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“ONE CAN ALSO LEARN TO
BE”: WOMEN AND THEIR
BODIES OF KNOWLEDGE IN
LE CONTE DU GRAAL AND
THE NONEXISTENT KNIGHT

“We are all born with bodies, but although they are thus native to us, and we innate to them, they are not thereby ‘natural’, distanced as they are from ‘nature’ by a multiplicity of psychic, sexual, social and political codes” (Kay, Rubin 1994: 1). The statement was never more true than in the Middle Ages, when the body was framed by various discourses and perceptions until it was turned into a metaphorical construct, standing for “any bounded system” (Camille 1994: 62). It was a model for direction in the cosmos, a metaphor for the state and its political order (the body politic), but also for the Church. Most significantly of all, it could become a representation of the system of knowledge or *disciplina*.

It was the female body that was seen in this role in medieval literature – the body that was particularly tantalizing to medieval physicians. As Miri Rubin states: “The female body was a place of hollows, caverns, mysterious spaces, above all that private space, the womb, which *Le Propriétaire de choses* described as a chamber in a house” (1994: 110). Seen as such, the female body was prone to penetration and violation. A stone sculpture at Musée des Augustins in Toulouse, for instance, depicts the body of *luxuria* with the phallic serpent emerging from, or entering, her genitals. This image of a woman as “a mere receptacle for male semen” (Camille 1994: 83), however, is reversed in the “body as knowledge” metaphor, where it is the man that becomes the receptacle of women’s knowledge and instruction.

Women as purveyors of knowledge figure prominently in medieval literature, which – being largely didactic in scope – often employs various manifestations of the Teacher and Student archetype. As enumerated by Gunn:

Mother Church and “christen children,” catechizing priest and youthful catechumen, preacher and congregation, university master and university scholar, divine *Philosophia* and the clouded human intellect, god and mortal, Muse and poet, veteran knight and bachelor-in-arms, sovereign lady and neophyte in love, master craftsman and industrious apprentice: all the learned diligent to teach and all the young and “lewed” laity eager to learn. (1962: 127)

In medieval dream visions, the dreamer is often instructed by a lady: Lady Philosophy offers consolation to Boethius, Lady Holy Church instructs Piers Plowman, the Old Woman in *Le Roman de la Rose* takes the role of an Art Master and gives a lecture

that she imagines will be heard at university.¹ Also in romances women often appear at crucial moments in the story. Such is the case in one of the earliest Bildungsromans – *Le Conte du Graal*, in the course of which the protagonist grows to maturity as a result of adventures he experiences and education he receives from women.

Written in the 1180s, *Le Conte du Graal* is the only of Chrétien's romances not focused on the issue of courtly love (Frappier 1973: 73). Instead, from the beginning of the poem, Chrétien de Troyes emphasizes the importance of knowledge, tracing the evolution of the main hero "from a naive country lad into a newly minted knight whose quest leads him to discover unexpected social and spiritual obligations" (Krueger 2009: 170). Perceval, "the son of the widow lady of the Waste Forest" (Kibler 2004: 382) (*li filz a la veve dame / De la gaste forest soutaine, Graal*, ll. 72–73), is taught by his mother to worship God and to respect the ladies, but is kept away from the world of chivalry and remains utterly ignorant of knightly duties.² No wonder, then, that when he comes across a company of knights, he mistakes them for angels and God Almighty and is eager to learn all that he can about becoming one of their retinue. Having reported his experience to his mother, he learns that appearances can be deceptive – "you have seen, I believe, the angels men complain of, who kill whatever they come upon" (Kibler 2004: 386) (*Tu as veü au mien espoir / Les angles don les genz se plaignent, / Qui ocient quant qu'il ataignent, Graal*, ll. 370–372), his mother tells him – but he also becomes aware of the long process of education that he has to undergo to become one of them.

Excusing herself for withholding the knowledge from her son, Perceval's mother explains what lies ahead of him:

But when you start trying out those weapons, how will it go then? Since you've never used weapons nor seen anyone else using them, how will you manage? Poorly, to be sure, I fear! You will lack all the skills, and it's not surprising, I think, since no one can know what he hasn't learned. But it is surprising when one doesn't learn what is often seen and heard. (Kibler 2004: 387)

Ce que vos ne feïstes onques
N'autrui ne lo veïstes faire,
Commant en savroiz a chief traire?
Malveisemant, voire, ce dot.
Mal seroiz afaitiez de tot,
N'il n'et merveille, ce m'et vis,
S'an ne set ce qu'an [n']a apris.

