

CHAPTER 1

Mounts as Social Identifiers: Describing Knights and Ladies through Their Horses

The knight, his steed and chivalric romance

The idea that a knight in the Middle Ages somehow blended with his mount, creating nothing less than a composite, an assemblage, has recently gained considerable currency in academic circles.¹⁰ Naturally, the rise of chivalry is not contemporaneous with the rise of the mounted warrior: in the early medieval period, mounted warriors were not knights, as they came to be known to us through the so-called “code of chivalry.” In fact, Latin texts of the period distinguish between “*milites*” and “*pedites*,” and the *milites* in question are not knights: they are simply mounted soldiers; another term used in early sources is *equites* or *equestres*, which was interchangeable with *milites*.¹¹ A horse, thus, is only one of characteristics making a knight: the

¹⁰ Jeffrey J. Cohen argues that, although “noble households ordinarily possessed numerous types of horses: hunters, chargers, palfreys, and a variety of workhorses,” none of them “gained the numinous aura of the aristocratic warhorse (destrier, *magnus equus*, grant chival), the knight’s beloved companion and the *sine qua non* of chivalric identity” (Jeffrey J. Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 84). Cohen’s notion of posthumanism is used, for instance, by Karen Brown Campbell in her discussion of the relations between the rider and the horse in chivalric culture (Karen Brown Campbell, “Reriding Chivalry: Humans, Horses, and Social Systems in Medieval Chivalry,” unpublished doctoral dissertation, Texas Tech University, 2012 and “Writing Bodies, Riding Equipment, Reading Horses: The Equestrian Canon and the Code of Chivalry,” in *The Horse in Premodern Europe*, ed. Anastasija Ropa and Timothy Dawson (MIP: forthcoming).

¹¹ Conor Kostick, *The Social Structure of the First Crusade* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2008), 160-186.

ceremony of dubbing a knight is of singular importance in transforming a mounted warrior into a noble knight, a member of military elite who is, at least in theory, both physically and morally superior to his undubbed peers. In this chapter, we will consider the transformation of a warrior into a knight, and the associated change of mount, which marks the passage to a new social status, in Chrétien de Troyes's famous romance *Perceval, ou le conte del Graal*. Indeed, Perceval motivates his refusal to descend from his horse when he first comes to Arthur's court by referring to the knights he saw in the forest, all of whom were on horseback: "Ja n'estoient pas descendu cil que j'ancontrai an la lande, et vos volez que je descende! Ja, par mon chief, n'i descendrai, mes fetes tost, si m'an irai" (ll. 984-988).¹²

It is believed that Chrétien de Troyes wrote *Perceval* around 1182, having previously completed several Arthurian romances, among them *Le Chevalier de la charrette* ("The Knight of the Cart"), and *Yvain ou Le Chevalier au lion* ("Yvain, or the Knight of the Lion"). On the literary scene, the period in which Chrétien was active is contemporaneous with the lays of Marie de France, troubadour songs and *chansons de geste*. What is different about Chrétien's romances, is not only their form, but also the content. Romances are usually dedicated to the matter of the ancient times and the "matter of Britain."¹³ Moreover, romances usually foreground the individual achievements of the hero, and, in Chrétien's romances, the focus is on the hero's social and psychological dynamics. Furthermore, Chrétien often inscribes the social and political realia of his time in his romances, and he is attentive to issues of social status. Thus, the crux of *Le Chevalier de la charrette* is Lancelot's dilemma to compromise his knightly honour if he decides to ride in a cart to save the queen or his love, in case he rejects the manifestly "unknightly" means of transport. The moment of hesitation costs him the queen's favour, yet Chrétien's were sure to understand Lancelot's unease, as the

¹² All references are to Chrétien de Troyes, *Conte du Graal (Perceval)*, ed. Pierre Kunstmann. Ottawa/Nancy, Université d'Ottawa /Laboratoire de français ancien, ATILF, 2009. <http://catalog.bfm-corpus.org/perceval> (accessed 23 November 2018). Further references to line number are given parenthetically in the text.

¹³ For an accessible introduction to the historical context of Chrétien's *Perceval*, see Micheline de Combarieu, *Perceval ou le conte du grail: Chrétien de Troyes* (Rosny: Bréal, 2003).

only proper way of travelling for a knight was on horseback, and on a good horse at that.¹⁴

Thus, a horse, its appearance and its trappings, signal the status of its rider in Chrétien's romances. Begonia Aguiriano argues that

Dans ce récit l'accès du héros à un niveau différent est marqué par le changement de monture et d'armes. A la cour arthurienne, de façon tout à fait surprenante et se laissant guider par son propre élan, il a réussi à vaincre le Chevalier Vermeil qui avait contredit le droit du roi Arthur sur sa terre. Sa victoire lui procure les armes et le destrier du vaincu, et il devient donc le "Chevalier Vermeil." Il accède à une nouvelle façon d'être qui n'est pas encore parfaite comme on verra à son passage par le Château du Graal. On peut dire que les armes et le cheval lui donnent "l'apparence" d'un chevalier ; à partir de maintenant, il lui faudra atteindre l'essence de la chevalerie.

[In this narrative, a hero's achievement of a different level is marked by the change of mount and arms. At Arthur's court, surprisingly, guided by his impulsion, he (Perceval) succeeds in defeating the Red Knight, who opposes King Arthur's right to the land. His victory brings him the arms and the destrier of the defeated knight, and he thus becomes the Red Knight himself. He gains access to a new way of being, which is still imperfect, as one shall see through the events at the Grail Castle. One can say that the arms and the horse give him the 'appearance' of a knight. From now on, he will need to achieve the core of chivalry.]¹⁵

¹⁴ Lancelot's humiliation when having to use a cart instead of a horse is also rendered in the prose *Lancelot*, which post-dates Chrétien's romance. For a discussion on the way in which Chrétien systematically stresses Lancelot's humiliation by insisting that riding in a cart is dishonourable for a knight and a comparison to the prose *Lancelot*, see Michel Zink, *L'humiliation, le Moyen Âge et nous* [Humiliation, the Middle Ages and us] (Paris: Albin Michel, 2017), 199-204.

¹⁵ Begonia Aguiriano, "Le cheval et le départ en aventure dans Les Romans de Chrétien de Troyes," in *Le Cheval dans le monde médiéval* [The horse in the medieval world] (Aix-en-Provence: Presses universitaires de Provence, 1992), 11-27, 21. Translations from French here and elsewhere, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

Remarkably, the horse could also signal the rider's moral and spiritual status. In this respect, the text of Chrétien's *Perceval* and its illuminations eloquently exemplify the importance of the horse in determining the rider's social status and adherence to the chivalric elite. While having a knightly horse and donning on a dead knight's armour does not turn an unpolished youth into a courtly knight, they do seem to influence the rider's behaviour and perception of himself, to say nothing of the way others perceive the armoured rider.

