps most intriguing about these limitations on Arthur and the ideal, though, is the use to which motifs and episodes are put. In Morte Arthure, Arthur is shown to be fallible primarily by the contrast with his own earlier actions, and by his responsibility for Gawain's adventuring, which ultimately leads to Gawain's defeat

and death at the hands of Mordred. In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight the hero has his most heralded qualities pushed and turned upon themselves until he is in a quandry with himself. The beheading game and the temptations and the winnings exchange serve to reveal Gawain's fallibility. In Yvain the traditional knightly concerns of love and combat are still opposed, though in Yvain the opposition is much more emphasized. And in Eglamour it is the knightly pursuit of adventure and the fulfillment of the knightly test that separates Eglamour and Christabelle and which hurts his family. Motifs and episodes function in ironic contrast, as in Sir Perceval. Finally, then, I will note that the outcome of the irony, the invention, the unromantic concerns, and the humanization of the hero and the court is not the elimination of the romance ideal. Except in the Morte Arthure, which does not itself entirely reject a limited role for the romance knight, all these romances, including Sir Perceval, tacitly or overtly retain the romance hero and setting. Instead of the elimination of the ideal, these romancers have made the hero the moderator between the romance world and the mundane, perhaps to assert the ideal in a new, more realistic context. And that is what the Perceval-poet has done.

#### H. Differences

But despite its participation in many of these motifs, themes and techniques, Sir Perceval is more than another typical Arthurian romance, a genre piece. Humor and irony together play a large part in Sir Perceval, just as in Gawain. The various kinds of both humor and irony, therefore, have a role in the modification and development

of the romance ideal and of the image of women and men. Structure, too, plays a significant part in Sir Perceval, because it organizes the events in a regular pattern and gives skeletal arrangement to several themes. Given the context of Sir Perceval in its genre and milieu, I will explore in more detail the manner in which humor and irony develop the romance ideal and suggest the growth of the hero. Second, I will turn to the function of the organic structure in Sir Perceval, the fact that it affirms that the story is a romance rather than an anti-romance, and its support for thematic development. Together, the use of irony and humor and the function of the structure in Sir Perceval will distinguish this romance from others of its milieu and will show some of the individual interest it has.

### III. HUMOR AND IRONY IN SIR PERCEVAL

The northern moderation of the romance ideal is evident in Sir Perceval, too. The problem is not that the themes are different from those noted above. If anything, the same themes are present in Sir Perceval in greater force. Rather, the role of humor and irony in the development of those themes in Sir Perceval demands assessment in comparison to their role in usual northern romance practice, as described in section II.

#### A. Distinction of Humor and Irony

Although one recent work comes close to defining all literary humor as ironical, I feel it is useful to make some distinction.<sup>24</sup> If humor by itself evaluates no character, social function or event, or theme, then it is little but one-liners and slapstick.<sup>25</sup> There is a fair amount of such elementary humor in Sir Perceval, but there is some difficulty in distinguishing between one joke that is full of ulterior purpose and irony, and another joke that is identical in form but lacking in a hidden meaning. To put it another way, if the humor is conscious and purposeful, it is the reversal of an attitude or an action, or if it is a commentary on the characters and actions, then the author has moved from simple humor to ironical humor. The problem, of course, is that all of those "if's" are relative and depend upon the reader's angle and degree of understanding. But in this study, I call both categories "humor," because they share in a direct appeal to the audience's desire for a good time, to laughter. Even humor that criticizes something or someone is limited within

the bounds of society, as it were--within the bounds of good behavior; no one who recognizes the "bounds of society" need feel threatened by humor.<sup>26</sup>

As humor may be characterized as material which causes laughter, there are several possible kinds of humor. The simplest kind in a narrative is verbal misapprehension because of naive literal mindedness: so Sir Perceval, when he encounters the three knights in the forest, asks which of them is this God his mother had told him about (ll. 281-4). Likewise, Perceval thinks all horses are "mares," until he is disabused of that notion in the midst of battle (ll. 168ff). Related to his kind of humor, especially with Perceval, is what I call character humor, in which the character's naive personality promotes misunderstanding. So Perceval applies his mother's advice to be even-handed in dividing the store of the lady of the hall (ll. 445-62). A third kind of humor is dramatic, where an action is ridiculous. So Perceval, while waiting for the Black Knight to return in the second lady of the hall episode, lays his head on her lap. Though Perceval wishes to justify the lady to her husband, when the Black Knight sees this pose, the two must huff and puff themselves into mighty rages and do battle (ll. 1901-12). Likewise, when Perceval enters Arthur's court, he enters on horseback, and his horse's nose touches Arthur's forehead (ll. 494-5). I will discuss these three kinds of humor later in order to describe the quantity of humor in the various sections of Sir Perceval and to evaluate its qualities.

Irony in its "purest" form does not imply humor at all. It has

six qualities: the ironic implication is a meaning opposite to, or divergent from, the apparent meaning. Irony may be understood by the initiated and not by the uninitiated--some sophistication is required. Irony must be intentional. Irony must be purposeful, not only in revealing the divergence between the image and the real but also in not resolving the incongruous--which incongruity is strong potential for humor. Irony may be both verbal and situational.<sup>27</sup>

There are also two kinds of irony: serious and humorous. On the one hand there is the terribly serious irony which brings Macbeth's conception of invincibility crashing down. On the other hand, if the irony makes a character seem ridiculous and human, if assumptions are uprooted without permanent damage to mind or body, if inappropriate words, scenes, characters and themes are brought together especially in a public display, then the irony is humorous. In both kinds of irony, the authorial intent is essentially the same: make a comment on someone or something and show up deficiencies. The audience will feel either justified or threatened, or at least disturbed. Irony is intended for the thinker in man, rather than the laugher. The humor that the second kind of irony brings is the extra part, the added benefit.

This distinction between serious and humorous irony is important for a study of Sir Perceval. According to Green, the whole purpose of the courtly romance was the attempt to justify a social class that wished to view itself as courtly.<sup>28</sup> The difficulty of reconciling the ideal and reality comes when one must either falsify reality so that it may fit the ideal, or lower or simplify the ideal so that it

may fit reality. Romancers from Gottfried to Chrétien to Eschenbach have ironized and refined the ideal, but one author's refinement of the ideal need not be ironical in relation to any other work in the genre--and another author's irony may be no more than a quibble, or minor disturbance of the ideal. Moreover, realistic details of all kinds do not always imply the questioning of an ideal.<sup>29</sup> Realistic details, even ironic ones, may still serve in an idealizing framework. In Chrétien's Perceval, the dümmling Perceval, intent on his future, takes Keu's advice to put on the Red Knight's armor, but that Perceval in the Red Knight's armor may seem ridiculous is not a rejection of the ideal that Perceval will attempt--it is a joke by Keu in an attempt to mock Perceval's ignorance. In Gottfried's Tristan the ideal is indeed displaced by ruthlessness and violence, because in Gottfried's view chivalry detracts from the serious business of love.<sup>30</sup> In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight the hero may exercise his chivalric powers, as Gawain does in his journey to find the Green Chapel, but his real test comes in his non-courtly behavior in the castle. In Parzival irony functions to limit the hero, as when he is identified with the arch-villain Lahelin, whom he in a sense imitates. Realism impinges on the Arthurian ideal. However, this generic irony also supports the ideal with detail, as when massed encounters make a battle more realistic. Physical details are thematically important when the less physically dangerous path is chosen by Parzival, because it is ironically the morally dangerous one.<sup>31</sup> So each romancer refines the ideal in his own way and uses humor and irony to make the ideal more realistic and thorough.



