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THE SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT OF SOME
KNIGHTLY CHARACTERS IN THE
ROMAN COURTOIS.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in French at
Massey University.

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To
my Father

Preface

In 1963, when I was studying Vergil's Aeneid, I became gradually aware that the Trojan leader, so often accused of being a negative plaything of the gods, was a great man and a great religious hero. For being able to see this point of view, I am greatly indebted to an enlightening article by F.A.Sullivan, S.J., who demonstrates how Aeneas, in his quest for a new Troy undergoes a spiritual journey not unlike that experienced by people who truly seek union with God by the sanctity of their lives.

Last year, when I was reading Yvain for the first time, it again became apparent that the hero, in his quest for reconciliation with his wife, could also show some features of a similar tripartite development. Further reading indicated that signs of a deep religious experience could also be found in other heroes, particularly in some of the romances of Chretien de Troyes, who have been studied here from the aspect of their spiritual progression.

Among all those who have in any way helped me to prepare this work, I should like to thank the Sisters of the Congregation to which I belong, the Sisters of Mercy, Wellington, who have given me much encouragement; the staff of the French section of the Modern Languages Department, Massey University, and especially Dr. Glynnis Cropp who has given so readily of her time and scholarly advice; the Library Staff, particularly the Interloan Section of Massey University; and finally, Mrs. Esme Lynch for her capable typing.

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Chapter I.Some Religious Influences on the Twelfth Century Romance

The twelfth century in France was undoubtedly an era of spiritual contrasts and spiritual endeavour. On the one hand the Church, finding itself associated with temporal structures, was in danger of becoming trapped in the system of militant service and ownership of property. Prelates and even Popes were too often inclined to come to terms with the powers of the World in exchange for transitory but substantial possessions. Lay powers intervened excessively in spiritual institutions, in ecclesiastical nominations and in the conduct of the affairs of the Church. Violence and immorality seem to have been prevalent not only amongst the laity, but also amongst dignitaries in high ecclesiastical positions.

But it is a profound law of Church history that whenever a crisis arises, a new leaven appears in the Christian dough. Consequently, to counterbalance abuses of the time, members of the laity were often permeated by a deep spirit of Faith, and monasticism in France at this very time underwent several spectacular upheavals. By no means the least amongst these was the reform instigated by a gallant little band of Benedictine monks who, disenchanted by the laxity and the free interpretation of the Rule in their own monasteries, and wanting to live their Rule in the stark splendour of its perfection, founded the first Cistercian monastery. The men who precipitated this reform, namely

St. Robert of Molesmes, St. Alberic and St. Stephen Harding were all prominent members of knightly families. St. Bernard followed, incorporating nature, contemporary needs and chivalric practices into his sermons, his Rule and his prayer, to consolidate a code of Cistercian spirituality. This giant was not only an immediate predecessor of Chrétien de Troyes, some of whose works will be studied in this thesis, but had his principal monastery at Clairvaux, in the plateau between Champagne and Haute-Bourgogne. Thus, the land where Chrétien is said to have lived and worked will have been permeated to a considerable extent by Cistercian spirituality. For these 'Knights of God' were no spineless cowards, using their piety as a means of escaping from the world, but characters of high chivalry and noble stock. So great was their influence that it could be said that the whole world had 'gone Cistercian'. The dedicated service of these 'White Monks' was vowed, not to any feudal lord, but to God, their Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier.

Predominant among the many features of the twelfth century was feudal society, wherein the growing influence of women was discernible, as well as the phenomenon of courtly love, which required the knight to give to his lady-love the kind of allegiance and homage that feudalism required him to pay to his liege-lord. The chivalrous knight tried to conform to this ideal which was peculiar to a relatively short span of civilisation. From men who would practise it, true courtliness exacted a high

standard of moral conduct and outlook, prowess in chivalry, sensitivity of feelings, a good physical appearance which was equalled only by physical strength and courage, generosity, pride in one's ancestry, self-control, a scrupulous loyalty, justice, singleness of purpose, respect for the feelings and actions of others, liberality, self-forgetfulness in the face of a greater good, a sense of quest, sufficient humility to withstand an occasional rigorous self-examination, prudence, faith on both the natural and the supernatural plane, enough hope to persevere in the face of great odds, and love in its various manifestations, including contemplation of the beauty of the beloved and promptness in carrying out her wishes.