Manuscript Background and Summary of Chrétien's *Perceval*

As compared to the later prose Arthurian romances, especially the so-called *Lancelot-Grail* romances, Chrétien's works survive in relatively few copies. In all, there are forty-five manuscripts and fragments of Chrétien's romances.¹⁶ *Perceval*, however, has eighteen extant copies, which is more than the other four romances composed by Chrétien have (*Érec et Énide*, *Cligès*, *Yvain ou le chevalier au lion*, *Lancelot ou le chevalier de la charette*).¹⁷ In general, few texts of Chrétien's romances are not illustrated with miniatures.¹⁸ One manuscript of *Perceval*, however,

¹⁶ A thorough edition and study of all the surviving manuscripts of Chrétien's romances is *Les Manuscrits De Chrétien De Troyes/The Manuscripts of Chrétien De Troyes*, ed. Lori Walters (Author), Keith Busby, Terry NIXON, Allison Stones (Rodopi: Brill, 1993).

¹⁷ In all, the textual variations in different manuscripts are insignificant for the purpose of the present study, as these variations usually concern the spelling and, in some cases, details of description and dialogue. There is also an early printed copy of *Perceval*, dated 1530: *Tresplaisante et recreative hystoire du trespreux et vaillant chevallier Perceval le Galloys, jadis chevallier de la Table ronde. Lequel acheva les adventures du Saint Graal. Avec aulchuns faitz belliqueux du noble chevalier Gauvain et aultres chevalliers estans au temps du noble roy Artus, non au paravant imprime*. Library access code: Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Arsenal, RESERVE 4-BL-4249. Available at

<<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k8533378.r=chr%C3%A9tien+de+troyes.lang-EN>> (accessed 03 December 2018). This is a luxurious printed edition, with historiated capitals and full-page illustrations.

¹⁸ Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits, Français 1429, dated thirteenth century, has the text of *Perceval* decorated with penwork initials. The text could have been introduced with a miniature on the first page, which is now damaged (only a small part of the first page survives). The black-and-white facsimile is available at <<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b9007482q/f3.item#>> (accessed 03 December 2018).

presents an exception: Bibliothèque de la Faculté de Médecine, Montpellier, H249 not only bears a relatively high number of miniatures, but many of the miniatures engage with the text and present a visual commentary on its meaning.¹⁹ Thus, on fol. 15r, Perceval is presented on a white destrier (the significance of this detail is explained below). Another spectacular manuscript is the fourteenth-century Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits, Français 12577, whose initial folio presents the storyline of Perceval meeting knights for his battle against the Red Knight.²⁰

Chrétien's *Perceval* is an unfinished romance, to which subsequent authors appended continuations in order to take the adventures of its two principal characters, Perceval and Gawain, a step further. The focus of the present chapter is on the early part of the text, before the attention is directed away from Perceval to Gawain; therefore, only this part of the text is summarized here.

Perceval is raised in a forest, away from courtly life, by his mother, whose husband has been killed and whose sons, except from Perceval, perished in knightly pursuits. An ignorant youth, Perceval does not even know his own name, let alone the rudiments of chivalry. One day, while hunting on horseback with his courser, he meets Arthur's knights, who are pursuing five knights running away with three maidens. The knights want to know if the young rustic man has seen the knight they are looking for, but young Perceval has his own concerns. Initially, he

¹⁹ Available online at:

<http://www.biu-montpellier.fr/florabium/jsp/nodoc.jsp?NODOC=2015_DOC_MONT_MBUM_42> (accessed 08 November 2018). The manuscript is dated between the thirteenth and the fourteenth century. The surviving manuscripts of Chrétien's *Perceval* postdate the composition of the romance. In the case of the Montpellier manuscript, produced after Chrétien's death, it is impossible to conclude on the author's or the early audience's reactions to the text based on this manuscript. Another illuminated manuscript is Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits, Français 1453, where the first of the miniatures, fol. 15r, shows Perceval in King Arthur's hall, where he arrives on his courser, carrying three javelins. This is contrary to the text, as Chrétien specifies that Perceval's mother made him leave two of the javelins when he departed. Available at <<https://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc45084v>>. (Accessed 03 December 2018).

²⁰ Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits, Français 12577, fol. 1r. Available at <<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10549434x/f5.item>>. (Accessed 03 December 2018).

has taken the knights to be demons, due to the noise they were making, and then he believes they are angels, as they are the most beautiful creatures he has ever seen. When he learns they are knights, he wants to know what every single item of their equipment is called and what it serves for. At last, he takes them to his peasants, who may have seen where the knights with the maidens have passed, but not before he ascertains that, to become like one these shiny beings, he needs to come to the court of King Arthur, who makes knights.

He returns home, terrifies his mother by announcing his decision to become a knight, and learns about his past. He listens to his family history less attentively than he listened to the explanations about knightly accoutrements, and he has even less patience with his mother's final pieces of advice on the proper knightly conduct. What he remembers he fatally misapplies, taking a tent for a church and robbing a lady in the tent of her ring and a kiss. When he departs, Perceval is the epitome of a rustic, a Welshman fitted out in peasant's clothes and riding in a manifestly unknighly manner.

On his way to Arthur's court, he chances upon the unlucky lady, mentioned above, at whose expense he feasts, provoking the justified suspicions and anger of her own knight. The latter decides to take revenge on his lady, while looking for the opportune youth. One of the items that signal the deprivations to be suffered by the lady is the neglect of her horse: it is to be deprived of basic care, and, if the horse dies, the lady is to follow her knight on foot.

When Perceval arrives at Arthur's court, he commits another *faux pas*: he enters the hall on horseback and nearly rides over Arthur, who is deeply upset by the fact that a certain Red Knight has offended the queen and no knight of the court dares to avenge the perpetrator. Accidentally, Perceval has met the Red Knight on the way to Camelot and decided he wants the Red Knight's armour. Kay, King Arthur's most uncourtly knight, mocks Perceval by saying the young man should take the armour himself. This joke provokes Arthur's wrath, but it is too late, as Perceval has already departed to seek the Red Knight and his armour.

When they confront, the Red Knight hits Perceval with the wooden shaft of his spear across the shoulders, stressing that the young man is not his match. Perceval, angered to the utmost, shoots one of his Welsh javelins and penetrates the Red Knight's brain. Subsequently, he has

considerable difficulty in extracting the dead man from the armour and would have never succeeded it if not for the help of Yvonet, a young and courtly page from Arthur's court. Perceval subsequently puts on the armour but refuses to wear the silken tunic of the dead knight, preferring his own coarse garments – a decision that signals, symbolically, the fact that his transformation into knight is only superficial and that, at the core, he remains an uninstructed young man. However, he also exchanges his own courser for the knight's warhorse, granting the courser to Yvonet. This gesture seals his identity as that of a knight-in-making and sets him on his course of becoming a knight. During his later adventures, he learns the rudiments of knightly combat and behaviour, saves a besieged damsel, and, fatally, fails to ask the question about the Grail at the Castle of the Fisher King.