## B. The Distribution of Humor and Irony in Sir Perceval

There seem to be two alternatives in the use of humor and irony: these techniques either explicate and demonstrate themes, or they aid the patterning and structure of the development of themes. Both choices are possible in the same work, and both are at work in Sir Perceval. In the early part of Sir Perceval, up until the hero's reunion with his uncle at the uncle's castle, there is a preponderance of what I have defined earlier as humor. The dümmling motif generates ridiculous actions by Perceval, much verbal humor, and much misunderstanding and contrariness. Despite Perceval's prowess in defeating the Red Knight, he is humanized by what he does not know, by the accident of his victory, and by the inappropriateness of some of his actions. In isolation, this first part of Sir Perceval could be viewed as an anti-romance composed primarily of the amusing failings and shortcomings of Arthurian Knights. The romance ideal, associated directly with the aspirations of the dümmling, and thus with his actions and failings, is certainly leveled and brought down from any impossible height of perfection in arms or manners or love.<sup>32</sup>

In the second part of Sir Perceval, however, from the hero's departure from his rest at his uncle's castle to the successful relief of Lufamour, there is a preponderance of what I have called irony: Perceval now proves himself most successful in battle and in love, and he is seen in the process of sloughing his dümmling image. Because Perceval demonstrates in a traditional chivalric adventure the capable, just and loving characteristics of a chivalric knight, what humor there is becomes either the fading off-shoot of his lack

of knowledge, or the uncomplimentary characteristics of someone else. Where in the first section Perceval was the object of the humor, in the second section, Arthur and Perceval's principal enemy, the Sultan, become the objects of humor. It is irony that contrasts Perceval and Arthur's reactions to the messenger's plea for aid, and irony turns the Sultan's demand of marriage upside down. Now Perceval's actions in support of Lufamour contrast with his earlier presumption with the lady of the hall, and the view from Lufamour's position on the castle wall contrasts ironically with the view from the battlefield. In this section the possibility of an anti-romance is diminished by the positive results of Perceval's chivalric action. In the larger context, then, there is refinement of the romance ideal: certain kinds of actions are approved and certain ones not. Perceval's marriage to Lufamour, then, stands as the traditional culmination of the lone knight's life adventure.

The story does not stop at this point, for in the third section, from Perceval's departure from Lufamour's castle to his reunion with his mother, Perceval is no longer the object of humor and is not the primary object of irony. All the humor is directed toward other characters, usually by Perceval. He makes those who are antagonistic to him and his goals, the Black Knight and the giant, into the objects of the humor. Irony is also placed on the other characters: the only irony left to affect Perceval stems from the remaining effects of his prior dümmling misunderstanding and inappropriate actions. The reunion of mother and son, like the reunion of the Black Knight and his wife, revises the romance ideal even more, by supporting the

family against the concerns of the individual knight. This reunion especially contrasts with the earlier examples of the breakdown of unity in family and society. Thus, the story that began with a dümmling who did not understand even how to be a lone knight ends with a fully human hero whose concerns are both chivalrous and social. The fantastic nature of Perceval's victory over many warriors before Lufamour's city, too, contrasts with the detailed and graphic quality of Perceval's duel with the giant; in the first case Perceval was protected by the magic ring he had taken from the lady of the hall, but in the second case he had lost that ring and was in full danger of having his head cut off. The romance ideal of the perfect knight is taken from a never-never land and brought much closer to possibility. Thus, Sir Perceval in the third section fulfills the ideal of the noble warrior and the social man.

### C. Particulars of Humor and Irony in Sir Perceval

Early. Given the general progression in the use of humor and irony in Sir Perceval, it is appropriate to focus more closely on each section of the romance to discover the extent and nature of the words, deeds and thoughts which exhibit humor and/or irony. Perhaps the key terms in the first section are the commonplace expressions used in the very first stanza to describe Perceval's special character, "He dranke water of the welle" and "He was fostende in the felle." The introductory passage summarizes his name, education, fighting ability, physique, lineage and character (ll. 3-9).<sup>32</sup> The course of the whole story in a sense proceeds from here, unfolding in particulars what Perceval represents. Initially, then, the story must demonstrate

Perceval's foolishness: he grows up in a wilderness completely apart from civilization--not just in the isolated chateau of a court lady who wishes to get away, as Chrétien's Perceval does. The emphasis in the narrative is on Perceval's innocence of the world; his mother has told him very little, and that little he misunderstands. So, when he meets the Arthurian knights in the forest he does not fear their power. Rather, he inquires if one of them is this "God" his mother had told him about, "That all this werlde wroghte" (ll. 281-4). The humor of the situation is verbal, as Perceval tries to use a physical reality to define a word he cannot identify with anyone. The reader is prepared for his lack of knowledge and also the psychological realism this humor reveals, when Perceval asks his mother earlier, "What kyne a godd may that be / That ye nowe bydd mee / That I schall to pray?" (ll. 241-4). When he returns to his mother after the encounter, he brings with him a common horse, but she must identify it for him as a "mare" (l. 363). This sort of verbal humor reveals one of Perceval's fundamental problems, a lack of knowledge, one that informs his other difficulties.

It is Perceval's inability to know exactly what to do and how to act that creates the second kind of humor: character humor. This type is exemplified when Perceval wants to fight the three knights because he knows no more courteous way to gain information (ll. 275-6, 293-6). Kay doubles the humor of this episode against himself by aggravating Perceval's desire to fight, which aggravation of a fool Gawain points out is ridiculous for a knight (ll. 297-308). Later, Perceval encounters the lady of the hall. His mother had told him

very carefully to be even-handed and fair and to give something in exchange for something received ("Be of Measure," l. 398). So, Perceval divides the grain he finds, and puts one half into his saddle bags. He eats half of the meat on the table and drinks half of the wine, and then asks how he might "more of mesure be?" (l. 462). When Perceval begins to leave the hall he discovers another chamber: almost as if compelled to find out more things to be of measure about, Perceval sees the lady of the hall asleep on her bed. He trades rings with her and steals a kiss. His problem with the definition of words earlier in this episode becomes translated into ridiculous actions, as he misapplies his mother's advice.

A third kind of humor is the dramatic, and it reveals, rather than a simple lack of understanding of the meaning of words or the misapplication of concepts Perceval understands in general, that Perceval does not know certain ideas. For instance, after he has killed the Red Knight, Perceval does not know how to get him out of his armor. Perceval prepares a fire for this purpose (ll. 742-3), before Gawayn arrives to show him how to undo armor (ll. 785-8). When Perceval enters Arthur's court, propriety is broken when the mare's nose touches Arthur's forehead (ll. 493-6). Perceval is full of misplaced energy, as when he threatens to kill Arthur if he attempts to make him a knight (ll. 527-8); Perceval fails to understand the proper relation of Knight to King, as well as the knighthood. Likewise, when he encounters his uncle and his cousins, Perceval does not realize the effect the Red Knight's armor he is wearing will have on other people, and thus is puzzled by the flight of the uncle and his

sons (ll. 809-84). Perceval's actions, although not necessarily anti-social, do tend to separate him from society. The damage is not final, partly because the actions are humorous, but the unsocial element is present, as when Perceval refuses to return to Arthur after the death of the Red Knight because "I am als grete a lorde als he" (ll. 814-6).

This unsocial element suggested by the humor of Perceval's inappropriate actions lends itself to development by irony. In fact, the first glimpse of a chivalrous society occurs in the tournaments put on by Perceval's father to honor his marriage and the birth of his first child. The result of the tournaments, the father's death and the Red Knight's revenge, is not humorous, but it does suggest an opposition between goods, which is what I have called serious irony. Ache flour chooses to abandon both society and chivalry lest the same fate await her son. Her intention is thwarted by the impossibility of restraining Perceval from leaving the forest and assuming the knighthood his blood demands (l. 355, "the kynde wolde oute-sprynge"). Humorous irony between episodes is also evident when Perceval decides not to return to Arthur when he has killed the Red Knight, in contrast to his earlier, overriding desire to seek out Arthur. Perceval's perceptions have changed, but not his pride.

