

## LITERATURE

### THE LAUGHING MAIDEN: FEMININE WISDOM IN CHRÉTIEN DE TROYES' *LE CONTE DU GRAAL*

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#### ABSTRACT

The essay proposes a reconsideration of Chrétien de Troyes' *Le Conte du Graal* as an existentialist romance, where Perceval's failure to help the Roi Pesecheor, Fisher King, and to reach the Grail ultimately results from his failure to interpret the instruction he receives from the romance's women. *Le conte du Graal*, therefore, may be viewed as a romance of failure, although Perceval's fiasco may not only betoken the fiasco of *chevalerie* grounded in vainglory. The romance becomes a lesson in accepting and coping with failure, and Perceval learns this lesson from the women he encounters. The essay focuses on the prophetic figure of the Laughing Maiden as the most influential and yet the least conspicuous of them. Her character is discussed here as an example of the roles played by other feminine figures of *Le conte du Graal*. Like the Laughing Maiden, they provide the romance with narrative development, commentary and, more importantly, appear to be in possession of the knowledge Perceval is unable to decode and internalize.

*Perceval, ou le conte du Graal*, the last of Chrétien de Troyes' romances is, doubtlessly, the most intriguing and mysterious of his texts. Unfinished and twisting between the story of Perceval and Gauvain, it gave rise to a number of medieval continuations and, in recent times, to a number of critical works discussing it from almost every possible perspective. Indeed, the words with which Lazamon's *Brut* describes the phenomenon of King Arthur, comparing his body to food and wine nourishing poetic imagination, and saying that "þis solde i-laste; to þare worle lange" (Lawman 1994: 11499) may well be applied to Chrétien's Grail romance, incidentally describing also the position of literary critics. None other Arthurian romance can boast more continuations or versions, and none of Arthurian motifs can rival the creative potential of the quest for the Grail. The intriguing nature of *Le conte du Graal* lies, however, not just in its incompleteness, neither can it be linked solely with the Grail theme. If Chrétien's earlier romances were concerned with the matters of *amour* and *chevalerie*, their

author presents us with his last and most mature composition, a *Bildungsroman*, where chivalry for its own sake is scorned and the love theme is visibly less significant than before. *Le conte du Graal* is the only of Chrétien's five romances not written for the courtly audience of Marie de Champagne, where chivalric stories were also stories of the challenges and complexities of love. Instead, it is dedicated to her cousin and Chrétien's second patron, Philippe d'Alsace, the count of Flanders, who lived under the influence of the ideas leading to his crusades and ultimately death in the *Outremer*, and for whom the mission of knight-hood would have been synonymous with religious challenge. And yet, it is through feminine characters that Chrétien shapes his story, albeit the significance of those figures is markedly different than in his previous texts.

My intention here is to discuss Chrétien's Grail-romance, and in particular its parts concerning Perceval, as a narrative virtually designed by the women appearing in the romance's most decisive points. A corresponding perspective on the position of women in twelfth- and thirteenth-century French romances has recently been proposed by Ben Ramm (2003), who emphasises feminine roles in relation to the Grail quest as "the very support for the male homosocial structure of the Quest" (Ramm 2003: 518). Ramm presents an outline of feminine characters across the romances, focusing on the Grail quest and rejecting the conventional reading of women as bringing the downfall of the quest. The present examination will centre on the narrative and interpretative significance of the figure even more marginal than the women characters Ramm discusses. The Laughing Maiden of *Le conte du Graal* briefly appears twice in the romance and does not participate directly in the Grail quest, but she is, I will argue, a controlling character, allowing for an interpretation of the romance as a philosophical study of failure. I will ultimately speculate about a possibility of viewing *Le conte du Graal* as a romance that is, in a way, complete, not on its narrative but on its interpretative level, which was first tentatively suggested by Burns (1988: 264). In contrast to what has been traditionally postulated (Frappier 1959 [2001]: 188-189; Topsfield 1981: 218-219), I believe that if, in the figure of Perceval, Chrétien posed before his audience a vision of a Christian knight, as opposed to the courtly knights of his previous romances, this vision is ultimately a vision of failure, or rather a deeply humanizing vision of one's attempt at coping with failure.