¹ As Sarah Kay notices, the speech of the Old Woman points to a subversion of the traditional duality of pairing "flesh" and "female" on the one hand and "mind" or "spirit" and "male" on the other. "Whether Jean is sneering at Arts Masters, or defending the claims of women's experience, or merely laughing at the gap his text opens up between the two," she writes, "his readers find themselves already on the edge of Genius's misogynistic terrain: the possibility (or threat) of women having access to the language of knowledge" (Kay 1994: 219).

² Throughout the text, references to Chrétien de Troyes's *Le Conte du Graal ou le Roman de Perceval* are first to the English translation by Kibler, henceforth referred to as Kibler 2004 (with page numbers given in brackets), and then to the edition presented by Charles Méla, 1990, Paris: Le Livre de Poche. From now on, I refer to this text as *Graal*.

Mais merveille est que l’an [n’]aprant
Ce que l’an ot et voit sovant. (*Graal*, ll. 482–490)

“A lack of clear instruction explains, but it does not fully justify a lack of knowledge,” his mother seems to be saying, because it is also through careful observation of “what is often seen and heard” that one should increase one’s awareness of the outer world.

A similar point is made by King Arthur: “Though the boy is naïve, still he may be of very noble line; and if folly has come from poor teaching, because he had a low-bred master, he can still prove brave and wise” (Kibler 2004: 393) (*Por ce, se li vallez est nices, / S’et il espoir molt gentis hom, / Ou ce li vient voir d’aprison, / Que il et aüz villain mestre, / Encor puet preuz et saiges estre, Graal*, ll. 970–974), he says to Kay who tries to undermine Perceval’s foolish eagerness, challenging him to do what he deems undoable. “Had someone instructed the boy and taught him enough of weaponry that he could use his shield and lance a little, no doubt he would have made a fine knight” (Kibler 2004: 397) (*Qui ensaignié et adrecié / Lo vallet as armes aüst / Tant c’un po aidier se saüst / Et de l’escu et de la lance, / Bons chevaliers fust sanz dotance, Graal*, ll. 1234–1238), he states.

Gornemant of Gohort, a gentleman whom Perceval meets during his quest, like the king before him, excuses the youth’s ignorance in matters of weaponry, saying “since you’ve never used weapons nor seen anyone else use them, there’s no shame or blame if you don’t know how to use them” (Kibler 2004: 399) (*Et quant vos onques n’apreïstes / Ne autrui faire nel veïstes, / Se vos faire ne lo savez, / Honte ne blasme n’i avez, / Mais se vos ne l’apreneiez / Honte et blasme I avreiez, Graal*, ll. 1417–1422). He enumerates the necessary features of a good student: effort, devotion and practice, and echoes Perceval’s mother in his statement that “[w]hat one doesn’t know can be learned, if one is willing to listen and work” (Kibler 2004: 399) (*Ce qu’en ne puet l’an aprendre, / Qui i velt pener et entandre, Graal*, ll. 1411–1412). “Friend, if your heart is in it [...], you’ll learn much and never experience any difficulty” (Kibler 2004: 400) (*Amis, se lo cuer i avez [...], molt en savrez, / Ja mar cusançon en avrez, Graal*, ll. 1460–1462), Gornemant concludes.

The problem with Perceval – a “naïve simpleton” (Kibler 2004: 398) (*lo conut et sot, Graal*, l. 1314), as he is known – is that he puts too much heart and too little thought into everything he does, following the advice he is given blindly and literally. If his mother asks him to greet and kiss the ladies, he does so, even though the lady he meets is waiting for her lover. If his mother instructs him to take the ring off the lady’s finger, he does so, grasping her wrist and forcibly removing the ring, even though it may deprive her of honour and endanger his life (Kibler 2004: 390). In this way he mistreats the Tent Maiden, acting on his mother’s advice blindly but selectively.³

³ The question why Perceval doesn’t understand and apply correctly his mother’s advice has been addressed by critics. Debora B. Schwartz argues that Perceval’s shallow application of the advice results from his inability to distinguish the essence from the surface, “focusing single-mindedly on the exterior signs of love service rather than the principle behind it.” Borysławski, who treats *Le Conte du Graal* as *le roman humain*, the existential romance, explains that Perceval fails to act on women’s advice because he is unable to decode and internalize it, which leads to his failure – a failure which accounts for the existentialist spirit of the romance (2005: 211–224).