When Perceval applies his mother's advice to the food and the lady of the hall, verbal irony puts in doubt the mother's ideal of manners. What does such advice amount to, when a logical application of "mesure" leads to results quite opposed to the mother's intended

end of making Perceval socially adept?<sup>33</sup> Verbal irony also contrasts Arthur's kind intention of making Perceval a knight with Perceval's appraisal of the same intention once he alone has killed the Red Knight (ll. 814-6, "I am als grete a lorde als he"). Verbal irony, furthermore, contrasts Arthur's acceptance of Perceval at court with his court's outrage at Perceval's impertinence (ll. 429-32, "All the Court . . . hadden ferly of the kyng, that he wolde suffre siche a thyng," but ll. 535-8, "The kyng . . . wexe he sone sorry" at Perceval's likeness to Arthur's brother-in-law, the father of Perceval).

These verbal ironies contrast ideals with actions, egos and reality. Dramatic irony does that with the ideal of the romance King too. Arthur is incapable of responding to the Red Knight's repeated insults, and says so (ll. 557-60), but Perceval does. The inability of Arthur, Perceval's unnamed uncle, Acheflour and Perceval's father to hold their family together is contrasted implicitly with Perceval's reunion with Arthur (although Perceval does not know they are related) and more significantly with Perceval's successful reunion with his uncle. In other words, there are many unsocial elements in this first section, even when the Red Knight himself is not mentioned: Acheflour abandons society to save her son, who returns to it as soon as he can; her advice means one thing to her and another to Perceval; Arthur's kind intentions are opposed by the unkind court; Perceval rejects Arthur, but will submit to him; the king is unable to defend his land and people, but he is the symbol of peace and union; family members flee one another, while Perceval

tries to bring them together. The irony, like the humor, functions to demonstrate a theme.

Middle. Whereas in the first section the ironies are, except for verbal contrasts, subtle, the irony of the middle section is often obvious, though not always verbal. Whereas humor in section one was dominant, humor in section two is usually subordinated to the irony, when it is not understated. Verbal humor is the most obvious of the kinds, especially when Perceval must stop in the middle of the battle with the Sultan to accept a revelation he has just received. Having all along thought that horses were called "mares," he is shocked to learn that the horse he took from the Red Knight is a "stede" (ll. 1686-1712). The humor here recalls Perceval's difficulties with understanding in the first section, and the humor is intensified by the sudden swing in the fortunes of battle Perceval's momentary forgetfulness brings. Likewise, verbal humor adds to the battle when Perceval taunts the Sultan, while he is on the ground, with his desire to force a woman's will and his present incapability.

Character humor occurs primarily with Arthur, when Arthur receives the messenger from Lufamour. When Arthur thinks it is a request to aid only strangers, he is unhelpful and flippant (ll. 1073-6). However, when he discovers that Perceval is involved, Arthur immediately calls his men and sets off. Mistaken identity, though, gives a slight touch of humor to Gawayn's thoughts as he prepares to fight Perceval, for Gawayn must struggle with a desire not to fight relatives and an equal caution against foolishly not fighting an enemy. Likewise, Perceval's desire to fight with only the Sultan,



which he innocently tells the Sultan's men (ll. 1153-60, 1297-9), leads to his fight with them, which he did not seek: the humor is that we see the trouble coming and Perceval does not.

Dramatic humor in this section is distinctly limited. The meeting in arms between Gawayn and Perceval, because they survive unharmed but impressed with each other, has the slight humor of relief and delayed recognition. Also, Perceval's hectic initial battle, demonstrated in the short three stanzas given to the telling of it and in his collapse at the base of the wall of the city, leaves him helpless and asleep at the feet of Lufamour's chamberlain (ll. 1161-1204, 1205-17, 1269-74).

Humor in the middle section is used mostly for incidental laughter or the easing of tension. Only when the Sultan is taunted, or when Arthur proves himself selfish, or when Perceval is himself helpless before Lufamour's city does humor advance the development of the themes. Irony, on the other hand, occurs throughout this section and helps to develop the themes of the story and to organize this section. The section begins with the contrast between the acceptance by Perceval of the messenger's plea, and the refusal thereof by Arthur. This structural opposition of reactions to a damsel-in-distress makes a judgment about which one is right<sup>34</sup>: we may expect a knight to respond, but to see another knight, and a king at that, immediately refuse to respond is to question the expectation. That Arthur's refusal is only due to self-pity and a lack of sympathy undercuts his position. After this juxtaposition of episodes, Perceval enters the battle with the Sultan and his forces. No irony is needed

here except when Perceval taunts the Sultan (ll. 1681-4, "thou ne solde never more then Fighthe for no wymman"). The ironic reflection of the Sultan's earlier vow to marry Lufamour by force supports Perceval's taunt, but irony contrasts Perceval's current moralistic position in defense of women with his earlier action in thinking that by simply trading rings he could engage the lady of the hall (ll. 1682-3, 465-75). Perceval apparently has learned by the Sultan's negative example, or by latent native instinct, and the irony of his contrasting positions makes this learning process important for his character development. Perceval is not only ready to fight for the weak, but also aware of a woman's right to decide herself whom she will marry.

The idea that a knight must act properly develops through irony in this section. After Arthur and Perceval are contrasted, Perceval and Gawayn meet. Though Perceval intends to fight all along, Gawayn struggles with his proper action, since he is not sure whom he is about to fight. The contrast between how he should act with his nephew Perceval and how he should act with an enemy is unresolvable. Gawayn decides to fight, it is true, but only because he believes the negative results of not fighting could outweigh the negative results of fighting (ll. 1433-60). Knightly decisions, then, are not as easy as Perceval's fights with the Red Knight or the Sultan's men would make them appear; this is an example of annoying practical details interfering with the ideal. On the other hand, when the terms of battle are clearly set, as they are when the Sultan offers battle, there is no need for hesitation. In that case, when there is irony,

it operates on the party clearly in the wrong.

The relation of a knight and a woman in this section offers opportunities for ironic development of social themes. The ideal of manners, which Perceval had mangled in the episode of the lady of the hall, returns with greater force with Lufamour. Now the Lady has a voice, and she wonders why Perceval so lacks in social graces (ll. 1550-84).<sup>35</sup> Perceval has committed himself to the support of the lady, and he is attracted to her, so he is practically trapped into learning better manners. The irony of Perceval's support of Lufamour and his marriage to her is furthered by the contrast with his actions with the lady of the hall. Furthermore, in contrast with Perceval's departure from his mother, as with the lack of any substantial bond between Perceval and the lady of the hall, Perceval and Lufamour marry and live together at the conclusion of this section. A family is formed, and social obligations with Arthur and his court are carried out (ll. 1745-7, 1639-42). The story has moved from the selfishness and lack of care shown by Arthur and from Perceval's status as a single adventurer of single marital status at the beginning of the middle section, to the formation of a family and social ties and the comradeship of equal knights (Gawayn and Perceval) and equal kings (Arthur and Perceval). The story has even come full circle to the situation found at the start, with the marriage of Perceval's father and Achefflour: the irony is directed at the earlier marriage, a traditionally romance image, in that this marriage is not celebrated with a tournament, social ties are confirmed rather than broken, and this marriage will not end in permanent separation. However,

this comparison will also serve to recall that not everything is unified: Acheflour has been left out of the family gathering.

Late. Whereas in the first section Perceval was the butt of humor, and in the second section the ironies develop Perceval's character and image, in the third section Perceval is the originator of humor, and the ironies comment on other people or perhaps Perceval's past behavior.