When Perceval joins King Arthur's court as a knight who has learned proper manner and committed deeds of chivalric prowess, he is suddenly reminded of his failure at the Fisher King's Castle. An Ugly Damsel, riding a mule, appears at the feast, berates Perceval for his silence at the Castle and challenges Arthur's knights to undertake numerous adventures. Following this challenge, Perceval and other knights, including Gawain, depart. Perceval, seeking to amend his former shortcomings, almost turns into a madman, forgetting about the passage of time, but returns to his senses when he meets a group of penitents and learns it is the Lenten season. Perceval comes to a hermitage, makes a full confession and, at this point, Chrétien leaves Perceval to take up the adventures of Gawain. As the romance is unfinished, later continuators took up the adventures of Perceval and Gawain, but it is impossible to know what transformation Perceval and his horse would have undergone if Chrétien had finished the story.

Horse types and their functions in medieval Europe

A variety of horses, other equids and beasts of burden inhabited the medieval landscape, performing various functions, from driving a cart or agricultural vehicles, to carrying baggage to bearing knights in tournaments, knights and ladies while travelling, hunting, or during pageants. All these activities required different types of horses, which, presumably, could be easily identified by medieval people as belonging to a certain type, within the context. Joan Thirsk, in the 'Foreword' to

Ann Hyland's influential monograph *The Horse in the Middle Ages*, explains that "horses for society's wealthy were usually classified as destrier, great horse, courser and palfrey, although the latter was also found among those people in the middle income bracket. Rouncies, sumpters, hackneys, pads and hobbies served in the middle income sector. Carthorses, not the modern stamp were used by all social classes."²¹ While medieval authors are frequently unspecific in their references to horses and riding, the instances when they do mention the type of horse, equid or beast of burden are likely to be significant.

Chrétien de Troyes mentions specific animals working in harness, for instance, to evoke particular associations or create a picture of rural or urban landscape for his audience. Thus, on the morning when Perceval meets Arthur's knights for the first time in his life, he is out to check on his mother's workers labouring the field. Chrétien's reference to the animals working in the field and the context in which the work takes place is specific; there are twelve oxen and six ploughs, that is, a team of two oxen per plough, cultivating the land: "Et pansa que veoir iroit hercheors que sa mere avoit, qui ses aveinnes li herchoient; bués .xii. et sis hierches avoient" (ll. 81-84). At the time, oxen, which are slower than horses but also cheaper to acquire and maintain, were ubiquitous in agricultural works. With time, horses increasingly came to replace oxen when speed was essential, though oxen were still employed on smaller or poorer farms. In certain cases, both horses and oxen would be used on the same farm. The fact that the farmers of Perceval's mother are using oxen rather than horses would signify, to Chrétien's later audience, that her farm was not at the forefront of agricultural progress, though the number of ploughs (six) shows that it was not very small, either.²²

²¹ Joan Thirsk, "Foreword." In *The Horse in the Middle Ages*, Ann Hyland (Stroud: Sutton, 1999), i.

²² For the shift from oxen to horses in the English countryside, see John Langdon, *Horses, Oxen and Technological Innovation: The Use of Draught Animals in English Farming from 1066-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). For France, see Floriana Bardoneschi, *Le cheval de trait et son harnachement (entre Meuse et Loire, XII^e-XVI^e siècle). Symboliser, habiter et cultiver les campagnes*. [The workhorse and its harness (between Meuse and Loire, 12th-16th century). Symbolising, inhabiting and working the countryside] Unpublished doctoral thesis. 2 vol. (Paris: Université Paris Diderot, 2017). It should be noted that horses and oxen could be used in the same household for the same tasks. Oxen were slower than horses, but cheaper to maintain.

On another occasion, on his way to Arthur's court, Perceval meets a coal burner, who uses a donkey to transport his goods: "et li vaslez tant chevalcha qu'il vit un charbonier venant, devant lui .i. asne menant" (ll. 832-835). Donkeys and mules were common beasts of burden, and much lower down the social scale than most horses. While mules could be used as mounts for ecclesiastics of high status and ladies in certain regions of Europe,²³ donkeys were considered to be very lowly animals. However, they also came to signify humility, as Christ entered Jerusalem on a donkey rather than a horse. In a thirteenth-century French romance, *La Queste del Saint Graal*, Hector has a dream, where he sees Lancelot riding a donkey. He is aggrieved at first, but a hermit explains that this is a good omen, as it signifies that Lancelot is going to deplore his former pride and will be saved through humility. Indeed, Lancelot is likened to Christ, who likewise entered Jerusalem on a donkey, not on a warhorse or palfrey: "[Nostre Sires] ne n'i volt pas venir sur destrier ne sur palefroi, ainzi vint sur la plus rude beste et la plus vilaine, ce est sur l'asne"²⁴ [(Our Lord) would not come upon a war-horse or even a palfrey, but preferred to come upon an ass, the poorest and meanest beast, in order that poor and rich alike might take it as an example].²⁵ In Chrétien's *Perceval*, however, the figure of the coal burner is introduced to add realism to the scene and highlight the contrast between Perceval, who, despite his homespun clothes, is a noble person, riding a courser, and a person of low social status, who has to content himself with a donkey. Asking the way to Carduel, Perceval stresses the man's status as a peasant by referring to the donkey to ensure the man understands he is being addressed: "Vilains, fet il, ansaigne moi, qui l'asne mainnes devant toi, la plus droite voie a Carduel" (ll. 835-837).

²³ In medieval Catalonia, it was also acceptable for noblemen to ride mules on certain occasions, probably given the fact that the terrain was often easier to negotiate riding a mule than a horse. Both horses and mules regularly appear in Catalan wills of the early medieval period; for details, see Pierre Bonnassie, *La Catalogne du milieu du Xe à la fin du XI^e siècle. Croissance et mutations d'une société* [Catalonia from the mid-10th century to the end of the 11th century. The growth and changes of a society] (Toulouse: Association des publications de l'Université Toulouse - Le Mirail, 1976), vol. 2, 927-930.

²⁴ *La Queste del Saint Graal*, ed. Albert Pauphilet, 3rd edn. (Paris: Champion, 1923), 158, ll. 25-26.

²⁵ *The Quest for the Holy Grail*, trans. W. W. Comfort (Cambridge, Ontario: In parentheses Publications, 2000), 144-145.

Slightly higher up the social scale, horses like rounceys and hackneys were used for riding, and servants often appear in French romances riding a rouncey. These horses were inferior in quality but enduring enough to enable a servant to complete the same demanding journey a knight would undertake. Knights, on the other hand, never rode these horses, unless compelled by necessity. In the *Queste del Saint Graal*, Perceval, whose horse is killed, asks a servant for his rouncey (“roncin”) to chase a knight who has stolen a horse. However, the rouncey proves inferior in speed and manoeuvrability, no match for a knight’s destrier.²⁶

Palfreys were horses of comfortable gait. They could be reserved for ladies and for ecclesiastics, but noblemen also would ride palfreys as the occasion demanded. In the prose *Lancelot*, Lancelot’s father, an aged man, rides a palfrey when he escapes from a besieged castle with his wife and infant Lancelot. When riding for pleasure, over great distance, and in those cases when speed was not essential, knights could use palfreys.