It is therefore hardly surprising if we find that, although most of the romances in this discussion can hardly be said to be religious works, there can be seen in varying degrees a parallel between the quest, goal or task of the hero, and the quest for sanctity experienced by the searching soul. Let us therefore look for signs of evidence of a spiritual ascent as we follow the development of the heroes of certain romances. Beginning with Eneas, portrayed from a Stoic rather than from a Christian point of view, we shall study in turn the quests and spiritual development of Erec, Yvain, Lancelot, Gauvain and Perceval. Before studying such a development, it is worth recalling briefly the progress in virtue and in union with God

that an average soul, seeking perfection and stumbling on the way, might hope to make.

Admission or initiation into a society frequently requires ritual. So too, the Christian is initiated into his supernatural life through the ritual of Baptism, those waters which cleanse, purify but which are above all the sign and very cause of new life. With Baptism are infused the Theological Virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity and the moral virtues, in particular, Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance, those virtues upon which all the others depend. But this is not enough. Dormant virtues survive only with difficulty and sometimes die altogether. Spiritual prowess has been likened to a contest which requires preparation, practice, self-examination, prayer and 'pietas' or 'promptness of the will in the service of God.'²

Thus, there is, dating from Apostolic times, an age-old division of the Spiritual life into three stages - those namely, of beginners, proficient and perfects or, in more technical language, the Purgative Way, the Illuminative Way and the Unitive Way. Accompanying these stages of life there are also three broad divisions of prayer which correspond with developing virtue. However, the soul is a spiritual faculty and therefore intangible. It is not difficult to appreciate that the rate of supernatural growth will vary from person to person, and that evidence of any growth taking place will be found only in external actions. It is obvious, too,

that the divisions between these stages is seldom clearly outlined, but that there will be some overlap.

The Purgative Way or 'state of beginners' consists in the purifying of the soul in view of attaining to intimate union with God. Necessary for such souls is the virtue of humility which begets confidence in God and self-knowledge. In this state, the concentration is more on the eradication of faults by prayer and penance.

Following this stage, but often overlapping with it comes the Illuminative Way. Here less emphasis is spent on the eradication of faults than on the positive acquisition of virtues, in the imitation of Christ. A higher state of prayer is achieved, a more complete dependence on God is sought, passions are mortified and purity of heart is attained. This leads to the Unitive Way, a state in which all things are brought to converge towards intimate union with God through charity. "The soul lives continually in the presence of God: it delights to contemplate Him living in the heart, 'to walk inwardly with God.' In order to live thus, it carefully detaches itself from creatures so as 'to be held by no outward affection.' It is on this account that the soul seeks solitude and silence; it gradually builds in the heart a sanctuary where it finds God and converses with Him heart to heart." ³⁾

Our heroes in this study will, in some way, be set apart by their destiny or by the nature of their quest, just as the Christian soul is "set apart", chosen or called by his Baptism. Their background circumstances all contribute to

both their temporal quests and their spiritual ascent, and in most cases a kind of initiation ceremony is required, again, not unlike that of Baptism. The first part of their adventures generally takes place in the blind groping which is characteristic of the Purgative Way, terminating in a crisis of self-awareness, repentance, reparation and conversion.

When the catharsis is complete, and the hero is led to see his destiny more clearly, he generally enters a state rather like that of the Illuminative Way. Recognising his faults only too well, he makes a positive effort to increase in virtue. He receives extraordinary helps to achieve his goal. The word 'clarté' is frequently used.

For example :- Si oel si grant clarté randoient
 que deus estoiles rassanbloient.
 (Erec, 433-34)

and in the Grail procession :-

Atot le graal quele tint,
 Une si grans clartez i vint.
 (Perceval 3225-26)

Many Liturgical hymns of the twelfth century, following St. John in his writings of the first century A.D. refer to Christ as the Light.

e.g. "That was the true light, which enlighteneth every man that cometh into this world." 4

and

"O lux beata Caelitum,
 Et summa spes mortalium:
 Jesu, o cui domestica
 Arrisit orto caritas. " 5

Finally, having attained a higher level of understanding, and a greater, more positive conformity to the principles of courtliness and chivalry, the hero enters into a kind of Unitive Way. Here he cannot be separated from his God or from his destiny, and in all cases, except the unfinished Perceval, the romance finishes on a promising note, suggesting that the hero will continue to leap from brightness to brightness, as by the Spirit of the Lord. 6,