

Picturing Human Beauty in Chrétien de Troyes' *Conte du Graal*

by Paul Creamer

In Chrétien de Troyes' fifth and final Arthurian romance, the *Conte du Graal* (*The Story of the Grail*), sustained descriptions of human beauty are an odd commodity.¹ They surface rarely and always at surprising moments, encoded with messages that are enigmatic to the characters present and even to the audience itself. The purpose of this essay is twofold: to systematically examine these descriptions, and then to consider how Chrétien uses them as powerful narrative tools in his text. Traditional scholarship on the Champenois poet's talents of description emphasizes that he was formally trained in poetics and familiar with Classical models, and drew from this background when describing the physical appearance of his characters.² Chrétien's descriptions, it is argued, were indeed derived from long-standing, fixed models but were creative, superior examples of such copying. This essay seeks to show that such reasoning is correct but incomplete. In considering three extended descriptions of human beauty in the *Conte du Graal*, it will attempt to demonstrate that these passages are more innovative than simple copies of a model, but also constitute, when considered as a group, a catalogue that displays Chrétien's diverse descriptive talents.

Surveying the *Conte du Graal*'s Descriptions of Human Beauty

Although left unfinished, presumably because of Chrétien's death, the *Conte du Graal* (circa 1185) is nonetheless the longest of the poet's five romances by some 2,000 lines. In the text's 9,234 verses, however, there is little description of human beauty. In fact, there is far less description of any sort in his final work than might be expected by modern tastes for an author so often recognized by present-day critics for his vivid storytelling.³ But as Michel Zink points out, Chrétien expected the audiences for all five of his romances to possess a pre-existing familiarity with the Arthurian world, its major characters, and its patterns of ceremony and celebration:

Il prête systématiquement à son lecteur une familiarité avec l'univers arthurien qui rend superflus les explications et les renseignements. Chaque récit particulier est présenté comme un fragment, comme la partie émergée d'une vaste histoire dont chacun est supposé maîtriser la continuité sous-jacente. Aucun roman ne présente le roi Arthur, la reine Guenièvre, la Table ronde, ses usages, ses chevaliers que le poète se contente d'énumérer d'un air entendu lorsque leur présence rehausse une cérémonie, un tournoi, une fête. (144)

Douglas Kelly notes that Chrétien, starting with his second romance *Cligés* (circa 1175), began forgoing any description that was not absolutely necessary:

He is interested in the effect of description on his audience. But description for description's sake was surely as tedious to him as to us. Consequently Chrétien began to shorten or lengthen in accordance with the demands of the narrative rather than with the recommendations of the arts of poetry or customary usage, and his art improved considerably as a result. The audience must not be bored nor its interest dispersed, and this could be prevented only by offering a poem whose details at all times had interest and relevance. (*Sens and Conjointure* 198)

A line-by-line reading of the *Conte du Graal* reveals, indeed, a relatively small number of instances where Chrétien makes mention of human beauty, and we can group these descriptions into three, progressively more-detailed types.⁴ The first type consists of moments where the narrator or a character indicates that a given character is handsome or beautiful by using the standard, comparative, or superlative form of the adjective *bel* or the noun *biauté* in Old French, but does not elaborate further.⁵ Twenty-three such blip-like descriptions pertain to male characters, twenty-six to female characters, and one line (5759) to both men and women. Of the total of fifty instances, nineteen involve the narrator speaking while the remaining thirty-one involve a character, cited in direct speech, describing another character.

The second type features Chrétien copying a long-established literary model of superior beauty whereby the narrator, or else a character, announces that a given male or female character is superlatively handsome or beautiful (for example: the most handsome knight ever seen, or the most beautiful woman ever made by Nature).⁶ The text hosts seven such traditional

descriptions, three for male characters and four for female characters.⁷ These passages run between three and twenty-three lines in length, with three of them in the narrator's own words, and four spoken via a character's direct speech.

It is the third type of description that forms the core of the present essay. In four instances over the run of the romance, Chrétien's descriptive art steps away from economy and predictability to become expansive, jarring, and mysterious: human beauty in these cases is not a question of just a single adjective, or of a pat and formulaic declaration of superior beauty. The descriptions of the third type are, in their order of appearance: Perceval's sighting of the party of knights (127-38); Blanchefleur's initial appearance (1795-1829); the Hideous Damsel's arrival at court (4610-37); and the red-haired squire's entrance on horseback (6984-97). The last two are the only examples of human ugliness whatsoever in the romance. A consideration of the first three of these descriptions (space limitations preclude examination of the fourth⁸) will allow us to see how elaborate and ambiguous they are, how they drive the narrative, and how different they are from one another.