Courserers were distinguished by their speed, and they could be used by knights for hunting, travelling and pleasure riding. In romances, however, the implication is that an errant knight should be riding a destrier. When a knight is riding a courser, he seems, in some sense, to be less than a knight: either he is engaged in activities other than knightly pursuits, such as warfare and tournaments, with a hint that he may have fallen from the status of an ‘adventurous knight’, or he has not attained the status of a knight yet. In the prose *Lancelot*, young Lancelot arrives at King Arthur’s court on a courser, accompanied by the Lady of the Lake, who is riding a palfrey:

La dame si [fu] atornee moult richement Car ele fu uestue
dun blanc samit cote & mantel a vne pene dermine & sist
sour vn petit palefroï soef amblant qui estoit si biaux & si
bien taillies com len le poroit miex deuiser Moult fu li
palefrois riches & biax si fu li frains de fin argent blanc
esmere & li po[i]trax autresi & li estrier & la sele estoient
diuoir e entaillie moult soutilment a ymages menus de dames
& de cheualiers Et la sambue estoit toute blanche &
trainans dusques vers terre & del samit meisme don’t la

²⁶ *La Queste*, 175, l. 6.

dame estoit vestue Ainsinc appareillie de cors & de palefroï
est la dame deuant le roi venue Et dales li fu li valles & fu
vestus dun blanket breton qui moult fu bons si fu beaux a
merueilles & bien taillies *Et sist desus un chaceor fort Et isnel qui
tost le porte.*²⁷

[She was richly turned out, for she was dressed in a tunic and cloak of white samite, trimmed with ermine, and she rode a little white palfrey, as beautiful and well formed as anyone could describe. It was very fine, and its bridle was of pure silver, as were the breast-strap and the stirrups, while the saddle was of ivory, most skilfully carved with small figures of knights and ladies. The saddle-housing was of the same white samite as the lady's clothing, and reached down to the ground. Thus attired and mounted, the lady came before the king. Beside her was the youth, dressed in an excellent white woollen cloth. He was wonderfully handsome and well formed, and mounted on a strong and swift hunter, which carried him rapidly along.]²⁸

In yet another Arthurian romance, the Middle English *Sir Launval*, which is related to the French lay *Lanval*, attributed to Marie de France, Lanval, who has left Arthur's court and spent all his money due to his generosity, lives in poverty in a town, being universally despised. One day, he wants to take a ride for pleasure, but he is so poor that he has to borrow a saddle and a bridle from the mayor's daughter. When riding in a park, Lanval's courser slips in the mud, and the unfortunate knight makes a fall to the derision of the onlookers. In this case, the fact he is mounted on a courser rather than a warhorse, albeit this is appropriate in the context of pleasure riding, stresses Lanval's fall from the status of a knight, as a knight ought to ride warhorses and to participate in tournaments, rather than take airs in the park. Lanval's actual fall emphasizes the knight's predicament and may suggest that Lanval's courser has been in some way neglected, e.g., may have lost one or more of his shoes, which lead to its slipping in the dirt.

²⁷ *Le Livre de Lancelot del Lac*, ed. H. Oskar Sommer, vol. III, p. I (Washington: The Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1910), 121-122.

²⁸ *Lancelot of the Lake*, trans. Corin Corley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 64.

A warhorse or destrier is different from the other elite horses, that is, the palfrey and the courser, in its appearance, physical and psychological qualities, and training. While a palfrey must have gentle gaits and a courser must be swift, a destrier should be, first and foremost, a brave horse. There is almost no information in textual sources about the kind of training warhorses received in Chrétien's time, that is, in the second half of the twelfth century. However, based on the knowledge of cavalry tactics in the medieval period and some experimental work, it has been concluded that medieval warhorses were highly trained, tractable animals, who could work in collection, including collected canter, and changed the lead at canter.²⁹ These are not extraordinary skills, but they are beyond the grasp of a novice rider. Today, these skills would be taught to a young horse towards the end of its training, usually at the end of the third or at the beginning of its fourth year.³⁰ Still, it has been suggested that the age at which a warhorse would begin its work in the Middle Ages would coincide with the age at which a horse (a stallion) reaches full physical maturity, that is, seven; today, many specialists recommend to wait until the age of six for a horse to do "serious" work.³¹ In a study of the warhorse in the early medieval period, Jürg Gassmann argues that "training for a cavalry horse cannot sensibly begin until the horse is four years old, and will take 2-3 years to complete."³² Thus, growing and training a warhorse required a considerable investment of time and means: providing the nutrition to allow the horse to develop well, as well as ensuring skilled training, so that the horse could be tractable and obey the rider. Fitting out a warhorse, too, would necessitate a considerable outlay of money, even in the period when no armour was used for a horse.

When Perceval arrives at Arthur's court and demands to be knighted, the type of horse is remarked by the King, who courteously greets Perceval and invites him to descend from his horse and entrust the courser to a servant: "Amis, fet li rois, descendez et vostre chaceor

²⁹ See Jürg Gassmann, "Combat Training for Horse and Rider in the Early Middle Ages," *Acta Periodica Duellatorum*, 6.1 (2018): 63-98. For the warhorse in the thirteenth century, the experimental work of Adeline Dumont is most useful: see Dumont, "Du cheval au destrier," 235-248.

³⁰ Reference to Ann Hyland, *Foal to Five Years* (London: Ward Lock, 1992), 95.

³¹ Isabella Edwards, "When Are Horses Mature?" *Equine Wellness* (7 April 2014). <https://equinewellnessmagazine.com/horses-mature/> (accessed 26 November 2018).

³² Gassmann, 72.

randez cel vaslet” (ll. 977-979). Perceval, however, refuses to do so, because the knights he saw in the forest were on horseback. How does Arthur know that Perceval’s horse is a courser, not a hackney, a palfrey or even a destrier? Does the King’s correct recognition signify that a medieval observer familiar with horses would be able to place the horse into the correct category instantly? Were these categories fixed one and for all, or could they be changed by training and equipment? It is impossible to give a definite answer in the absence of detailed materials on horse training in the period, as the earliest books of marshalcy date to the thirteenth century and contain more material on horse care and treatment than on training. However, the characteristics that distinguish horse types according to use are well known, so that apparently an experienced horse observer, such as King Arthur ought to be, should be able to distinguish between horse types at a glance. The equipment of the horse is important here, but also the horse’s conformation and movement can be assessed to determine its type.

Thus, a destrier should be heavier, to be able to bear a knight with his arms and armour and, later, when horse armour came into use, also its proper armour. Heavy horse armour was designed primarily for tournaments and came into general use later, so that the destriers Chrétien’s Perceval has observed were unarmed, and they would have needed to bear only the weight of their armed riders. A twelfth-century destrier would then have been a relatively big horse, heavier than a courser, and of considerable endurance. A courser is a horse of light build, whose main characteristic is speed rather than strength. The difference between a courser and a destrier would then roughly be the same as between a modern show-jumper and a race horse: however, a race horse can be retrained into a show-jumper, building the necessary muscles in the process.