Such a view on *Le conte du Graal* and Perceval, is predominantly engendered by two concepts narratively essential for the romance – that of encounter and that of misinterpretation. While the former is an indispensable element of any romance, the emphasis on the latter and the multiple meanings resulting from it are peculiar to *Le conte du Graal*. On the narrative level of the romance these two notions are frequently combined into misinterpreted encounters, and as such are the main propellers of the action. On the interpretative level, how-

ever, they fashion the romance's most important and most existentialist theme of the quest for identity. In the course of the following pages I intend to present a closer reading of what may be the romance's decisive misinterpreted encounter and search in it not so much for the ironic air discussed by, for instance, Haidu (1968), but for a humanizing perspective on man and for a lesson in accepting one's limitations transcending the context of chivalric discourse. Reading the Grail romance in this way is possible, as I have mentioned, when we analyse the roles played by the romance's women. Their position in the course of the narrative is essential and it provides not only incentives for fresh episodes in the romance, but also a commentary upon the hero's development. Predominantly, however, the romance's women function as mirrors where the world of chivalric and male vainglory can find a reflection of its true value. It is in them that we find curious ambivalence between knowing and not knowing, telling and not telling, pleasure and affliction, and it is in the women of this most magical of Chrétien's romances that the presumably pre-Christian and mythical sphere is manifested. Even though the Laughing Maiden is not the first woman Perceval encounters, she nevertheless appears to be combining all these elements.

On a side note, I feel that I owe a word or two of explanation as to why I have decided to stretch the boundary of the journal and move beyond medieval literature in English. For one thing, let me explain myself with a platitudinous statement that it is impossible to speak of English romances without their French origins and influences, and that the court of Chrétien de Troyes' powerful contemporaries, Henry II of England and his queen, Eleanor, was oriented almost exclusively towards the culture of the French language and literature. Marie de Champagne, for instance, the first of Chrétien's patrons, was Eleanor's daughter from her first marriage with Louis VII of France. More importantly, however, if we treat *Le conte du Graal* as an existentialist romance, which I am about to propose, then this treatment, along with the manner in which women function in such a frame of romance, can also be applied to later English quest romances, most notably to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

*Le conte du Graal* is symbolically and literally enveloped with the words demanding interpretation and questioning. Burns most aptly notes that the romance's last line, the question posed by Queen Guenièvre "si li demande qu'ele avoit" (*Le conte du Graal*: 9234),<sup>1</sup> "she asked her what was the matter" (Kibler 1991: 494), provides "a haunting echo to the text's enigmatic prologue" (Burns 1988: 251) with its Biblical image of reaping and sowing (2 Cor 9: 6) and further allusions to Christ's parable of the sower (Matt 13: 3-23; Mark 4: 3-20;

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this work references to Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval ou le conte du Graal* are to T version, edited by Roach (1956).

Luke 8:5-15). But the words from the second letter to Corinthians contain a promise that may have both an ominous and auspicious sound to it: "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously". As much as the prologue is a eulogy to Chrétien's patron, Philip of Flanders, it also furnishes an interpretative perspective for the romance: "it is a statement of poetic theory and endeavour, and an introduction of themes. As the poet sows, so do his protagonists. Awareness of this dual function may inform our reading of the narrative proper" (Busby 1993: 15). The duality observed by Busby concerns the prologue's functions, however its interpretation is fraught with duality too, for Chrétien's prologue hints both at a possibility of success and that of failure. Moreover, the warning presaged in "whoever sows sparingly will reap sparingly" may refer to a miscarried interpretation, as well as the failure of the eponymous character. Thus a vision of fiasco is set in the romance immediately from its beginning, whereas the final, broken and unanswered question, as it were, complements it. It bespeaks failure, in the sense that it lacks the answer, but it also is a potentially promising point, for we may either presume that Chrétien would have supplied one, or, more importantly, we may provide one ourselves.

A similar duality between a promise and a threat appears in what I see as a dominating and determining episode of the romance, that is the moment of Perceval's meeting with the Laughing Maiden (ll. 1034-1062). Few scholars, if any, have lingered on the significance of the brief scene at Arthur's court. Let us, then, begin the quest for the significance of *Le conte du Graal's* women by reflecting on the scene whose potential dichotomy is frequently omitted. When young Perceval, having abandoned his mother, emerges from the Waste Forest to arrive at Arthur's castle in Carlisle, the king is brooding over the insult dealt against him and Guenièvre by Chevalier Vermeil, the Red Knight. Arthur's court is set within, what may seem, oneiric air and the prevalent impression is that of resigned expectation. The appearance of Perceval breaks the silence, bringing a welcome change, but it also engenders one the most perplexing scenes in the romance: as he is about to leave, he greets a maiden, who had been sunken in melancholy for six or more years. She laughs out loud and, still laughing, says:

Vallet, se tu vis par eage,  
Ce pens et croi en mon corage  
Qu'en trestot le monde n'avra  
N'il n'ert ne on ne l'i savra,  
Nul meillor chevalier de toi-  
Einsi le pens et cuit et croi

(*Le conte du Graal*: 1039-1044).