The first instance of verbal humor in the third section shows that Perceval is now the humorist. The Black Knight threatens to lay Perceval low, and Perceval responds with a vow to reverse the threat and lay the Black Knight low (ll. 1905-6, 1910-2, "Now . . . sall we see who . . . is worthy to be slayne"); Perceval is, after all, assured of victory, as he candidly reminds the lady of the hall (ll. 1894-6). Perceval's verbal capability, demonstrated in the case of the Red Knight (ll. 1910-2) and in that of the Sultan (1681-4), is put to work again in this section almost immediately, with the giant. After cutting off his feet, Perceval tells the giant to "lepe if thou may" (l. 2084). This expression of Perceval's superiority is made the more obvious because Perceval's past behavior still carries humorous weight. After freeing the lady of the hall from the bondage her husband had subjected her to, Perceval takes a nap with his head on the lady's knee (ll. 1883-4). He is innocent himself of any wrong-thinking, but the Black Knight has no qualms about jumping to conclusions; he asserts that the lady has found her lover, the one with whom she had exchanged rings, and in a sense he is quite right. Perceval's past has caught up with him. The Black Knight, however,

is wrong in the most important sense, and from Perceval's privileged perspective the Black Knight's assertion is ridiculous. That the Black Knight is forced to change his attitude toward his wife by his defeat at the hands of Perceval, and that his pride is brought to the ground, is humorous itself.

One other example of character humor may remain, and that is the action of Achefflour. She fled into the forest a second time because the giant showed her the ring he had received from the Black Knight, which Perceval had given the lady of the hall. To Achefflour, seeing that ring meant that Perceval was dead. So she flees civilization again, though this time her cause is false. She misapprehends the meaning of events and engages in inappropriate action.

Dramatic humor as well as character humor occurs when Perceval lays his head on the lady of the hall's lap, and the Black Knight discovers this position. The meeting of the Black Knight, husband to the lady of the hall, and Perceval, the one who stole a kiss from her, is highly appropriate because of her, but inappropriate for the rationale the Black Knight gives, and it is therefore humorous. The Black Knight gets his comeuppance for his dealings with his wife, and Perceval has a chance to remedy the worst effects of his earlier mistakes. Later, the giant, who came to punish a stranger for riding on his land, is punished himself by Perceval. The giant's club is so heavy his swing leaves him wide open to Perceval's slice. The giant is reduced limb by limb, until only the trunk is left. Humor serves here and elsewhere in the third section as Perceval's right arm, swinging either the first blow or the last in support of

the knight and the ideals he has come to represent.

Serious and humorous irony in this last section act as a qualifier of the image of Perceval as the perfect romance hero in his success at arms, in his past relationship with women, and in his past support of the family. First of all, Perceval's success in the relief of Lufamour's city, though obviously heroic, may have always seemed a little too easy to be true. Now an explanation, which we had been denied before, appears: the ring Perceval took from the lady of the hall was magical and would defend the bearer from mortal injury and give him a tactical advantage over his opponents (ll. 1857-64). The irony is that Perceval's success is at least partly transferred to an inanimate object. The fact that the ring is stolen, too, undercuts Perceval's reliance on it. However, irony can cut the other way. Considering the ease with which whole armies were dispatched in section two, it is more than a relief to see realistic detail describing Perceval's fight with the giant: without added protection and without magic, Perceval achieves victory. The magnitude of Perceval's success in section two is qualified by its logical, if magical explanation, but the nature of that success as proof of Perceval's ability at arms is retained in section three.

Two early episodes in which Perceval failed appear again in the third section. The lady of the hall episode, when Perceval acts as the lady's protector, recalls directly the misapplication of the mother's advice in section one, when he acted as the lady's nemesis. Perceval must face the consequences of his earlier action. This time he frees her, rather than symbolically tie her with a ring.

This time she is wide awake and can accuse the one who did her wrong (ll. 1841-51), but he falls asleep. This time the Black Knight returns to catch him in the act and to take vengeance on the one who has wronged him. This time Perceval repairs a relationship, rather than rip it apart.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, this time Perceval must find his mother, where before he left her very quickly.<sup>38</sup> This time he must find the ring his mother gave him, and the search leads from the lady of the hall to the Black Knight to the giant and to the gaint's porter, who finally has it. In contrast, Perceval had given it away at the first opportunity. Where he had left his mother "all manless" (ll. 1785-8) before, now he strives to provide her with a man and the protection he implies. The reunion of mother and son at the end of the romance recalls the initial union of father and mother in the beginning. All the irony about departures that require difficult returns actually suggests a simple theme, and one that may have replaced the Grail theme of other Perceval romances,<sup>39</sup> the need for family unity.

And that is the third use of irony in this third part of the story. The individual adventurer, who had departed his mother's dwelling and Arthur's court in section one and his uncle's castle in section two, also leaves Lufamour's city in section three. This time, however, unlike the previous times, he has a set schedule and a planned return. Once he regains his mother, Perceval's thoughts immediately turn back to Lufamour, and that is where he and his mother go in the end. The individual knight heals the marriage of the lady of the hall and the Black Knight, and unifies his own family. Per-

ceval is a social knight: one who is successful in deeds of arms, as he had been in sections one and two, and one who holds society together. He may have to fight anti-social forces until, as the Black Knight does, he can make them reform, or until he must kill them, as he does the proud giant. The individual knight is nonetheless a social knight. Perceval has emulated Gawayn, and in his success at both arms and civilization, this romance provides an image of the ideal knight qualified and illuminated by the distribution of humor and irony in the story.



#### IV. THE FUNCTION OF STRUCTURE

The narrative pattern of Sir Perceval suggests an organic structure. The dümmling motif dominates the first section, Perceval's success in the knightly profession informs section two, and his flowering as a whole person of "measure" informs the third section. In addition, there is a circular super-structure that articulates the modification of the romance ideal and the growth of the hero.

##### A. The First Section (ll. 1-948)

It is clear that the dümmling motif is the overarching theme of Sir Perceval, in the growth of Sir Perceval from naive youth to fully realized knight. What is less obvious is the specific development of the hero's attitude toward women, the family, other knights and society itself, and the specific development of the techniques of each section.

In section one, Perceval's attitude toward women is noticeably less than admirable. He leaves his mother "all manless"--an inconsiderate thing to do in a rough world she fears. He then acts inconsiderately toward the defenseless lady of the hall, taking half of her goods, trading rings with her, and ruining her reputation. He does not consider the woman's interests but only his own. Likewise, he leaves his family to go adventuring alone, and his adventuring imposes itself on the generosity of Arthur and Gawyn. Furthering the familial element, he even imposes his demand for greeting on the uncle who is running away from him. Outside of women and the family, Perceval's attitude toward other knights is obviously antagonistic. He threatens Gawyn, Kay and Ewayn when he first meets them in the

forest, because he knows no better. He threatens Arthur too, and carries out his threat against the Red Knight. Likewise, Perceval has a hazy idea what God or a Knight might be, since he asks what both terms mean (ll. 242-4, 407-8). Perceval even misunderstands what to be of "Mesure" means, in the case of the Lady of the Hall, since he divides her food in half. He does not understand good manners, equity, religion or mercy, chivalry or love. He does not understand the romance ideal.

In this first section, then, Perceval exhibits humorous characteristics that arise from his lack of knowledge and selfish personal concerns. So his question of the three knights is, "Wilke of you . . . May the grete godd bee . . .?" (ll. 281-2). Perceval's presumption in the hall of the lady is ridiculous, because he is stealing under the pretence of a moral law. His threatening of Arthur is out of place. He does not know how to get the Red Knight unlaced. He chases his own kinsmen, even though they outnumber him ten to one. Likewise, Perceval's actions give rise to irony, particularly as they contrast Perceval's intention to become a knight with his unknighly behavior. Irony also undercuts Acheflour's desire to protect herself and her son from the dangerous chivalric world, because it is not the outside world which endangers Perceval. It is Perceval who ventures out into the world and who desires that dangerous knighthood, and it was Acheflour who gave him his little spear. Arthur's reputation also suffers, because of his helplessness before the Red Knight, and in response to Perceval's conscious and unconscious slights: thus even a knightly paragon is levelled.