This brief overview of the types and functions of horses and other equines allows us to appreciate the fact that, in referring to horses and equines by specific categories, Chrétien provides his audience with indications about the rider’s social status, aspirations and the way in which others would see the rider. In this context, Perceval’s change from a courser to a warhorse becomes meaningful as a step up the social ladder, yet the audience is reminded that, from the very beginning, Perceval has a rightful place in the chivalric community.

Horses as mirrors of the riders' social status

Perceval's progress from a courser to a destrier

At the beginning of the romance, we are introduced to Perceval, a careless, naïve youth, who rose up one morning, and saddled his courser, without a care on his mind: “se leva, et ne li fu painne aue il sa sele ne meist sor son chacheor” (ll. 76-78). It is remarkable that the type of horse is signaled right away: rather than mentioning a generic ‘cheval’, Chrétien specifically refers to a “chacheor” or “chaceor,”³³ and, until Perceval gives away his horse, the type of the horse is mentioned time and again, which is rare in medieval romance.³⁴ Clearly, the fact that the horse is a courser is significant.

Perceval's initial purpose was to check on his mother's peasant working in the field, but, rejoicing in the freshness of the morning, he took off his horse's bridle to let it graze freely, while he himself threw javelins in an apparently haphazard fashion: “Por la dolçor del tans serain osta au chaceor son frain, si le leissa aler peissant par l'erbe fresche verdeant” (ll. 91-94). In romance, errant knights often let their horses graze, but this usually happens at the end of a long riding day, or when they come to a place where no special food is available for the horse, such as a hermitage.³⁵

Taking the bridle off the horse has both practical and symbolic meaning. Obviously, a horse must be released of the bridle and bit, which would interfere with its grazing. On the other hand, the bridle symbolizes restraint and control. In romance and folklore, a rider would release the reins and let the horse take him wherever it wishes to go, at moments of indecision, or simply by way of announcing the rider's obedience to fate or nature. Perceval, apparently, has complete trust in his steed and is not concerned that the horse might wander away. To prevent a horse wandering away, it can be hobbled, an action

³³ The word “chacheor” can be translated as “courser” or, literally, as a “hunting horse.” In the Middle Ages, a courser was a swift horse, lower down the hierarchy of elite horses than the knight's warhorse, a *destrier*.

³⁴ See, for instance, l. 305, when Perceval takes Arthur's knights to the peasants laboring the field: “Li vaslez prant son chaceor.”

³⁵ The implications of horses grazing and eating special food, including oats and hay, are discussed in chapter 2, ‘Feeding the Horse of an Errant Knight’.

occasionally specified in romance, but here, Chrétien stresses that Perceval allowed his horse to go wherever it would, “si le leissa aler peissant” (l. 93). Just as he is not concerned with controlling the movements of his horse, Perceval himself abandons self-control and engages in playing, throwing his javelins at will and for no apparent purpose. In this scene, not only the horse is moving in a haphazard fashion, but also its young rider. Both have abandoned control and let nature dominate them, the horse grazing in abundant, fresh grass and the rider rejoicing in the forest.

The arrival of Arthur’s knights signifies a turning point in Perceval’s life. In contrast to the free play of the horse and the young man, the knights and their horses epitomize control, self-restraint, culture, or ‘nurture’ (education) as opposed to nature. The knights arrive noisily, their armour clanking and glistening in the sun. The knights’ horses are not mentioned, as Perceval’s questions relate only to the knights’ arms and armour. However, the contrast between his own courser and the knights’ warhorses is implicit, and Perceval later abandons his courser to ride upon the Red Knight’s horse.

While riding a courser does not necessarily signify his rustic upbringing, nor the fact he is a Welsh man, Perceval’s clothes, equipment and riding style clearly do: “congié prant, et la mere plore, et sa sele li fu ja mise. A la meniere et a la guise de Galois fu aparelliez” (ll, 598-601). First, there are the garments of simple materials made by his mother, in which he is arrayed, his large hobnailed boots and the javelin he carries. Furthermore, while knights use spurs to control their horses, Perceval carries a whip to send his courser on its way: “Une reorte en sa main destre porta por son cheval ferir” (ll. 610-61.13). While a knight would be carrying a lance or a sword in the right hand, Perceval, who is not yet a knight, carries a whip. His javelin could be held in the left hand, in which a knight would be carrying a shield and holding the reins.

Both Arthur’s knights earlier in the episode and Perceval depart in a speedy manner. However, the movements of their horses and the actions of the riders are described differently, and this is significant. The knights are simply said to be eager to catch up with those five knights they are pursuing, so they depart “at fast galop” (“les granz galoz,” l. 360). Presumably, they use spurs to initiate the horses’ movement, and, as this is a normal action among knights, Chrétien

does not specify it. Perceval, in turn, uses his whip, lashing the horse's rump with it, making the horse take of 'at great speed': "Et cil ceingle de la reorte son chaceor parmi la crope, et cil s'an va, qui pas ne çope, einz l'an porte grant aleüre parmi la grant forest obscure" (ll. 625-628). Subsequently, Perceval rides all day without stopping, while it was light: "et chevalcha des le matin tant que li jorz clers aparut" (ll. 629-630). Here, while it is likely that the horse departs at a gallop, the speed is evoked, as this is the more important characteristic. Thus, while the horse's natural qualities seem to be excellent – it is speedy and enduring, able to ride all day, just as proper knights' horses – in difference to the destriers of Arthur's knights, it is nevertheless inferior, and its training is deficient as well. While the knights' horses obey the riders immediately, without apparent effort from the riders, Perceval's courser needs a strong blow to make it take off.

Moreover, Perceval does not appear to be a proficient rider, or at least his equipment is of such quality as to make easy, flowing transitions and turns unforthcoming. When Perceval finally arrives at Arthur's court, he enters the feasting hall on horseback, refusing to dismount. Arthur is so immersed in his sad thoughts about the Red Knight who had offended the Queen that he fails to notice the impertinent young man, even when Perceval addresses the King directly. Disappointed, Perceval decides that this mute king would never make him a knight and intends to leave. He is so clumsy that, when he was turning his horse to leave, he knocks the King's cap off: "Tantost del retorner s'atorne, le chief de son chaceor torne, mes si pres del roi l'ot mené a guise d'ome mal sené, aue devant lui, sanz nule fable, li abati desor la table del chief .i. chapel de bonet" (ll. 929-935). Perceval's clumsiness is evoked specifically. To begin with, it was imprudent of the young man to ride up so close to the King, suggesting Perceval either did not care or was unable to stop and hold his horse in a precisely chosen spot. He made his *faux pas* worse when he turned the horse's head, possibly because his bridle was not good enough, his courser was a little resistant, or Perceval was no good at precision exercises. A courser is, of course, a less costly and less prestigious horse than a destrier; it may also be less highly trained, more excitable and less manoeuvrable, though this is hard to ascertain in the absence of detailed information on horse training in this period. At the same time, there is nothing inherently dishonourable in Perceval's riding a courser,

because it is a common mount for young men who have not yet been knighted: as we have seen, Lancelot arrives at Arthur's court on a courser, too.