[Young man, if you live long enough, I think and believe in my heart that in this whole world there will never be, nor will anyone ever acknowledge, a better knight than yourself. This I think and feel and believe]  
(Kibler 1991: 394).

Her statement is succinct and sharp, and it is the one and only instance when we hear the maiden speak. Yet what she says is going to be formative for Perceval. Benkov, summarising the dominating attitude toward female speech in medieval patristic and courtly literature, speaks of two chief points: "a) the less a woman talks, the better she will be viewed and b) . . . when a woman does speak, her choice of vocabulary and topic are equally important" (Benkov 1989: 246). The Laughing Maiden is a model instance of the way the two elements noted by Benkov are applied in the narrative scheme of the romance, whereas the pithiness and the meaning of her words, invest her and her speech with a gnomic aura.

Of the maiden herself we know virtually nothing and she is clearly a strange figure and mysterious figure. We neither know the reason for the six years of her cheerlessness, nor do we learn anything else about her identity. We may but ponder the sense of her words, for which she is immediately and most ignominiously struck by Keu. Traditionally her statement has been understood to constitute a foreshadowing of Perceval's future glory in knighthood: "the laughing girl and the fool prophesy that Perceval will be the finest knight ever known and finer than all those to come" (Wilson 1988: 115). Had it not been for the maiden's absent and then present laughter, we could also assume that she simply makes a comment on Perceval's foolhardy, and selfish promise to defeat the Red Knight. Foolhardy, as he is a novice in the art of war and selfish as he wishes to fight solely to obtain the Knight's splendid armour he clearly craves, not thinking of avenging the insulted Guenièvre. It is only later that Perceval will begin sending vanquished opponents in tribute to the Laughing Maiden. It cannot, however, be denied that she possess features of a magical figure – silent for years and breaking out into a comment about the hero, she is the most important of the romance's several prophetic women, as she is the first to speak of Perceval as a knight, and, in this way, she symbolically confers knighthood of Perceval. Twice she stresses that she "thinks, feels and believes" in Perceval's knightly success, making her words sound like a magical incantation. Indeed, in the classical terms defining magic, outlined by Malinowski, her appearance in the romance epitomizes three necessary elements magic involves: words, action and the magician (Malinowski 1926 [1998]: 174). The outcome of her words bears some semblance to effects of magic too: the prediction of the Laughing Maiden brings for Perceval the consequences that are at the same time creative, controlling, confusing, and, as it will be shown below, even catastrophic. The fact that it is a woman who makes the prophecy is especially telling, in view of

the magical position assigned to women in medieval romances. While, as Sweeney asserts, it is not always women who “introduce magic into the romances, . . . it is certainly predominantly the case that women seem to have access to magical philters created by Morgan [le Fay, and] the link between [female] magic and power over an individual is tied in many ways to the link between control over female sexuality” (Sweeney 2000: 27).

Even if the Laughing Maiden should not be treated as a sorceress per se, she unquestionably acts as a prophet. And, as becomes a prophet, and feminine prophet to that, and as becomes the atmosphere of indeterminacy surrounding *Le conte du Graal*, her statement and her laughter may in fact be ambivalent. Her prophecy, as it were, unlocks the tale, for Perceval swears to avenge the ill done to her by Keu, beginning a series of events that will lead to his knighthood. Furthermore, the prophecy of the fool that follows the words of the maiden complements them in what Sturm-Maddox calls “a narrative program of veridiction in which the fool’s prophecy is continually tested against the hero’s progressive development” (Sturm-Maddox 1979: 105). Interesting questions and possibilities, however, arise if the maiden’s laughter, her words and the subsequent comment made by the jester, are taken not at their face value, but if they are regarded as tinted with an air of ambivalence. Much as her words speak of Perceval’s fame, we later see that it is, in fact, superficial fame, grounded in *vana gloria*, and, in this way, the maiden’s laughter ironically foreshadows Perceval’s failure more than his greatness. She is still laughing while talking to the reckless and inexperienced Perceval – how easy it is for the immature youth he is then to take the maiden’s laughter for what he would want it to be and how characteristic it is of him to misinterpret things. After all, we see him failing to understand what he learnt from his mother and we see him misinterpreting instructions and information he receives time and time again. Why the maiden is laughing then and what sort of laughter it is are the questions that might determine the choice of the meaning for the entire romance. Schaeffer, in his study of laughter in culture, speaks of laughter as arising from the incongruity presented in a ludicrous context (Schaefer 1981: 17). It is not entirely impossible, it seems, to see such an incongruity between the inexperience of Perceval and the chivalric context he finds himself in and simultaneously aspires to.