Had he taken to heart the whole of his mother's advice, he wouldn't have done anything to displease the lady just as he would have made the sign of the cross when he saw the approaching knights. "I scorn her teaching" (Kibler 2004: 382) (*cest ensaig desdaignerai, Graal*, l. 116), he says on this occasion. On other occasions his charmingly childish "My lady mother spoke the truth when she said to me" (*Voir me dit ma mere, ma dame, / Qui me dit que ...*) is always on his lips until Gornemant forbids him to evoke his mother's advice lest he be considered a fool, saying "You must never again claim, dear brother [...] that your mother taught or instructed you" (Kibler 2004: 402) (*ne dites ja mes, beaux frere, / Que ce vos aprist vostre mere / Ne qu'ele vos ait ansaignié, Graal*, ll. 1633–1635). Instead, he takes upon himself the role of Perceval's tutor and becomes his mentor in chivalry, spending a month instructing him on knightly conduct. Having knighted Perceval by attaching the boy's right spur, Gornemant teaches him to be merciful on battlefield, not to talk too much, to console distressed ladies and to pray to God. He then gives him his blessing to the boy's promise of never again referring to "the words of any other master than the vavasour himself" (Kibler 2004: 402) (*nul mot tant com il sera vis / Se de lui non, Graal*, ll. 1649–1650).

This leaves us with the impression that from now on the role of women in the romance will be marginalized, but this is not so. The next woman that stands in Perceval's way is Gornemant's niece – Blancheflor. The maiden, who is "more charming, more splendid, and more graceful than sparrow-hawk or parrot" (Kibler 2004: 403–404) (*plus cointe / Plus acesmee et plus jointe / Que esperviers ne papeguauz, Graal*, ll. 1753–1755), is also the hostess of a besieged castle of Biaurepaire. It is here that Perceval has a chance to put into practice Gornemant's teaching. Accordingly, he refrains from speaking when he finds himself within the walls of the castle, he tries to console the lady and defend her lands when she reveals her misfortunes, and he shows mercy to her oppressor during the fight. In return for his protection and in an attempt to teach him the rules of courtly love, Blancheflor "slipped the key of love into the lock of his heart" (Kibler 2004: 414) (*ele li metoit la clef / D'amors an la serre do cuer, Graal*, ll. 2576–2577). The impact of Blancheflor on Perceval's education has been seen as crucial in terms of the flow of the narrative in that it prevents him from returning to his mother, as Boryślawski notices (2005: 219), but also in that it paves the way for his spiritual growth, as Schwartz argues: "Perceval's love for a woman has opened him to the love of God." The critic continues: "While his initial offer of chivalric service in exchange for her love reflected Perceval's focus on the superficial level of appearances (what knights and ladies are supposed to do), he eventually comes to understand that love is more than mechanical adherence to a code of behavior" (Schwartz 1996).

However, one cannot help feeling that Perceval's conduct during his next adventure at the castle of the Fisher King is again nothing short of mechanical. Seeing a procession of squires and maidens pass through the castle hall, Perceval fails to ask about the different objects they are carrying – a white lance with a drop of blood flowing from its point, a candelabra of pure gold, a grail and a silver platter – "for in his heart he always held the wise gentleman's advice" (Kibler 2004: 421) (*Que toz jorz an son cuer avoit / La parole au prodome saige, Graal*, ll. 3184–3185). He took to heart Gornemant's admonition about asking too many questions and with his characteristic literariness Perceval does not dare to ask even one. "No question came through my mouth" (Kibler

2004: 425) (*Ainz de ma boche n'en issi, Graal*, l. 3508), he confesses to his female cousin, who rebukes him for not showing any interest in the events at the castle for had he done so, the Fisher King, maimed during a battle, would have regained the power in his limbs.

He is reprimanded again at King Arthur's court at Caerleon by the ugly damsel on a tawny mule. She curses Perceval for keeping silence when he should have asked questions about the mysterious objects in the procession, saying: “Wretched is the man who sees that the propitious hour has come but waits for a still better one” (Kibler 2004: 438) (*Molt est malaürez qui voit / Si bel tans que plus n'in covaigne, / S'atant encore que plus i vaigne, Graal*, ll. 4594-4596). The consequences of his negligent silence will be disastrous: “Ladies will lose their husbands, lands will be laid waste, and maidens will remain helpless as orphans; many a knight will die” (Kibler 2004: 438) (*Dames en perdront lor mariz, / Terres en seront essilliees / Et puceles desconseilliees, / Qui orferines remanront, / Et maint chevalier en morront, Graal*, ll. 4608-4612), she forecasts. Again it is a woman who imparts the knowledge to Perceval, who now makes an oath to learn about the grail and the bleeding lance (Kibler 2004: 439). But while on his quest, Perceval forgets about God and needs to be reminded about his Christian duties by a hermit – his uncle who reveals the reason for his silence. “Sin stopped your tongue” (Kibler 2004: 459) (*Pechiez la laingue te traincha, Graal*, l. 6335), he says, explaining that the greatest sin Perceval committed was abandoning his mother, as a result of which she died of sorrow. The penance that the hermit gives to his nephew is: “Believe in God, love God, worship God; honour gentlemen and noble ladies; arise in the presence of the priest [...]. If a maiden seeks your aid, or a widow or orphan, help them, and you will profit” (Kibler 2004: 460) (*Deu croi, Deu aime, Deu aore, / Bon home et bone fame henore, / Contre les provaires te lieve [...] Se pucele aide te quiert, / Aide li, que mielz t'en iert, / A veve fame o orfenine, / Icele aumosne iert enterine, Graal*, ll. 6385-6394). The words uttered by the hermit sound similar for they were uttered by Perceval's mother as she said goodbye to her son. In this way, the hermit reasserts the influence of Perceval's mother whose ghostly presence towards the end of the romance literally and symbolically encompasses his whole life (Boryslawski 2005: 219).