Also in this first section, Perceval's actions are echoed in the progression of scenes, as scenery undergoes notable changes. The romance opens in a highly courtly surrounding replete with tournaments and lords and ladies and a king. This is where Perceval's father dies, and his version of the knightly ideal with him. Next, Acheflour moves to the forest, taking Perceval with her, quite apart from all traces of civilization, and raising the "fole in the felle." When Perceval meets the three knights, it is at the edge of the forest, and when he leaves the forest, he immediately finds a hall. These episodes occupy a middle ground between the forest he is leaving and the court he is heading toward. The meeting with the knights gives him a model knight in Gawayn, with Kay as the foil, and the episode at the hall gives Perceval an opportunity to fail his first test as an aspiring knight. The court is usually the place for the best of the knightly world, but Perceval's uncouthness, the court's negative reaction to him, and Arthur's helplessness before the Red Knight lower the courtly ideal. Perceval returns to the field to slay the Red Knight, and he finds some real companionship at his Uncle's hall. The story, then, moves from a traditional romance setting with the father, to an extreme anti-romance setting with the mother. Perceval moves toward the traditional romance setting again, with Gawayn and Arthur, but one intermediate setting in a hall intervenes which throws his romance goal into question, and another hall is Perceval's choice of resting place after his adventures. These halls may embody a non-romance attitude, not as dangerous as the chivalry of Perceval's father and not as uncivilized as Acheflour's choice. They represent much the same north country attitude as Bercilak's castle does in Gawain and the Green Knight.

#### B. The Second Section (ll. 949-1760)

The beginnings of Perceval's character in the first section are developed

in the second. Even though there is little narrative interconnection between these two sections, the structural change is not emphasized. It is easier to see that the defeat of the Sultan and the marriage with Lufamour provides a break at the end of section two, and harder to see the importance of a break from action, such as the uncle provides at the end of section one. Nevertheless, the second section has a consistency which establishes its distinctive structural importance. Perceval's attitude toward women makes the change of sections clear. He not only sets off to rescue the damsel; he proclaims a moral position against forcing women, and he enforces his prohibition. This section is unlike the ring exchange in the Lady of the Hall episode. He marries Lufamour openly and with her consent. Through his marriage and his renewed ties to Arthur and Gawayn he supports the family. He even accepts knighthood from Arthur, which of course not only establishes a social bond between them, but also contrasts with his refusal of that honor in section one.

Perceval intends his fight with the Sultan to be a two man affair, and only slaughters the Sultan's army when he has no choice. The ideal of single combat is upheld twice; once when Gawayn convinces himself he must fight the advancing Red Knight, and again when Perceval answers the Sultan's challenge. This kind of respect for another knight extends to Perceval's willingness to undergo the social formality of knighting at Arthur's hands, a formality that Perceval had no understanding of in section one. He has adapted to his new position as a defender of a specific society, which is an essentially social position, and one that is formalized by his knighting and marriage. Thus Perceval at the end of section two appears to have fulfilled the romance ideal: he achieves knighthood, participates in both private and public adventure, and marries a woman of high social rank.

Though the humor of section one is continued in section two, it is

altered, reflecting Perceval's development. Humor arises in this section from Perceval's actions and the sloughing of the dümmling motif. Verbal humor supports Perceval's image as a mighty warrior, when he makes the Saracens' head-bones hop like the hailstones upon the ground (ll. 1189-92). There is humor in his remaining naive limitations, as in his initial encounter with the Saracens, when he expects no opposition to his proposal to slay the Sultan. That is an innocent expectation of which he soon is disabused, rather than the product of his earlier presumption. Dramatic humor is present in the much anticipated, approaching joust between Gawayn and Perceval, and when they expend their energies against each other rather than the Saracens; that friends should fight mistakenly is ridiculous, if they do so without injury. Unlike the scene in section one where Perceval's horse touches Arthur's forehead, this scene makes ridiculous not the characters but the action alone. Like humor, irony reflects Perceval's development, but irony qualifies his status in the world. Perceval's altered view of women is revealed in his ironic taunt of the Sultan, reflecting on Perceval's own attitude toward the lady of the hall. His new status as a knight is revealed also by contrast with Arthur, who does not respond immediately to Lufamour's request, and by his equality in fighting ability with Gawain, which is established in the draw between them. On the other hand, Perceval makes an odd figure in a social setting as his lack of social graces in Lufamour's city shows, and the opposition between nature and nurture (l. 1567) shows that he is an incomplete knight. Perceval is uncomfortable but committed ("Thofe he couthe littill Insighte, the childe was of pith; He bad he solde be to prayse, Thereto hende and curtayse," ll. 1639-42).

Scenes change little in this section, but the changes are marked, reflecting different images of chivalry. Arthur is seen lolling in his hall, unable to move (l. 1062, 1073), while Perceval is "pricking on the

plain." Though one scene might be considered anti-romantic, the other is very typical of the traditional romance. The battlefield with the Sultan is itself not especially interesting, because it is not described in detail, except in the contrast between Perceval's view and the view from the battlements. The battle is swift in the narration and not very subtle, but Lufamour's point of view is drawn out over several more stanzas. The adventure Perceval was pricking toward is contrasted with the romance of love and courtly conversation, by the difference in narrative length and attention given, which emphasize Lufamour's position. The chamberlain is characterized as possessing Gawayn's courtesy (ll. 1261-3) for the same purpose. Section two, in summary, shows essentially two images of chivalry, Gawayn's equal in words, the chamberlain, and Gawayn's equal in battle, Perceval: Perceval is capable only on the battlefield, and the chamberlain is capable only in the city. The possibility is raised, however, of Perceval's education in courtesy, and he does marry Lufamour and become the warrior lord of the city, thus unifying the warrior and lover images in the romance.

### C. The Third Section (ll. 1761-2284)

The plot, themes, scenes and techniques of Sir Perceval receive their fulfillment in the third section. Perceval's attitudes toward women are again one case in point. Whereas in section one Perceval left his mother manless, in this section he returns to her. Whereas in section two Perceval fights at Lufamour's suggestion (ll. 1338-40) to win her, in section three he must fight only to protect the Lady of the Hall. Both these episodes reverse the usual romance pattern of knightly achievement in arms and of reward for service rendered.

Family and social ties receive special attention in this

section and suggest the growth of Perceval's character. Whereas in section one Perceval acted as if marriage vows were mechanical (ll. 471-2, "a tokyn to wedde sall thou lefe with mee"), in section three he puts his body behind his words and acts to enforce marriage vows on the Black Knight (ll. 1905-20). Whereas in section two Perceval kills the men of the Sultan, in section three Perceval does not kill the giant's Porter. We see a differentiation among Perceval's enemies by Perceval. Perceval and the Porter even join forces to find Perceval's mother and to aid her recovery (ll. 2164-8, 2246-8). Instead of killing, we see actions in support of the family and the development of social ties. Perceval follows the precept his mother had taught him in section one about being of "Mesure," when he shares one-half of the giant's gold with the Porter. It is indicative of Perceval's advance that this time he shares the spoils of war with a follower of his slain enemy, whereas before he "shared" with the lady of the hall only the spoils of thievery. Because his actions are now filled with rightly understood "Mesure," he establishes social ties with the Porter, and between the Lady of the Hall and the Black Knight.