The incongruity is evident when we take into account the fact that when the Laughing Maiden confronts Perceval, their social positions cannot be further away: she is, presumably, associated with the courtly discourse, he emerges uncouth from the world of nature. Yet in meeting her, Perceval is unconsciously also offered his most important lesson, that of learning his true identity. Her prophetic words inspire in him the hope and promise of chivalric fame much more than his first seductive encounter with the knights in the Waste Forest. Keu may be then striking the maiden for the fact that she is beyond the control of the mas-

culine world. Rather, if only for a brief moment, it is her who controls it. Thus, Keu’s blow is a manifestation of the vulnerability and helplessness of the male world of *vana gloria*, an attempt at what Benkov describes as a similarity between “the keeping of women” and “the keeping of language”:

Women’s fecundity and the similarly dangerous creativity of the word must equally be kept under wraps. It becomes apparent when the first level of control fails (i.e., when women are able to overcome the limitations of their education), secondary measures in the form of physical controls come into play. More than once do we find violence directed against women in order to silence them. Often as not, women are chastised for speaking out of turn, speaking their minds, or simply speaking the truth (Benkov 1989: 263).

Keu’s rash behaviour would then seem to be an instance of male agitation against an attempt at dominating the all-male discourse of chivalry by the Laughing Maiden, as well as a frenzied overreaction to what may be an example of feminine magic and divination. Sweeney goes as far as observing that “the tremendous anxiety surrounding the idea that a woman could use the *seemingly* magical power of her sexuality to control men” was, in fact fuelled by “the romances and other such forms of literature with their preoccupation with women and magic, which contributed to the hysteria concerning female power over men, the birthing process, and the sexual perversions attributed to heretics in the later medieval period” (Sweeney 2000: 27).

Whether Sweeney is correct in her remark or whether, in reverse order, the romances were really a reflection of the socio-cultural reality, the meeting between Perceval and the Laughing Maiden can be treated ambivalently. Such a view is especially legitimate, when we consider the second meeting of the pair. Its circumstances are again clearly prophetic and extremely dramatic, moreover, they appear to be built on an almost exact opposition to the first encounter. By that time Perceval is past his adventures in the castle of Biaurepaire, and after his experience in the castle of Roi Pescheor, the Fisher King. He is invincible as a warrior-knight, yet he has also forgotten about his intention to return to his mother, whom he selfishly left at the beginning of his search for knighthood. Furthermore, it is already after another young maiden, his cousin, informed him that the apparently elegant silence at the court of the Fisher King, which he was to keep, according to the instruction of his mentor in chivalry, Gornemant de Gohort, would bring disastrous repercussions. Thus, when Perceval is brought to Arthur’s court by Gauvain, he is in pensive and melancholy mood, which may not only result from his contemplation of the three blood drops on the snow. Nevertheless, the celebration in his honour arouse in him a vainglorious man again, the state that he frequently lapsed into in the past and will continue doing so again. This time the maiden who laughed when they met for the first time is silent, although the prophetic ambience of their second meeting will soon be

felt. Seeing the damsel from his past once more, Perceval greets her courteously and elaborately. He has advanced in chivalric ways and, after all, he has been sending vanquished knights to Arthur's court as tributes to her honour. And yet, immediately after the refinement of that scene, or maybe because of it, Chrétien brings in shock and repulsion, for he introduces yet another woman figure. The loathly lady, entering Arthur's court on a mule, is so hideously deformed, that the narrative is at this point powerfully contrasted with Perceval's earlier musing over the three blood drops on the snow, reminding him of the beautiful Blancheflor of Biaurepaire, and with the elegance of addressing the Laughing Maiden. Greeting everyone except Perceval, the grotesque damsel, in a humiliating manner, turns to him from the mule with the words of scorn, and, having played her part, immediately leaves the shocked assembly. She is another woman to speak of Perceval's failure, though this time it is done in front of the entire court, and she is another prophetic figure, as she foretells the disasters that will follow only because of his courtly silence in the Grail castle:

