

Perceval, the Slow Apprentice of Courtly Manners

Chrétien de Troyes' Perceval begins the tale as a young 'naïs', ignorant of the world away from his mother's manor. Through an accumulation of experiences and with the tutoring of Gornemant de Goort, Perceval undergoes a veritable education, until, at last, he becomes a knight worthy of King Arthur's esteem. An essential component of that education consists in learning to speak courteously. Chrétien underscores Perceval's rather gradual progress not only in attire, gesture and deed, but also in the manner in which Perceval addresses others and the manner in which he is addressed.

As a mere lad, he addresses a knight whom he has never seen before with "Biax sire chiers" and "Danz chevaliers", a maiden as "bele amie", and charcoal burner as "Vilains."

At Gornemant de Goort's castle, Perceval greets his mentor awkwardly. Yet by the time Perceval leaves -- and he leaves a real knight -- he has a much surer grasp of courtly speech. Succeeding scenes suggest that mistakes continue to be made but of lesser gravity and frequency. He receives the chance to address the maiden he encountered earlier as a lad more properly now, and he indeed does so.

His stature as a knight worthy of emulation is reflected in the manner in which he is apostrophized some 2000 lines into the tale. Once called 'vaslez' and spoken to with 'tu', he is henceforth addressed with vocatives befitting any knight of Arthur's court and with the *vous reverentiae* as well. His rise in prestige is complete as of his stay at the Château de Beaurepaire.