If Perceval grows in maturity, it is not only because of the adventures he experiences in the course of the narrative, but first and foremost because of the knowledge he gains. As Stahuljak argues: “adventure has had *an effect* on the knight, but *no meaning* for him” – rather, it creates a kind of cognitive gap or “a blockage in intelligibility” as knowledge cannot be gained through senses but it occurs in the mind or the soul (Stahuljak 2011: 84–86).⁴ The transformation of experience from senses to intellect takes place through asking question, which is what the ladies try to teach him. The women

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. (Boryslawski 2005: 220)

⁴ For the discussion of *Graal* and medieval thinking see: Stahuljak et al. 2011: 75–109.

Perceval is condemned – not for *not having* a question, but for *not uttering* the question (Stahuljak 2011: 93). Had he asked the questions that were expected of him, the knowledge would have been revealed to him. Seen from this perspective, knowledge does not result from introspection, but from interaction with others:

Knowledge is not arrived at through introspection, but intersubjectively [...] – to orient oneself, one has to interact with others. Knowledge depends on others, those who are often the first affected by the effects of adventure although adventure does not happen to them directly: women, hermits, beastly herdsmen, dwarves. (Stahuljak 2011: 104)

In failing to ask questions and interact with others, Perceval shows that for him knowledge comes largely from experience: he knows things when he sees them, but does not have time to stop and think about them. When he receives instruction, he treats it seriously, perceiving things in terms of absolute truth – it seems appropriate to recall here again his “My mother spoke the truth when she told me” – and not in terms of situational contingency.

This, however, does not prevent Perceval from becoming a successful knight. In fact, he fulfils the prophesy of the Laughing Maiden at King Arthur’s court, who on seeing Perceval, assured him that “there will never be, nor will anyone ever acknowledge, a better knight than yourself” (Kibler 2004: 394) (*trestot lo monde n’avra / N’il n’iert ne l’an ni savra / Nul chevalier meillor de toi, Graal*, ll. 997-999). And indeed Perceval does not have to wait long for a chance to prove his worth in fight. Having heard the story of the shame the Red Knight from the forest of Quinqueroy has brought on King Arthur and his wife, Perceval insists on being knighted to avenge the King: “good sir king, I’ll never be a knight if I’m not a red knight” (Kibler 2004: 393) (*biax sire rois, / Ne serai chevaliers des mois, / Se chevaliers vermaus ne sui, Graal*, ll. 953-955), he swears and asks the King to grant him the armour the Red Knight is wearing. It is only moments later that the newly knighted Perceval, in an amazing display of bravado, earns the name of a knight and the red armour that goes with it. Even though his later adventures will be undertaken with a similar alacrity and to a similar effect, the red armour will forever accompany him as a sign of his prowess, but also as a symbol of limitation. As one of the critics notices: “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” (Boryslawski 2005: 221). Therefore, he performs his duties without asking any questions.

In this respect Perceval anticipates Agilulf – a character created by Italo Calvino nearly eight hundred years later (1959) in his story with a baffling title *The Nonexistent Knight*. Similarly to Perceval, whose existence seems limited to the red arms he wears, Agilulf’s existence is also limited, but in a much more literal sense for he exists only as an empty suit of white armour. Asked by Charlemagne during his review of paladins to lift his visor, Agilulf “seemed to hesitate a moment, then raised his visor with a slow but firm hand. The helmet was empty. No one was inside the white armour with its iridescent crest” (Colquhoun 1977: 6).⁵

⁵ References to *The Nonexistent Knight* are to Archibald Colquhoun’s translation, henceforth referred to as Colquhoun 1977.