A mal eur tu [te] teusses,  
Que se tu demandé l'eusses,  
Li riches rois, qui or s'esmaie,  
Fust ja toz garis de sa plaie  
Et si tenist sa terre en pais,  
Dont il ne tendra point jamais

(*Le conte du Graal*: 4669-4674).

...

Dames en perdront lor maris,  
Terres en seront escillies  
Et puceles desconseillies,  
Qui orfenines remandront,  
Et maint chevalier en morront;  
Tot cist mal esteront par toi

(*Le conte du Graal*: 4678-4683).

[Cursed be the hour you kept silent since, if you had asked, the rich king who is suffering so would already be healed of his wound and would be ruling in peace over the land he shall never again command. [. . . in consequence] Ladies will lose their husbands, lands will be laid waste, and maidens will remain helpless as orphans; many a knight will die. All these troubles will occur because of you]

(Kibler 1991: 438).

Perceval's life is thus enclosed between the two prophetic meetings associated with the Laughing Maiden – in the first of these he was at the beginning of the path, in the second he is heading towards an end. If the first meeting marked a sense of possibility for Perceval, the second almost concludes his life, for noth-

ing significant regarding him follows in the extant narrative and Chrétien begins to shift his attention to Gauvain. What happens before, after and in between the meetings with the Laughing Maiden can, contrary to most of the critics, be called the story Perceval's development to a limited extent only. Even though, immediately after the loathly lady departs, he swears to uncover the true meaning of the Grail and the bleeding lance, and that "ja nel laira por nule paine" (*Le conte du Graal*: 4740), "he would not abandon his quest for any hardship" (Kibler 1991: 439), Perceval is locked in the thrall of the ugly lady's prophecy. When Chrétien returns to him, after some fifteen hundred lines devoted to Gauvain, he tells us that Perceval "ot si perdue la miemoire/ Que de Dieu ne li sovient" (*Le conte du Graal*: 6218-6219), "had lost his memory so totally that he no longer remembered God" (Kibler 1991: 457). Perceval persists in his pointless sending vanquished knights as prisoners to Arthur's court, and he is again under the spell of knightly vainglory. The quest is abandoned once more, Perceval's pledge is not fulfilled again, and, although the hermit Perceval meets helps him to see the wrongs of his ways, eventually revealing the meaning of the Grail to him, Perceval will never be able to compensate fully for the mistake he had made. He can only repent and this is where the narrative abandons him. The sin against his mother had been committed, the Grail castle deserted and gone and Perceval's repentance is simultaneously an act of accepting his failure.

The two meetings with the Laughing Maiden create a frame which encompasses Perceval's chivalric career, but his entire life is literally and metaphorically encompassed by his mother. She appears initially as Perceval's guardian and protector against the dangers of the world of chivalry, and then at the end, as a ghost from the past, when the hermit, incidentally also Perceval's uncle, explains his failure as rooted in the sin of abandoning her. Moreover, *Le conte du Graal* contains instances of other, female characters, who appear in crucial moments of Perceval's development and quest, a detailed presentation of whom, however, would exceed the spatial limits of this text. Some of the romance's women seem entirely peripheral to its action or are not even present in person, but are, nevertheless, always critical to the flow of the narrative. Queen Guenièvre, for instance, insulted by Perceval's first opponent, the Red Knight, who spilled wine over her, remains, as we hear from King Arthur, in her chamber, and yet it is her shame that indirectly facilitates Perceval's first fight. Blancheflor, whom he defends against Clamadeu des Isles and his seneschal, and with whom he spends many a pleasurable moment, restrains Perceval from returning to his mother that he had undertaken. The sword Perceval receives from Roi Pescheor was sent to the Fisher King by his niece, and she does not appear in the romance other than that. Even the Grail vessel in Fisher King's castle is carried by a maiden, who, significantly, remains silent.