When King Arthur greets Perceval and asks him to alight from his courser, the King implicitly acknowledges the youth's rightful place among the men who rightfully aspire to be knights but who have not yet attained this status. Subsequent events show that Perceval, indeed, is physically ready to become a knight, as he easily overcomes the Red Knight, yet he is psychologically and culturally immature and not prepared to bear the responsibilities and obligations of knighthood.

Perceval gains a new horse and a set of armour when he defeats the Red Knight in a manifestly unknightly manner, dashing the Red Knight's brains out with a javelin. With the help of Yvonet, Perceval undresses the dead knight and puts on the Red Knight's armour, refusing his fine clothes, as he prefers his own coarse garments and boots, cursing Yvonet for his "foolish" suggestion: "Deable, est ce or gas, que je changerai mes bons dras que ma mere me fist l'autr'ier por les dras a cest chevalier! Ma grosse chemise de chanvre por la soe, qui mout est tanve, voldriez vos que je lessasse? Ma cotele, ou aigue ne passe, por celui qui n'an tanroit gote? Maudite soit la gole tote qui changera n'avant n'après ses bons dras por autrui malvés!" (ll. 1160-1170). In fact, Chrétien invites his audience to laugh at Perceval's obstinacy in preferring his coarse clothes over the fine garments of the Red Knight, noting that it is useless to teach a fool ("Grief chose est mout de fol aprendre," l. 1171) – and, at that point, Perceval remains a *naïfs* – a naïve, foolish person.

Indeed, while Perceval receives a new horse and new means of controlling it, leaving his whip behind, he does not entirely abandon his rustic habits, and he must learn to use the new equipment attained from the Red Knight. Here, again, Yvonet helps the youth by putting his foot in the stirrup: "Puis li met le pié an l'estrier, sel fet monter sor le destrier. Einz mes estrié veü n'avoit ne d'esperon rien ne savoit, fors de cinglant ou de roorte" (ll. 1181-1185). Chrétien stresses that Perceval is unfamiliar with both the spurs and the stirrups. Presumably, the saddle he used on the courser did not have stirrups, and, as already mentioned, Perceval only used a whip for his horse. Again, Chrétien designates the horse by a specific term, "destrier," rather than by the generic "cheval,"

because the change from a courser to a destrier constitutes an important step in Perceval's career.

As Perceval is about to depart, he leaves his courser to Yvonet by way of thanking him for his assistance and also because in his new status as a knight he has no need for a courser any longer: "Amis, prenez mon chaceor, si l'an menez, qu'il est mout bons, et jel vos doing por che que je n'an ai mais soing" (ll. 1189-1192). The gift is entirely appropriate, because Yvonet is a servant, and Perceval's courser is a good representative of its class. Perceval praises the quality of his horse, and the audience has no reason to doubt his words, as it has been mentioned earlier that the courser was capable of riding at great speed.

It is remarkable that, in one manuscript of Chrétien's romance, Bibliothèque de la Faculté de Médecine, Montpellier, H249, the change from a courser to a destrier is visually highlighted, as the horses are represented as dark grey and silver grey. Perceval is initially shown riding a dark grey horse; the young man holds three javelins in his right hand and is dressed in simple, brown clothes (Fig. 1).

The illumination is placed on the first folio, before the prologue to the romance, apparently illustrating Perceval's initial foray into the forest on a spring morning when he met Arthur's knights. The text of the romance is written in two columns, and the square miniature is the same width as the column it introduces, suggesting that the manuscript patron was ready to go to certain expense for his manuscript, which also includes a considerable number of painted and penwork initials and miniatures throughout the text (there is, for instance, a painted "Q," eight lines high, just below the miniature). The care that went into preparing the manuscript illuminations and decoration seems to indicate that the manuscript patron or producer was interested in having a high-quality product, so that illuminations could have been thought-through and planned to enhance or comment on the meaning of the text. It is remarkable that the representation of Perceval on a grey horse is consistent throughout the text: for example, on fol. 4v, Perceval is shown departing from his mother, also riding a grey horse (Fig. 2). The quality of the miniature makes it impossible to make judgements on Perceval's clothes and arms, if any, but he seems to be wearing brown boots, probably representing the large hobnailed boots Chrétien describes on at least two occasions: when Perceval prepares to

leave and when he puts on the Red Knight's armour but retains his own coarse clothes.



Fig. 1. Perceval sets out on a courser. From Bibliothèque de la Faculté de Médecine, Montpellier, H249, fol. 1r



Fig. 2. Perceval takes leave of his mother. From Bibliothèque de la Faculté de Médecine, Montpellier, H249, fol. 4v.

On becoming a “knight,” Perceval is shown on a white horse in at least one of the illuminated manuscripts of Chrétien’s romance: the illuminator of the Montpellier manuscript shows Perceval in red armour riding a white horse on fol. 15r (Fig. 3). Though the colour of the horse is not mentioned in the text at this point, the white horse could point to Perceval’s relative maturity or to his position as a “hero.” The “white” or, more precisely, the silver grey colour is symbolically important, as heroes are usually represented riding white horses: in the *Queste del Saint Graal*, Galahad is known as a “white knight,” and many, though not all illuminations, show him in white armour riding a white horse. White horses were also more prized than horses of other colours, including grey and dapple grey, as can be seen from lists of horse colour hierarchies.



Fig. 3. Perceval in red armour on a white horse.
From Bibliothèque de la Faculté de Médecine, Montpellier, H249, fol. 15r.

Moreover, as grey horses become lighter with age, the new destrier is a more mature and, presumably, better prepared, better trained and more experienced horse than Perceval’s dark grey courser. Symbolically, Perceval’s change from a dark grey to a silver-grey horse denotes his passage from naivety to relative spiritual maturity. If Perceval does not

become a mature person at once, by donning a knight's armour and mounting a destrier (and his courteous speech to Yvonet, as well as his recognition that he has no more need of his courser indicate he does become a little more mature), he is at least expected to change, and the silver grey horse will be his teacher, at least in that it requires spurs rather than a whip to control.



Fig. 4. Perceval converses with penitents.

From Bibliothèque de la Faculté de Médecine, Montpellier, H249, fol. 40v.

Perceval is shown riding a white horse on other miniatures as well. On fol. 40v, introducing his return to his senses after a period when he

forgot about God and the passage of time, he is represented seated on a white horse, holding a lance and a red shield, in conversation with three penitents (Fig. 4). On fol. 66r, he engages in battle on a knight seated on a bay horse, wearing red colors, as on the previous occasions. It is remarkable that, although Chrétien does not specify the colour of Perceval's courser and the Red Knight's destrier in the romance, the illuminator is relatively consistent in his representation of the hero and his horses, suggesting that the colour is significant, making Perceval easy to distinguish from other knights.

In yet another manuscript, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits, Français 12577, fol. 1r., the battle between Perceval and the Red Knight has Perceval on a grey horse, while the Red Knight is mounted on a white one (Fig. 5). This illustration is part of a complex tableau, illustrating Perceval's adventures from the beginning of the romance (Fig. 6). In other parts of the illustration, Perceval is shown riding either a grey or white horse, so here the representation of the courser as grey and of the destrier as white is not consistent.