The fact that he does not exist, however, does not mean that he cannot perform his duties. On the contrary, he can devote all his time and effort to performing them well for he is not troubled by human necessities, such as sleep, hunger or common human flaws, such as carelessness or incoherence (Colquhou 1977: 56). But if he “exists without existing” (Colquhou 1977: 17), what is the force that fuels his actions? “Willpower” and “faith in [the] holy cause,” Calvino tells us and indeed both need to be great for Agilulf never fails in his duties. He has “a mania to inspect everything and search out other errors and negligences” (Colquhou 1977: 11–12). Every evening he goes his rounds of inspection and if the slightest signs of negligence show up, he drags his fellow paladins from their evening chatter or from sleep, “pointing out discreetly but firmly where they were at fault” (Colquhou 1977: 8). Assigned new duties to correct their performance, other paladins react in a most natural and human way to his words and his somewhat inhuman perfection:

He was always right, the paladins had to admit, but they did not hide their discontent. Agilulf Emo Bertrandin of the Guildivern and of the Others of Corbentraz and Sura, Knight of Selimpia Citeriore and Fez was certainly a model soldier, but disliked by all. (Colquhou 1977: 8)

Charged with the command of troops in Emperor Charlemagne’s army, Agilulf proves “a better officer than many who vaunted themselves illustrious, the best of all officers, in fact” (Colquhou 1977: 11). He thus seems perfect, but his perfection is mechanical, i.e. based on too strict adherence to the rules and regulations. In fact, he knows all of them by heart and “enjoys showing his own competence, and confusing other’s ignorance,” as shown in the exchange with Raimbaut of Roussillon – a youth willing to avenge his father (Colquhou 1977: 14). Having approached Agilulf for advice and reassurance, he learns only about the formal regulations concerning entering a battle: “You must put in a request to the Superintendency of Duels, Feuds and Besmirched Honor, specifying the motives for your request, and it will then be considered how to best place you in a position to attain the satisfaction you desire,” Agilulf explains (Colquhou 1977: 14). Not satisfied with this official answer, the youth demands to know how to behave on the battlefield should courage or power desert him. “I keep to the rules. Do that yourself and you won’t make a mistake,” Agilulf advises him standoffishly (Colquhou 1977: 14).

However admirable obeying the rules is, when carried to extremes, it becomes the essence of Agilulf’s being, overshadowing the more human side of his nature:

Deprived of humanity, he is competent but officious, living by the book and feeding on rules and regulations instead of food. Pompous and condescending, he is an inflexible company man who knows nothing of love or camaraderie for he is incapable of emotion. (Markey 1999: 78)

Immune “from the shocks and agonies to which people who exist are subject” (Colquhou 1977: 21), Agilulf comes across as an “uncompromising doctrinaire,” or “a mechanical robot” (Weiss 1993: 57).⁶ His mechanical recitation of rules, such as

⁶ For the author, Agilulf represents an “artificial man who, being equivalent to consumer goods and situations, is nonexistent because he no longer creates friction [*attrito*] with anything, he no

“[a] verbal statement by the emperor has the validity of an immediate decree” (Colquhou 1977: 32), bespeaks a mentality, in which all the chivalric and military values around him are codified (A.H. Carter, qtd in Weiss 1993: 57). He “remember[s] everything, cite[s] chapter and verse even for a feat of arms accepted by all and piously described by those who had never seen it” (Colquhou 1977: 76). It is in his unquestioning obedience to rules that Agilulf recalls Perceval. In other respects, the French knight seems to share more with Raimbaut than Agilulf.

Inasmuch as Agilulf prefers doctrine, Raimbaut favours experience. Similarly to Perceval, he is a an “untiring man of action” – inexperienced, but willing to earn a name for himself (Weiss 1993: 58). When he first appears in Charlemagne’s camp with the desire to avenge his father, he knows nothing of battles, “though he had thought of little else in all his young life” (Colquhou 1977: 34). He is therefore looking forward to his baptism in arms, but the moment he enters the battle, the desire to avenge his father almost leaves him. He is not feeling comfortable in the armour he is wearing and he can see nothing in the cloud of yellow dust, signaling that the battle has started. Furthermore, he is not sure as to the identity of his opponent. When he finally kills his enemy, he is torn between contradictory feeling – “exaltation and honour seemed to touch him” now that he contemplates dead corpses scattered around (Colquhou 1977: 41). His eagerness to “rush into some dashing feat of arms” gives way to tedium when he is asked to accompany Agilulf on his turn of inspection.

