

HUMOR AND IRONY AND STRUCTURE IN

205

SIR PERCEVAL OF GALLES

by

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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