"Mesure" extends to Perceval's attitudes toward other knights and knighthood too. Perceval matures in his reaction to other knights. Whereas in section one Perceval always threatened to kill people, and in section two he learned to execute them (ll. 1687-9, 1713-22), in section three he refrains from killing the Black Knight. Perceval has learned that knightly action does not require someone's death. Whereas in section one Perceval burnt the Red Knight and his mother, and in section two Perceval threatened to burn the



Sultan (l. 1681), in section three he just leaves the giant on the ground (l. 1098). Perceval has learned restraint, and that dead knights and enemies do not need to be burned. Fire is a tool limited to the destruction of people protected by magic, apparently, and Gawyn had upbraided Perceval for suggesting it in the case of the Sultan (l. 1186). At any rate, Perceval is a little less ferocious than he had been. In sections one and two, Perceval had provoked or started every fight, even the one with Gawyn, but in section three he is attacked each time. He now responds to force, rather than seek out his adventure. Likewise, Perceval's attitude toward his very knighthood and the high political honor of his knighting is open-minded. He upholds his station and honor when necessary, and when he has a pressing reason to put it aside, to rescue his skittish mother, he does.<sup>40</sup> Whereas in section one Perceval proved himself adept at arms, and in section two he achieved knighthood and kingship, in section three he is able to leave the kingship for a while and puts off his knightly costume and "mode" (ll. 2197-8, 2185-8) in order to rescue his mother. Perceval balances his knightly and dümmling characteristics in "Mesure."

Perceval's development again is echoed in the function of humor in this section. At this point in the poem, humor turns away from attention to his simple character, but does not entirely disappear. There is still a trace of the comical dümmling left, but the trace is both innocuous and indirect: when Sir Perceval puts his head on the Lady of the Hall's knee in section three, the position is naturally awkward, as well as the position of a knight in obeissance; Sir



Perceval's innocence of any wayward intentions simply compounds the effect of the situation when the Black Knight arrives. Also, the humor comes primarily in the words of the Black Knight, who has obviously misinterpreted the situation, rather than in any statement or action of Sir Perceval. The difference is clarified even more when Sir Perceval actually explains himself to the Black Knight and admits some wrong-doing (ll. 1933-45). He is not the butt of humor now, because in his maturity he is willing to accept responsibility for his actions. The humor in section three is different from that in earlier sections, for now Sir Perceval jokes about others: so he taunts the giant, "Of the fote thou getis no gode, / Bot lepe if thou may!" (ll. 1083-4).

This aspect of Perceval's development as a whole knight is also supported by the use of irony in the third section. There is not a great deal of irony in this section, and it is not expressed as strongly as in earlier sections. Much of the irony is an echo of the earlier sections, as in the above discussion of Sir Perceval's changing attitudes toward women and knights. Most notable of the ironic changes is Sir Perceval's use of measure to advantage with the giant's treasure, as opposed to the disastrous "Mesure" he had applied to the Lady of the Hall. Also important is the turnabout in the case of the Black Knight: his lady is now his "sucour" (l. 1920), whereas at the start of the story he had threatened to kill her; the word "sucour" also parallels Lufamour's praise of Sir Perceval for being her "sucour" (l. 1541). Perhaps even more important, though, is the irony which informs Sir Perceval's need to take off his armor in the forest: now that he will find his mother, he must abandon the trappings,

the "mode" (ll. 2197-8, 2185-8), he had left her to seek. Like Gawain after his journey to find the Green Chapel, the hero has passed through tests of arms and now must succeed, "yif I may" (l. 1982), without them. Like Sir Eglamour, but unlike most other romances, the hero must recreate a family by rejoining his mother in his final adventure. Mothers are not as exciting as dragons or formidable knights, but this romance gives them a place of importance. Generally, Perceval has discovered what is most important to him: remedying past wrongs, establishing social ties, and being reunited with his mother, whom he had left two thousand lines before. The irony, finally, of the third section and the whole poem, is the irony of the dümmling who has achieved knighthood and fame, in order to begin again where he started, in order to fully know the place for the first time.

The movement of scenes in this third section shows that this return to nature and the mother is not mechanical. Sir Perceval first meets the Lady of the Hall, as he had done in section one, and he meets the Saracen giant next, as he had met the Sultan in section two. Achefflour, the mother, whom he next encounters, parallels Lufamour, the wife. However, the sequence of scenes is altered from its pattern of the first two sections. The Lady of the Hall is found the second time, much as the uncle of Sir Perceval is at the end of section one, in open air, rather than in her bedchamber. The Black Knight is on a horse, in battlegear, and Sir Perceval is at some disadvantage, just as the Red Knight is on his horse and Sir Perceval is at a disadvantage in the middle of section one. The giant is associated closely with a hall, just

as the Lady of the Hall is at the start of Perceval's knightly adventures in section one. Achefflour is in the forest both times, at the beginning of Perceval's story and at its end. This progression of scenes in section three, therefore, is the exact reverse of that of section one. Moreover, the basic narrative progresses from the forest, the world of nature, the unlearned and uncivilized but still innocent world, to the world of the court, where social concerns, extended familial ties and courtly cultivation thrive, and then back to the forest, to the nature which is the mainspring and source of Sir Perceval's life and values. Quite unlike the usual end of a romance,<sup>41</sup> Sir Perceval affirms the hero's need for nature and for the family, even while Perceval benefits from cultivation at Lufamour's court and from his new connections with Gawayn, Arthur, the uncle, and the "kinsmen" of Lufamour's court.

#### D. Organicism

Generally speaking, Sir Perceval is structured in an eternal, circular movement, from forest to forest, and family to family. Sir Perceval does not reject the romance ideal, after all, in either its individualistic tradition, as Auerbach would have it, or its grail tradition, as the continental romancers would have it. Sir Perceval is very much an individual who achieves the romance ideal of the courtly knight of arms, but he does adapt the ideal toward familial and social concerns. The religious ending to the Perceval legend is much modified here, and it is much diminished in importance: in Conte du Graal the hero's hidden agenda is designed to prepare

him for saintliness; in Parzival the hero must reject the normal knightly tasks and acquire a strong moral and religious fiber; in Sir Perceval the hero must become mature, learn what "Measure" means, acquire mercy and honor his mother, and he dies in the Holy Land afterwards. It seems ironic, but yet natural, to have Sir Perceval end his adventure by finding his mother and drinking of the well. This end is not far from that of grail stories, for the water is pure and natural, Perceval has proven himself to have many good qualities, and he has lost the pride he had had in being as "good" a knight as Arthur, but this is not the Grail story retold another time. The Grail world must be distinct from and superior to the Arthurian world; this is a story about the worldly compromise of the two worlds, the woods and the court, Achefflour and Lufamour, the knightly and the familial. Sir Perceval is a "secular" version of the grail quest, where the knight must learn to unify the family, to support the limited but necessary freedom of women, and to act in favor of society. Sir Perceval's hidden agenda in the romance is to add nurture to nature, individual to family, and family to society, like an architect who designs and builds the interlocking elements of an individual being and an entire community. The developing attitudes of the hero toward women, knights, the family and the romance ideal; the humor with which Sir Perceval is presented and which he uses; the irony that comments on each stage of the hero's development, on the people around him, and on other romances; even the architecture of the sections of the story and the progression of its scenes: all of these elements build the story from its innocent dummling beginnings in the forest of ignorance, to its full human fulfillment, as Perceval returns to his roots.