Raimbaut’s desire to do earn honour in arms is renewed when he falls in love with Bradamante who, in turn, is passionate about Agilulf and follows him on his quest to prove the virginity of old days. “He longed for a time to fight and do prodigious deeds before her emerald eyes” (Colquhou 1977: 70) and when he sees her, he becomes indignant: “I’m here, girl, loaded with love, how can you not want it, what can a girl want that she doesn’t take me, doesn’t love me, what can she want more than what I feel I can and ought to give?” he asks (Colquhou 1977: 85). Justifying her choice of Agilulf as the perfect lover, Bradamante states that he is “the only man whose actions are not mere impulse, shallow caprice, like those of the usual rabble who follow me” (Colquhou 1977: 134). In fact, “if a girl has had enough of every man who exists, her only remaining desire could be for a man who doesn’t exist at all” (Colquhou 1977: 66). The knight who does not exist, however, is as passionless as Raimbaut is lusty and on finding himself in an intimate situation with a lady he prefers to plunge into a dissertation on love and the art of bed making rather than grant her the desires of her heart. Here again we can see that the two characters represent two different models of humanity, but at the end of the narrative they become one.

His knightly title being questioned, Agilulf needs to prove that the lady to whom he owns it, Sophronia, was a virgin fifteen years ago. After weeks of various adventures, when his honour is about to be vindicated, Agilulf vanishes. It seems puzzling for up to this moment he has been struggling at all costs to cling to his existence and not to plunge into a void. Keeping himself occupied with different manual exercises, he “always needed to feel himself facing things as if they were a massive wall against

longer has a connection (struggle and through struggle harmony) with that which (nature or history) surrounds him, he ‘functions’ only abstractly (Weiss 1993: 56).

which he could pit the tension of his will, for only in this way did he manage to keep a sure consciousness of himself,” Calvino states (Colquhou 1977: 20). As one of the critics notices,

Agilulfo is all discipline, coherence, rigorous adherence to a pre-established order. But at the centre of this iron-clad system there is nothing, a vanishing point of being that can only be overcome by constant vigilance, by a truly superhuman effort of will and self-conscious attention. Agilulfo’s reliability has no equal among the paladins. He is a tower of organizational strength. And the fortress is built on the void. (Bolongaro 2003: 141)

Throughout the narrative we follow Agilulf’s *Bildung* – his own coming into being which ends, surprisingly enough, in his disappearance (Bolongaro 2003: 140). Before Raimbaut replaces Agilulf in the service of Charlemagne, “thus uneasily conjoining the nonexistent knight’s iron will to a defective human essence in order to shape one whole and arguably more serviceable knight” (Markey 1999: 79), he asks:

“Knight, you have resisted so long by your will power alone, and succeeded in doing all things as if you existed, why suddenly surrender?” But he did not know in which direction to turn; the armor was empty, not empty like before, but empty of that something going by the name of Sir Agilulf which was now dissolved like a drop in the sea. (Colquhou 1977: 132)

With his knighthood questioned, Agilulf lost “his difference, a mode of being that was blocked on the threshold of individuality” (Bolongaro 2003: 144). “My name is at my journey’s end,” he exclaims, pointing to the importance of leaving a mark on history. But what’s in a name, as Shakespeare would say? “Insignia, ranks, titles ... All mere show”, Calvino answers. “Those paladins’ shields with armorial bearings and mottoes are not made of iron; they’re just paper, you can put your finger through them”, he adds (Colquhou 1977: 68).

The gap between appearance and reality is one of the most arresting issues addressed by Italo Calvino in his story, most graphically in the description of the Sacred Order of the Knights of the Holy Grail and their religious duplicity. Portrayed as an antipathetic group of half-naked knights, “with their story about Grail always moving them, they indulged in all sorts of loose habits while pretending to be ever pure” (Colquhou 1977: 122). They never soil their hands with work or money, but exact tribute from peasants and do not fail to resort to the cruelest ways when not obeyed. Since the peasants stand no chances in defending their women and children against the knights’ “inexorable lances”, soon the whole villages are “reduced to crackling bonfires” (Colquhou 1977: 123–124).

A similar point about chivalry was made by Chrétien de Troyes. It seems apt to recall here again the question addressed by Perceval to a group of knights for the same question – “Are you God?” – may have been addressed by Chrétien de Troyes to his contemporaries. “Was this a question Chrétien wanted the knights of his society to consider? Were they, like the first sinners in Eden, setting themselves up in the place of divinity, arrogating to themselves God-like power?” as one of the critics asks (Kaeuper 2006: 124). “Prowess was truly the demi-god in the quasi-religion of chivalric honour; knights were indeed the privileged practitioners of violence in their society”, the historian further argues (Kaeuper 2006: 124).