Fig. 5. Perceval's battle against the Red Knight. Fragment of illustration from Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits,

Français 12577, fol. 1r.



Fig. 6. Perceval's adventures at the beginning of the romance.
Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits,
Français 12577, fol. 1r.

Perceval's progress up the social hierarchy and his passage from nature to culture, from rusticity to chivalry, and from youth to maturity is thus rendered more graphic by means of the horses he rides and the manner of his riding. The horse is part of the young man's identity, and, as his social and psychological identity changes, so do his horses.

Moreover, Perceval's journey takes place through landscape populated with horses and other equines and beasts of burden, so that the social and symbolic landscape, and the characters he meets are also defined and distinguished from Perceval through their mounts and beasts of labour. In this respect, the appearance and representation of two ladies and their mounts in the romance is meaningful.

Orgueilleux de la Lande punishes his lady by punishing her horse

In the course of Perceval's journey to Arthur's court, the youth sees a tent and, taking it for a church, enters it. He finds there a beautiful lady and, following the advice of his mother, which he grotesquely misinterprets, he eats the food and takes a ring from the lady before continuing the journey. The lady's knight, Orgueilleux de la Lande, does not believe his paramour's explanation and is enraged, suspecting the worse and blaming his lady. He decides to capture the importune young man, in the meantime punishing the lady: "Antree estes an male voie, antree estes an male painne" (ll. 818-819).

As he begins his speech dwelling with detail on each part of the punishment to which he is about to subject the lady, he begins, perhaps surprisingly, with the horse. First, the lady's horse will be fed inferior food, excluding oats: "ja ne mangera d'avainne vostre chevax" (ll. 820-821). Not having any oats means, for a horse about to take the lady on a prolonged, trying journey, subsisting only on hay. This is insufficient for a horse doing hard work, which is used to having oats. After a while, the horse will drop weight considerably and will have a very bony appearance.

The horse will also be deprived of basic veterinary care, bleeding, up to the point when the knight takes his vengeance: "ne n'iert seniez tant que je me serai vangiez" (ll. 821-822). Brigitte Prévot explains that 'La saignée [...] est un remède très utilisé par les hippiatres, à titre curatif, mais aussi préventif' [bleeding is a remedy used very often by veterinarians, both as curative and preventative measure].³⁶

³⁶ Brigitte Prévot, "Le cheval malade : l'hippiatrie au xiii^{ème} siècle," [The sick horse: hippiatric medicine in the 13th century] in *Le Cheval dans le monde médiéval* [The horse in the medieval world], 451-464 (Aix-en-Provence: Presses universitaires de Provence, 1992).

Another essential point of horse care is shoeing, which, for a horse working on hard or uneven surfaces, such as travelling on stony or muddy roads, was indispensable. An unshod horse could soon go lame if working on a hard surface for hours; it could also develop cracks in the hoofs, which is another cause of lameness. In the Middle Ages, working horses were shod. Re-shoeing horses at regular interval is also important. Today, the interval of four to six weeks between shoeing is recommended,³⁷ although six to eight weeks is equally acceptable.³⁸ However, depending on the workload and the structure and shape of the individual horse's hooves, a horse may need to be shod with relative frequency. A horse which has not been reshod at the proper time is more likely to lose a shoe, and, if it continues working with one or two shoes off, it is likely to go lame in the unshod foot. Besides, as its feet would then be on different levels, a horse without a shoe will lose the evenness of gaits, which would be particularly onerous for a palfrey, a horse prized for its even gates. Therefore, the next item in the Orgeuilleux de la Lande's long list is particularly important: in fact, he says that, if the lady's horse loses a shoe, it will not be reshod ("et la ou il desferrera, ja mes referrez ne sera" (ll. 823-824).

At this point, the audience will be able to imagine the physical and moral discomfort to be suffered by the hapless lady. It is likely that she would ride on a bony, stumbling horse – a formerly pampered, good-looking palfrey – which, in addition, is likely to suffer all kinds of health issues that bleeding was meant to cure or prevent. The ride would probably be not only uncomfortable, but also humiliating. In this context, the final words concerning the horse are cruel, but hardly surprising; the knight threatens that, if the horse dies, the lady is to follow the knight on foot: "S'il muert, vos me sivoiz a pié" (l. 825).

In comparison to the poor horse, the deprivations to be suffered by the lady come as an anti-climax. Of course, they are hard and

³⁷ Cited in John Clark, "Horseshoes," in *The Medieval Horse and Its Equipment c. 1150-c.1450*, ed. John Clark (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2004), 75-123, 83.

³⁸ The recommended period of six to eight weeks is current practice for hobby horses, i.e., horses who are not worked intensively (private communication with Latvian farriers). However, note an example reported by Evans of a Suffolk blacksmith, Clifford Race, who explained that the local country horses used to be re-shod once every three months (G. E. Evans, *The Horse in the Furrow* (London, Faber & Faber: 1960), 194). It is likely that medieval practice on the period for re-shoeing would be closer to the latter than to the former.

humiliating, but, given the treatment of the horse, it hardly comes as a surprise that the lady is not allowed to change her clothes: “ne ja mes ne seront changié li drap don vos estes vestue” (ll. 826-827). The knight concludes that the lady would follow him naked, on foot – as the horse is unlikely to survive mistreatment for long – until the knight meets Perceval and beheads him: “einz me sivrez a pié et nue tant que la teste an avrai prise” (ll. 828-829).

Remarkably, although the supposed crime of unfaithfulness has been committed by the lady, the principal sufferer appears to be the lady’s horse. It is the horse, not the lady, who will be malnourished and deprived of basic veterinary care. The lady, by comparison, will only be unable to change her dress, which could be a source of some physical discomfort, but mostly a source of humiliation. When Perceval, dressed as a knight and having acquired the rudiments of chivalry, meets the lady again, she is riding on a sorry nag, trying to hold together her dress, which is literally falling apart. Perceval defeats the Orgeullieux de la Lande and, having explained that the lady was guiltless, requires him to restore her to her former degree of comfort, before the two would travel to Arthur’s court to tell the king of Perceval’s victory. It is to be hoped that, like the lady, whose well-being is to be restored, the horse will be well fed and cared for, but the text does not specify it.

In the Middle Ages, horses could often appear as expendable animals, unless they merited from a special relation to their owner (in this case, the horse is usually given a name in the medieval text). The point that Chrétien makes here, however, is not about the well-being of the horse: the horse is only one of the factors that, like the clothes, indicate the status of the person. In this case, the deplorable condition of the horse reflects the lowering in status of the owner, just as a change to a higher-status horse signals Perceval’s step up the social ladder.