The role of women in the romance is thus constantly being emphasised, and it appears that the possible ambivalence of the Laughing Maiden may in fact be exemplary of the position of all women characters in *Le conte du Graal*. Chrétien's comment on Blancheflor's verbal manipulation she exercised over Perceval, might as well be applicable to other women the hero encounters in the romance, and, in particular, to the Laughing Maiden:

Tel plait li a cele basti  
 Qu'ele le blasme et si le velt;  
 Mais sovent avient que l'e[n] selt  
 Escondire sa volenté,  
 Quant on voit home entalenté  
 De faire trestot son talent,  
 Por che que mix l'en entalent.  
 Einsi fait ele come sage,  
 Qu'ele li a mis en corage  
 Ce qu'ele li blasme molt fort

(*Le conte du Graal*: 2128-2136).

[She pretended to discourage him by her words, though in fact she wished him to fight; but it often happens that one hides one's true desires when one sees someone who is keen to enact them, in order to increase his desire to fulfil them. And thus she acted cleverly, by discouraging him from doing the very thing she had planted in his heart to do] (Kibler 1991: 407).

Whichever of the romance's women we turn to, she either affects Perceval to the extent he is unable to comprehend at the moment of their encounter, or she is in possession of some foreknowledge concealed from him. This is also largely true of the romance's second part concerning Gauvain, yet Perceval's quest is practically defined and shaped by women. They point his fate to him and they define his quest by indicating the absent question he should have posed, in order to make him realize that the nature of his quest, and indeed the nature of human life, lies in the search for the possibility to pose questions. Perceval's realization of his right and necessity to ask questions and of the importance of interpretation never comes true. The twofold failure in his quest for the question is, in effect, Perceval's failure in interpretation, represented by his silence in the Grail castle. Misinterpreting the signs he encounters in the course of his life has been haunting him from the romance's opening, and, aside from the final repentance, there is no single moment in the romance when Perceval is capable of a reflection reaching beyond his here and now that he would be able to accomplish. In one way or another then, more or less ironically, *Le conte du Graal's* women are therefore mirrors reflecting Perceval's flaws and faults to him, and through him, to other heroes embarking on their quests. This is not a misogynist vision of femininity, women act here rather like catalysts of events or catalysts of possi-

bilities. They present choices, but it is the task of the hero to see and understand those choices. The Laughing Maiden could have been both right and wrong when she spoke of Perceval as potentially a perfect knight. However, like Gauvain of the remaining part of the romance, who ended up confined in the Castle of Marvels, Chrétien's Perceval symbolically chose to remain locked in the Red Knight's armour he craved at the beginning of his adventures, shut in a limiting vision of chivalry that he had never been able to transcend. It is in this way, then, that the romance becomes complete in its incompleteness, although before Chrétien parts with Perceval we hear him promise to speak of him again. The promise, however, is never fulfilled, the romance is abruptly left unfinished, paradoxically becoming Chrétien's supreme achievement, where he steps beyond *le roman d'aventure* and moves towards what we could call *le roman humain*, the existential romance. In doing this, Chrétien presents us with a humanizing vision of incompleteness, absence and lack as the one sense in life we all experience.

Finally, if *Le conte du Graal* represents human existence as a never-ending quest for understanding, beset with failures, and if it is through ambivalent feminine characters that such a vision is realized, then it is tempting to close such observations with analogical ambivalence found among visual representations of medieval femininity. The so-called sheela-na-gig carvings are predominantly present first in eleventh and twelfth century Northern France and later in the British Isles (Andersen 1977: 113). As they appear on the walls of churches, monasteries and castles, they intertwine pre-Christian and Christian ideologies, and although their principal element, that of violent sexuality, does not feature openly in *Le conte du Graal*, the duality between their threatening and inviting qualities (Andersen 1977: 19-21; Kelly 1996: 45-46) is reminiscent of both the choices posed by the women of the romance, and their otherworldly potential. Like the sheela figures, *Le conte du Graal's* women are evidently connected to the realm of pre-Christian myth, and, like the sheelas, they appear in or around castles or places presumed sacred, such as the Grail castle or even Orgueilleux de la Lande's tent, that Perceval mistakes for a chapel. More importantly, however, through their prophetic attributes the women of the romance offer a possibility of protecting Perceval against making wrong choices, and, ironically, at the same time they push and tempt him towards them. Thus, given the apotropaic function of the sheelas, it appears that the women Perceval encounters could ward off the evil of his sin, if only he were able to step beyond his egotism and, through reading the signs they bring, pose the right question.

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