Both Chrétien de Troyes and Italo Calvino seem to attack the conformism of medieval knights, blindly following “the sancrosanct rules which [...] being so firmly fixed, take away any bother of thinking” (Colquhou 1977: 62). War as described by the historians differs markedly from what it was to those on whom its outcome depended – “a bit of slaughter and a bit of routine” (Colquhou 1977: 62). Calvino mentions prolonged warfare and the effects it has:

The war will last for centuries, and nobody will win or lose; we’ll all sit here face to face forever. Without one or the other there’d be nothing, and yet both we and they have forgotten by now why we’re fighting (Colquhou 1977: 69)

It is not only Charlemagne’s knights who get confused in battle, but the Emperor himself cannot be trusted when it comes to the exigencies of war, not unlike his real-life model:

The real Charlemagne, who had been crowned emperor in 800 by Pope Leo III, had expected to reconstitute the fallen Holy Roman Empire. But when he put his ideas to the test, they turned out to be unworkable, an unattainable goal, an artificial creation – just as hollow as the armor of Agilulfo – kept together merely by self-awareness and will power, and only abstractly achievable. (Weiss 1993: 59)

A similar point about reputation obscuring the real worth of man was made by Chrétien de Troyes with reference to Alexander the Great (Kibler 2004: 381), but Calvino goes much further in his exposure of the gap between appearances and reality,⁷ toying with the notion of knowledge and existence. He does not only create a knight who does not exist (Agilulf), but one who does exist, without realizing it (Gurduloo). Confusing himself with external reality, the latter takes many forms and has as many names as there are places he stays in: “Call him and he thinks you’re calling a goat. Say ‘cheese’ or ‘torrent’ and he answers ‘Here I am.’” (Colquhou 1977: 28)

The two characters – Agilulf and Gurduloo – are inscribed in the discussion on names and their referents in the Middle Ages:

It was not rare then to find names and thoughts and forms and institutions that corresponded to nothing in existence. But at the same time the world was polluted with objects and capacities and persons who lacked any name or distinguishing mark. (Colquhou 1977: 33)

What did not exist in history, however, may still exist in fiction as an authorial invention, communicated through the narrator no matter how unreliable he or she may seem. Calvino makes an experienced woman the narrator of *The Nonexistent Knight* and we are constantly made to believe that she is a nun, in no way involved in the events described and with no prior experience in the ways of the world, not to mention a battle:

We country girls, however noble, have always led retired lives in remote castles and convents. Apart from religious ceremonies, triduums, novenas, gardening, harvesting, vintaging, whippings, slavery, incest, fires, hangings, invasion, sacking, rape and pestilence, we have had no experience. What can a poor nun know of the world? (Colquhou 1977: 34)

⁷ For an analysis of the apparent vs the real see: Schwartz 1996.

Having deceived us with respect to her own identity, the female narrator claims: “This towards the truth we hurry, my pen and I, the truth which I am constantly expecting to meet deep in a white page” (Colquhoun 1977: 87). But what kind of truth can the reader expect to grasp when the universe of discourse is distant from the universe of action (Bolongaro 2003: 151)? Having lived through two world wars, Calvino certainly conveys doubts about historical accuracy and tries to expose “the discrepancy between what actually took place and what is reported” (Markey 1999: 84). But when it comes to Calvino’s fiction, “nothing is but what is not” and in the end, the trickster narrator proves to be the Amazon warrior in love with Agilulf and well experienced in battle. She claims she has undertaken the narration as a penance. Seen as such, the story is both a challenge and a struggle as the female narrator, similarly to Perceval and Agilulf, seems “locked” in the role she was given. Even though “[o]ne can never be sure of saving one’s soul by writing,” as she says, the female narrator does her best to fulfil her scribe’s duties (Colquhoun 1977: 72). She constructs the narrative thread, interweaving adventures and plotting the journeys of heroes on a blank page, which is not unlike “mechanical dotting the chronicles with maps” (Markey 1999: 84). The narrator’s reflections on writing make a point about imagination as a product of certain mechanics:

It’s a suggestion which seems paradoxical because, from the point of view of a romantic, one can think that the imagination is by no means a mechanical force, but one which is primarily ‘spontaneous’. And yet, it is not so. Imagination, perhaps great imagination, is always a development of certain mechanics. (Barthes 2001: 7).⁸

C’est une proposition qui a une allure un peu paradoxale parce que, d’un point de vue romantique, on pourrait penser que l’imagination est au contraire une force point du tout mécanique mais extrêmement «spontanée». Or, pas du tout. L’imagination, peut-être la grande imagination, c’est toujours le développement d’une certaine mécanique.