Signalling abnormality by describing the Ugly Damsel’s mule

The poor lady who fell victim of Perceval’s naivety and her knight’s jealousy, is not the only female character in the romance whose status is reflected by the equine she rides. Another such person is the notorious Ugly Damsel, who enters King Arthur’s court riding a mule. Mules were used by ladies, and, in romance, female messengers and servants

often appear on the back of a mule. In *Sir Launfal*, for instance, when the maids of Triamour come to Arthur's court, the first ten maids are described as riding, without the description of their mounts, and the next ten have Spanish mules ("They ryd upon joly moyles of Spayne"³⁹). The maids are described as exceedingly beautiful and well-dressed, so, presumably, their mules are well turned-out equines, worthy of carrying their comely and honourable riders. In another Arthurian romance, *The Awntyrs off Arthure*, Guinevere appears riding a white mule ("On a mule as the mylke"⁴⁰).

In *Perceval*, the situation is different. The damsel who comes to the court is riding a mule of yellow colour, which is not the most distinguished or fashionable hue. Centuries later, Alexander Dumas famously depicts his d'Artagnan on a yellow gelding, and the animal's colour makes the rider an object of ridicule among the onlookers. In medieval hierarchies of horse colours, the most valued colours are silver grey or, alternatively, dark bay with a white mark, dappled grey, bay, etc., down to coal black. The damsel is holding a whip, which is quite appropriate for someone riding side-saddle, though she could just as well be riding astride, as the detail is not specified in the text, and the illuminator of Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits, Français 12577, depicts the Ugly Damsel riding astride on fol. 27r (Fig. 7). However, ladies who were proficient riders and needed to travel at speed could also sit astride and use spurs, just like men. Sitting side-saddle was common when ladies and damsels were riding with decorum, e.g., in procession. The Ugly Damsel's entry to King Arthur's hall, thus, suggests some decorum, but the yellow colour of the mule and especially the Ugly Damsel's own appearance underlie this pretension.

Moreover, when the Ugly Damsel addresses Perceval, her reproaches are so vociferous that, in combination with her appearance, the overall impression is either grotesque or uncanny – or both. This is in sharp contrast with other scenes where female messengers riding horses or mules appear in romances, such as the somewhat later *Queste del saint graal* and the Middle English *Sir Launfal*, which is based on Mari

³⁹ "Sir Launfal," in *Middle English Romances*, ed. Stephen H. A. Shepherd (New York, London: Norton & Company, 1995), 214, l. 886.

⁴⁰ "The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne," in *Middle English Romance*, 220, l. 25.

De France's *Lanval*. Probably Chrétien's intention was to alert the audience to the unusual nature of the occasion by presenting a remarkably unsavoury damsel on a mule of unfashionable colour riding straight into Arthur's hall.



Fig. 7. The Ugly Damsel arrives at Arthur's court.
Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits,
Français 12577, fol. 27r.

Conclusion

The first assessment of a rider is done through his or her mount, which is natural, just as today people are often assessed by the brand and model of a car they drive. A change of one horse for a different one thus becomes meaningful: it can signal the change of a person's status, occupation and moral condition as well as the transition from adolescence to relative maturity, as is the case with Chrétien's Perceval. Perceval's change from an uncultured, rough youth is related to a

change of mount, from his own courser which obeys only a whip to the Red Knight's destrier, for which Perceval needs spurs. In describing the courser and the destrier, Chrétien relies on the audience's ideas about the two kinds of elite horses. The main characteristic distinguishing a courser is its speed, which is implied in Perceval's speedy departure from his house. When Perceval gives his courser to Yvonet, the audience already knows the horse meets the basic requirements set for this type of equine, and there is no reason to question Perceval's explanation that it is a good horse. Nothing is said about the destrier, presumably because it goes without saying what a knight's warhorse should be like: powerful, obedient, and enduring.

In real life a noble man could ride a variety of horses: coursers (for hunting and amusement), palfreys (for travelling with comfort) and destriers (for tournaments, and in many, but not all cases, for war). In romances however, the transition from one horse type to another is symbolic. Thus, coursers are associated with youth and immaturity, as well as a step back from noble, knightly occupations. When Lanval mounts a courser to leave Arthur's court or while living away from the court (in *Sir Launfal*), the audience is likely to feel that he has taken a step down the social ladder, and the change of mount is related to Lanval's fall into poverty. In fact, during a pleasure ride, for which Lanval borrows a saddle and bridle for his courser from the mayor's daughter, Lanval's courser actually slips and falls in the mud, to the derisive laughter of the passers-by: "He rood with lytyll pryde; Hys hors slod and fel yn the fen, Wherfore hym scorned many men Abowte hym fer and wyde."⁴¹ In *Sir Launfal*, the marvellous white destrier given to the knight by his fairy mistress ensures that the knight becomes universally victorious and is related to Lanval's triumphant return to the court and his subsequent successful performance in numerous tournaments. The name of the fairy horse is Blanchard, possibly an allusion to its coat colour; furthermore, the horse is capable of fighting on the part of his master, as when Lanval dismounts in a battle with the Earl of Chester and Blanchard continues kicking the enemies: "Thorough Launfal – and hys stedes – dent, Many a knight, verement, To ground was i-bore."⁴² In romance, travelling in search of adventures, jousting and going to war are the only worthy pastimes for

⁴¹ "Sir Launfal," 196, ll. 213-216.

⁴² "Sir Launfal," 203-204, ll. 484-486.

a knight, which is why a destrier is the only fitting mount for a true knight when the knight is properly occupied. In real life, warhorses were indispensable only for jousting, while coursers could be used by poorer knights or on certain campaigns, such as Edward III's *chevauchées*.⁴³ The latter campaigns, however, could not be regarded as strictly chivalric, if judged by the standards of romance. Moreover, towards the end of the medieval period, as the arms and armour used in tournaments evolved and became safer and heavier, the qualities required from a good tournament horse became different from those sought in a good warhorse, so further specialisation occurred. This specialisation is not reflected in romance and, anyway, it did not take place until long after Chrétien's time.

While the descriptions of the courser and the destrier in *Perceval* are minimal, much more attention is paid to the palfrey ridden by the mistreated lady. The Orgeilleux de la Lande's threats begin with the punishments to be suffered by the mount rather than its hapless rider. When Perceval meets the lady, Chrétien first describes the pitiful appearance of the equine and only then the lady. Here, the bad treatment suffered by the horse is a sign and a shorthand for the punishment to which the lady is subjected, while the distress caused by the ill condition and poor appearance of the horse amplify the physical and moral unease of the lady. Anyone looking at the lady can see that she has fallen down the social ladder – not because she is seated on a horse of a different type, but because the horse she rides is in a very poor state, is very bony, and the riding equipment is in disrepair.

The fourth type of equine discussed in this chapter is the Ugly Damsel's mule. Only two details are given about the animal: its yellowish colour and the fact the Damsel uses a whip. These two details are important for the medieval audience, which can immediately see that the animal is less than spectacular, signalling that its rider would not be the paragon of elegance, either. The following detailed description of the Ugly Damsel with her grotesque deformities confirms this initial impression.

⁴³ On the development of the chevauchée during the Hundred Years' War, see, for instance, Kelly DeVries, *Joan of Arc: A Military Leader* (Stroud: Sutton, 1999), 10-12.