## V. CONCLUSION

Sir Perceval of Galles is a redaction of the Perceval legend which uses the material of other romances dealing with the Parzival figure and the themes and techniques of other north English romances of the time. The specific rendition of Perceval levels and humanizes him through the use of humor and irony. His past and development are given in ways that promote laughter, laughter generated first by his own actions and later by other people's actions. This hero is not immune to mistakes, but neither is he incapable of learning from his mistakes. Perceval in this romance participates in the development of serious themes because he overcomes his propensity for ridiculous actions and the misinterpretation of general rules of conduct. This development of serious themes is reinforced by the use of humor and irony to level the court, as when Arthur refuses to aid Lufamour when Perceval does aid her. The effect of the leveling of the ideals is to emphasize more mundane concerns, such as the freedom of women to choose their husbands, the need to hold a family together, and the desirability of establishing social bonds. The romance ideal is transformed from a purely individual affair, perhaps one concerned with religious experience or epiphany, into a secular and social ideal that actually reaffirms the old paragon of the strong, pure knight, unifying the individual with the social and the secular with the sacred. In generic terms, Sir Perceval of Galles may be seen as a link between the old romance of the continent and the un- or anti-chivalric literature of the north of England, and as a bridge between the older romance tradition of Chrétien and the coming anti-romance of Chaucer.<sup>42</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Early criticism generally found little to commend in Sir Perceval and thus spent little time finding things of aesthetic value there. Rather, scholars were interested in its relationship (or lack thereof) to the other Perceval legends. R.H. Griffith, Sir Perceval of Galles (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1911), is the only one ever to publish a book on the subject, and it received much criticism for its conclusions concerning the folk tale analogues that he says grew into the Perceval story, but also much support for the argument that Chrétien was not the source of Sir Perceval. R.S. Loomis, Arthurian Tradition and Chrétien de Troyes (New York: Columbia U. Press, 1949), p. 57, supports the French argument. A.C.L. Brown, "The Grail and the English Sir Perceval," Modern Philology 16 (March, 1919), 553-67, supports Griffith's contested links to the folktale with much evidence of his own, but he too fails to prove his thesis, even in later articles in MP 17 (1919-20), 372-82, and 18 (1920-1), 211-22. Helaine Newstead, "The Besieged Ladies in Arthurian Romance," PMLA 63 (1948), establishes the prevalence of the besieged lady theme, though again she has trouble assigning a source to the Sir Perceval episode or in fact to any such romance episode.

The criticism pertaining to literary merit divides into two camps by time. Dorothy Everett, "A Characterization of the English Medieval Romances," Essays on Middle English Literature by Dorothy

Everett, ed. Patricia Kean (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 12, rather unkindly pronounces the romance "crude." A.B. Taylor, An Introduction to Medieval Romance (London: Heath Cranton, 1930), p. 109, concurs, calling it "clumsy." John Spiers, "Sir Perceval of Galles," Medieval English Poetry: The Non-Chaucerian Tradition (New York: MacMillan, 1957), pp. 122-38, notes the comic quality of the romance, and generally spends a lot more time in reaching a more favorable conclusion. There is one full-length treatment of the structure, in Edna Sue Hood, "Sir Perceval of Galles: Medieval Fiction," Diss. U. of Wisconsin, 1966. Another unpublished dissertation edits the romance, and emphasizes its humor and structure, but spends most of its time on prosody and textual matters: Dean Richard Baldwin, "Sir Perceval of Galles: An Edition," Diss. The Ohio State University, 1972; line references and quotes are drawn from this competent edition, rather than one of the published, but "cleaned" versions.

Only recently has there been much positive critical interest in this romance. The two dissertations aside, the first attempt to discover the thematic value of the poem came in F. Xavier Baron, "Mother and Son in Sir Perceval of Galles," Papers on Language and Literature 8 (Winter, 1972), 3-14. This was followed by Caroline Eckhardt, "Arthurian Comedy: The Simpleton-Hero in Sir Perceval of Galles," Chaucer Review 8 (Winter, 1973), 104-20. As promising as Baron's study is, perhaps the most intriguing argument comes in David C. Fowler, "Le Conte du Graal and Sir Perceval of Galles," Comparative Literature Studies 12 (1975), 11-5. Perhaps I should

also note George Kane's point about psychological development, which fits closely with the viewpoint of these studies, made twenty years before in Middle English Literature (London: Methuen, 1951), p. 78. Also of some interest may be the discussions of the poetry of Sir Perceval, in Baldwin, and in Derek Pearsall, "The Development of the Middle English Romance," Medieval Studies 27, 105-16, and in Dieter Mehl, Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), especially p. 100.

<sup>2</sup> Valerie Krishna, ed., The Alliterative Morte Arthur: A Critical Edition (New York: Burt Franklin and Co., 1976), p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Krishna, p. 20; Eric Auerbach, Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, trans. Willard Trask (Garden City: Doubleday, 1957), pp. 116-24.

<sup>4</sup> Krishna, pp. 20-1; John Finlayson, ed., Morte Arthure (London: Edward Arnold, 1967), p. 81n, and "Arthur and the Giant of St. Michael's Mount," Medium Aevum 33 (1964), 117-20.

<sup>5</sup> Krishna, pp. 21-2; William Matthews, The Tragedy of Arthur (Berkeley: U. of California, 1960), chapter five.

<sup>6</sup> Krishna, pp. 20-3, and Matthews, chapter five.

<sup>7</sup> Krishna, p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> Krishna, pp. 29-30; Larry Benson, Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (New Brunswick: Rutgers U. Press, 1965), pp. 151-3.

<sup>9</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, eds. Sir Gawain and the Green



Knight (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930).

<sup>10</sup> Albert B. Friedman and Norman T. Harrington, eds., Ywain and Gawain, Early English Text Society, no. 254 (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1964).

<sup>11</sup> Friedman and Harrington, pp. xviii-xix.

<sup>12</sup> Friedman and Harrington, p. xx.

<sup>13</sup> Friedman and Harrington, p. xvii.

<sup>14</sup> Friedman and Harrington, pp. xlii, xliii, xlv, and xlvi.

<sup>15</sup> Friedman and Harrington, pp. xlii-xliii.

<sup>16</sup> L.F. Casson, ed., The Romance of Sir Degrevant: A Parallel-Text Edition from Mss. Lincoln Cathedral A.5.2 and Cambridge University Ff.I.6, The Early English Text Society, no. 221 (London: Oxford U. Press, 1949; reprinted 1970), p. xlii, gives a summary of the differences.

<sup>17</sup> Casson, p. xlii.

<sup>18</sup> Casson, p. lxxiv-lxxv.

<sup>19</sup> Casson, p. lxxiv.

<sup>20</sup> Casson, p. lxxi, discusses the similarity; G. Ludtke, ed., The Erle of Toulous and the Emperes of Almayn (Berlin: NP, 1881), uses the Thornton manuscript copy. Part of the interest of Sir Degrevant is the way it uses the material of the Erle, as well as of the Morte Arthure; vide Casson, pp. lxxvi, lxxi-lxxii, and lxxii.

<sup>21</sup> Frances E. Richardson, ed., Sir Eglamour of Artois, The Early English Text Society, no. 256 (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1965),

p. xxxv.

<sup>22</sup> Richardson, p. xl.

<sup>23</sup> Richardson, p. xl.

<sup>24</sup> D.H. Green, Irony in the Medieval Romance (New York: Cambridge U. Press, 1979), is a slightly flawed but very useful work, compiling and organizing much material--though mainly drawn from German sources--on an important subject in medieval romance. The flaw comes from his limited scope, since little use is made of English romances, little of French work outside of the obvious Chrétien, and none of any other language; we get a partial historical view, rather than a comprehensive overview. Nevertheless, Green has some good things to say about what he does deal with, even if he may suggest that everything in medieval romance is ironical if it is any good.

<sup>25</sup> Green, p. 10, does not go into comedy in any detail, but generalizes this distinction of irony and comedy for his own purposes.

<sup>26</sup> Still, Green is willing to grant this much for humor, p. 10.