In his story Calvino also plays with the notion of woman as purveyor of knowledge – a notion discussed in the first part of this paper with reference to *Le Conte du Graal*. Inasmuch as Chrétien de Troyes was focused on the theme of education, Calvino puts emphasis on “truth.” In the prologue to his romance, Chrétien de Troyes quotes from 2 Corinthians and refers to the Parable of the Sower:

He who sows sparingly, reaps sparingly, but he who wishes to reap plentifully casts his seed on ground that will bear him fruit a hundredfold; for good seed withers and dies in worthless soil. Chrétien sows and casts the seed of a romance that he is beginning, and sows it in such a good place that it cannot fail to be bountiful [...] (Kibler 2004: 381).

Qui petit seime petit quiaut
Et qui auques recoillir viaut
En tel leu sa semence espande
Que fruit a cent doble li rande,
Car en terre qui rien ne vaut
Bone semence seiche et faut.
Crestiens seime et fait semence

⁸ Translation mine.

D'un romanz que il encommence
 Et si lo seime en sin bon leu
 Qu'il ne puet estre sanz grant preu. (*Graal*, ll. 1–10)

The metaphor of the writer as a sower planting seed finds an interesting twist in the story by Calvino, whose narrator, being female, is the recipient of seed – the seed which grows inside to be delivered to the readers in due time. Inasmuch as Chrétien's romance can be seen as one of *conceiving into being*, Calvino's fiction is one of *delivering into being* (Bolongaro 2003: 151). From the purveyor of knowledge in Chrétien's romance, the woman in Calvino's fiction becomes the purveyor of being, of life and of the future. "From describing the past, from the present which seized my hand in its excited grasp, here I am, O future" – concludes Calvino's narrator and it doesn't really matter if there are some who do not (yet) exist, like Agilulf, or others who do not (yet) realize they exist, like Gurduloo, for "[h]e will learn too ... We ourselves did not know we existed ... One can also learn to be ..." (Colquhoun 1977: 138).

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Résumé

« On peut aussi apprendre à être » : les femmes et leurs corps de savoir dans *Le Conte du Graal* et dans *Le Chevalier Inexistants*

L’article aborde la question du savoir et de l’éducation en rapport avec le roman de Chrétien de Troyes *Le Conte du Graal* et le récit *Le Chevalier Inexistant* d’Italo Calvino. En se servant de la métaphore du corpus du savoir, l’article montre que dans le roman de Chrétien de Troyes les femmes du Moyen-Âge, d’habitude présentées dans le rôle passif par rapport à l’homme, deviennent d’actives donatrices du savoir que le jeune chevalier doit acquérir au cours de son voyage. Cependant, la littéralité, avec laquelle Perceval se conforme aux conseils de ses monitrices, l’enferme littéralement dans son armure du chevalier, ce qui fait penser au héros du récit d’Italo Calvino – Agilulfé – chevalier qui n’existe que comme armure vide. La question des femmes et du savoir qu’elles transmettent est montrée par Calvino d’une manière bien intéressante : la femme, installé dans le rôle du narrateur, devient non seulement une source du savoir, mais aussi le commencement de la vie, de l’existence et de l’avenir.

Mots-clés: corpus, savoir, moyen-âge, femmes, roman arthurien, Chrétien de Troyes, Italo Calvino.

Streszczenie

„I tego, żeby być, także trzeba się uczyć”: kobiety i ich korpusy wiedzy w *Percewalu z Walii czyli opowieści o Graalu* i *Rycerzu nieistniejącym*

Artykuł podejmuje kwestię wiedzy i edukacji w odniesieniu do romansu Chrétien de Troyes *Percewal z Walii czyli opowieść o Graalu* oraz opowiadania *Rycerz nieistniejący* autorstwa Itala Calvina. Używając metafory korpusu wiedzy, artykuł pokazuje, że w romansie Chrétien de Troyes średniowieczne kobiety, które zwykle przedstawiane były w rolach biernych osób w stosunku do mężczyzn, stają się aktywnymi dawczyniami wiedzy, którą młody rycerz ma przyswoić w czasie swojej wędrówki. Jednakże dosłowność, z jaką Percewal stosuje się do zaleceń swoich nauczycielek, sprawia, iż pozostaje on dosłownie zamknięty w swojej rycerskiej zbroi, co przywodzi na myśl bohatera opowiadania Itala Calvina – Agilulfę – rycerza, który istnieje jedynie jako pusta zbroja. Kwestia kobiet oraz przekazywanej przez nie wiedzy jest przez Calvina ukazana w bardzo ciekawy sposób: osadzona w roli narratora, kobieta staje się nie tylko źródłem wiedzy, ale także początkiem życia, egzystencji oraz przyszłości.

Słowa kluczowe: korpus, wiedza, średniowiecze, kobiety, powieść arturiańska, Chrétien de Troyes, Italo Calvino.