<sup>27</sup> This is the essence, in my words, of Green's listing of the qualities of irony, pp. 4-9; the list is also simplified.

<sup>28</sup> Green, p. 51.

<sup>29</sup> I am simply making an unstated distinction that Green would agree with (see pp. 53-4), in order to clarify his apparent overstatement.

<sup>30</sup> Green, p. 57.

<sup>31</sup> Green, pp. 38, 61 and 43.

<sup>32</sup> Green, pp. 11, 37-8, 39, 40-1, 74 and 81-3, has a plethora of evidence on Parzival's modification of earlier romance material.

<sup>33</sup> Green, p. 351, notes the similarly weak beginning to Parzival's quest.

<sup>34</sup> Green, p. 163, notes another use of a double time perspective, which is also familiar from Gawain's simultaneous two hunts.

<sup>35</sup> Friedman and Harrington, ll. 31-2, give the same phrase in praise of knights. This suggests that the commonplace, which is a natural result of alliterative word formations, comes under ironical scrutiny by one of the noted users of commonplaces. That is only appropriate in a poet who is in any way self-conscious, for the use of alliterative phrases is not a very subtle technique; and a poet would be aware of their prominence and thus be willing to exercise some control over their usage and effect on the audience. In this case, as in the case of the "dranke water of the welle" and "fosterde of the felle" commonplaces, the Perceval-poet is working away from the standard use of the term.

<sup>36</sup> Baron, pp. 5-7, says masculine archetypes, like the sword and spear, are usually dominant over feminine ones, like the ring, in Arthurian romance.

<sup>37</sup> Green, pp. 93-4, notes misogyny in romance. In Tolkien and Gordon, ll.2414-9, Gawain also is misogynous.

<sup>38</sup> Green, p. 351, notes the similar qualification of the knightly

ideal in Chrétien's Perceval.

<sup>39</sup> Fowler, p. 11, makes this argument; though necessarily hypothetical, it is most intriguing and perhaps need not be taken solely on faith, considering the prevalence of the Grail motif in the extant Perceval stories. We must account for the lack of the motif in Sir Perceval somehow, and this is a reasonable explanation.

<sup>40</sup> Green, p. 76, notes that Gawain fights his last battle, but that Parzival does not fight.

<sup>41</sup> Northrop Frye, The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. Press, 1976), p. 150, explores the "annihilation of the individual" at the end of romance, the loss of magic and return to the real world, or a higher world, as in The Tempest and the exit from the pastoral world of The Arcadia; It seems an over-simplification of Frye (p.173) not to note that annihilation is a form of the civilizing force, which Sir Perceval utilizes in the social emphasis of the ending. Likewise, there are many ways in which this romance fits Frye's definition of romance, despite the role of irony. This is a different mode for Frye, closer to satire, and thus not the same as the ironical humor I have discussed in this essay: vide Frye, The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton U. Press, 1957), p. 192. In fact, the central theme of this romance, the action of the knight to create and preserve society, is simply one form of the romance quest for a victory of fertility over waste--the eternal grail-quest theme--as Frye puts it in Anatomy,

p. 193. I am less sure that the forest is at the end of the romance a world of moral neutrality, for the "good" overtones are too many; but the forest was exactly that at the beginning of the romance, when Perceval knew neither good nor bad (vide Frye, Anatomy, p. 196, and also his discussion of the nature-spirit who is like the buffoon in comedy). Though the forest at the end of this romance need not be left for reasons of moral good and bad, Perceval does need to leave for familial, personal and social reasons. In this respect perhaps Frye holds a key to an understanding of the last two movements of the romance, into the forest, and back to the comfortable and safe castle. His fifth phase of the romance, after all, is a sequel to adventure, as is Perceval's quest for his mother. This is a sequel where the hero (or narrator, or audience) can look back over the experience of the romance; this is also the phase where moral stratification takes place (Anatomy, p.202). As in Sir Perceval the giant is relegated to the dust but his porter survives when he shows good qualities, so Perceval achieves his final development as a social knight. And the sixth phase of Frye's romance also becomes clear, when we see that Perceval and Acheflour return to civilization to resume normal family life, once the villains and Saracens have been defeated or converted. This is certainly the cuddle fiction stage (to use Frye's term), though it is contemplative only if we count the narrator's religious prayer at the end and the death of Perceval in the Holy Land, as a turning toward the things of the afterlife (Anatomy, pp. 202-3).

<sup>42</sup> Green, p. 126, notes the use of the fabliau already in both

Gawain and Tristan; we can take such notes as indication of the relative looseness of the strict generic boundaries we tend to place on creative works. We may also take these notes as aberrations, but that course has its own dangers. Certainly if the fabliau methods are used, they do work to level the hero and ideal, and to broaden the appeal of the work in terms of different audiences's different generic expectations. The extent to which the fusion of genres, and their subsequent mutation into new genres, can be recognized in the elements of anti-romance in Sir Perceval is a problem outside the scope of this paper. There is scope here to note, however, the problematic nature of my identification of Perceval as, essentially, a hero: how like the heroes of Wolfram and Chrétien can Sir Perceval be? Is there, in other words, a continuous, common definition of the hero in these Perceval legends? How general and significant are medieval doubts about the ideal of the hero? Vide the limitations expressed by Bernard Huppe, "The Concept of the Hero in the Early Middle Ages," Concepts of the Hero in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, eds. Norman T. Burns and Christopher J. Reagan (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1979), pp. 1-2, 8-9, 13, 19, 23. See also Morton W. Bloomfield, "The Problem of the Hero in the Later Medieval Period," in Concepts of the Hero, p. 27--the Indo-European root of the concept of the hero, a helper and protector, is what we have in Sir Perceval; pp. 28-9--the later Middle Ages are suspicious of the concept of the hero; pp. 31-2--the anti-heroic pole dominates the heroic in the late Middle Ages; pp. 33-4--the anti-heroic is evident in English romances; p. 34--Bloomfield limits the modulation of the hero to the

use of the personae of the poet and to the use of various heroes in the same work, so none will stand out. To these two methods we should add the use of humor and irony, as in Morte Arthure, Gawain, Eglamour, and Sir Perceval.

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HUMOR AND IRONY AND STRUCTURE IN  
SIR PERCEVAL OF GALLES

by

CHARLES WATTERSON DAVIS

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S THESIS

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ABSTRACT. Sir Perceval of Galles has not received the quality of critical attention that I believe it deserves. There are a number of significant themes and methods used in this romance, which are important because of their relationship with themes and methods in use in other romances of the same milieu. Sir Perceval is surely transitional, bridging the earlier, continental romance tradition and the soon-to-flower Chaucerian anti-romance, but I intend to show that it is also pivotal in the careful way it balances early ideals and later realism. The poem describes, as well as any other, the growth of an organic hero: Perceval moves from being a bumpkin to achieving the status of ideal Arthurian knight, and then from that fairly traditional ideal to a whole knight who participates in society and supports familial themes. Perceval combines both the ideal and everyday qualities.

First, I will discuss the background of the poem, so that the poem's originality of design and technique may be properly understood and appreciated. Manuscripts from the collection where we find Sir Perceval, and others like Sir Gawain and the Green Knight which are important to the time and area, will serve as the sources to be studied.

Second, I will then analyze the poem into its several parts to prove its originality of design and technique. Design I divide into the structure of the story, the juxtaposition of adventures, and the interrelationship of character, scene, theme, and speech. Technique I divide into the use of humor, of verbal, dramatic and generic irony, and of the leveling of the Arthurian court and heroes.

Finally, I shall conclude that a careful analysis of the design and techniques of Sir Perceval prove its originality. The nature of this originality implies that this romance is representative of the forefront of its culture, and thus that it is pivotal. Since the romance is both original and pivotal, it deserves a critical examination.