The First Example: Perceval Encounters Chivalry

The first description is found very early in the text, when Perceval is out riding alone on his mother's estate. What the Welsh lad and the audience don't know at this point is that his father and two brothers had been knights, his father a glorious one, but the profession had ultimately led, directly or indirectly, to the death of all three. For this reason Perceval's fearful mother, as she tells her son later, decided to raise the boy in isolation, away from the threat of chivalry (407-88). At the text's beginning, however, the lad has no idea what a knight is. He is startled by a terrifying noise: a group of five knights is riding through the woods, and the racket fascinates him. At first Perceval only *hears* the approaching horsemen (100-26), but then:

Mais quant il les vit en apert,
Que du bois furent desovert,
Et vit les haubers fremians

Et les elmes clers et luisans,
 Et les lances et les escus
 Que onques mais n'avoit veüs,
 Et vit le vert et le vermeil
 Reluire contre le soleil,
 Et l'or et l'azur et l'argent,
 Si li fu molt bel et molt gent,
 Et dist: "Ha! Sire Diex, merci!
 Ce sont angle que je voi chi.["] (127-38)⁹

This scene is remarkable because it is, simultaneously, irreducibly simple and irreconcilably scrambled. Let us first consider the description's simplicity. As Norris Lacy notes, the audience sees the five knights from Perceval's perspective, rather than from that of the narrator (61). Umberto Eco, in a general survey of medieval ideas about beauty, writes that "[i]mmmediacy and simplicity characterised the medieval love of light and colour" (44), and here the audience learns from Perceval's hastily processed mental portrait that the lad has broken the knights down into little more than light and color. In his tragicomic, child-like naïveté, he reduces them to a luminous, glistening set of contrasting colors; their weapons and armor, seductive to the adolescent's eyes, register as light-emitting objects rather than as tools of combat. Perceval believes the knights to be strikingly beautiful (136-38), but he is not focused on them, but rather on what they carry and wear.¹⁰ The lad does not know the violent *raison d'être* of these accoutrements, as his subsequent conversation with the lead knight proves (186-290). Peter Haidu likens this verbal exchange, where the kindly knight patiently responds to the clueless queries of the Welsh bumpkin, to Henri Bergson's definition of a Punch and Judy show (122).

But the humor of the lad's encounter with the knights does not cancel out the misunderstanding and misinformation that undergird their chance meeting. Perceval is terribly wrong throughout this scene, and ingenuously unaware of his wrongness: hearing the knights, he thinks they are the devil; seeing them, he thinks they are angels; and he then thinks the lead knight, the most handsome of the five, is God. To speak anachronistically, the neurons are

crossed in the adolescent's mental circuitry: his mother's tutelage in Christianity has been misconstrued and misapplied. On a linguistic level, too, he is ill-equipped: he can see the colors and the light of the arms and armor but, necessarily lacking vocabulary, he cannot process them into actual nouns. As Lacy points out, Perceval's fascination with the luminous objects leads him to mistake *signifiant* and *signifié* (23). Charles Méla goes further: in a study both appearing in a book series edited by Jacques Lacan and Lacanian in nature, Méla links Perceval's misunderstanding to pleasure: "Des signes qui n'ont pas de sens mais qui possèdent les sens, qu'est-ce sinon de purs signifiants dont l'illisibilité même fait la jouissance? (21)"

What is perhaps most remarkable about Perceval's encounter with the knights is that it sets into motion, without the lad or the audience yet realizing it, a disastrous domino effect: in seeing the knights, Perceval burns to become one; leaving home to do so, he ignores his heartbroken, slumping mother; this insensitive act will later cause his silence at the worst possible moment at the Grail Castle, and he will therefore fail to restore to health the Fisher King, his lands, and his people. By the time Chrétien's text reaches its abrupt conclusion, Perceval has yet to repair the damage triggered by his sin of ignoring his fallen mother.¹¹ Chrétien's romances were originally performed aloud, and it is striking to realize that this doom-triggering scene—rooted in sincere but ultimately catastrophic fascination with knightly beauty—occurred just a few minutes into what must have been a performance of several hours in length.¹²

The Second Example: Blanchefleur Appears before Perceval

It is difficult to gauge the role Blanchefleur would have played in the *Conte du Graal* if Chrétien had brought his romance to a conclusion. Perceval meets her nearly 2,000 lines into the text, courageously saves her and her people, then leaves her but vows to return. It is irrefutable that in the poem as he left it, with Perceval's vow unfulfilled, her portrait is by far the longest description of any human character, and among the longest descriptions of any sort to be found in the text. In order to study what seems to be the purposely fractured nature of this portrait, it will be presented here divided into three sections, although such visual separation did not occur in any medieval manuscript. I hope to demonstrate that Chrétien has a different

motivation for each of the three contiguous pieces. As Perceval sees Blanchefleur for the first time, the audience hears:

Et la pucele vint plus cointe
 Et plus acesmee et plus jointe
 Que espreviers ne papegaus.
 Ses mantiax fu et ses bliaus
 D'une porpre noire, estelee
 D'or, et n'estoit mie pelee
 La penne qui d'ermine fu.
 D'un sebelin noir et chenu,
 Qui n'estoit trop lons ne trop lez,
 Fu li mantiax al col orlez. (1795-1804)

The description begins with Blanchefleur's splendor and grace being compared favorably to two types of bird (1795-97), which may be ironic because she has long been "caged" with her starving people in her besieged castle. It then moves to a formulaic and rather uninspired description of her external layer, that is, her clothing. The description thus far holds little hint of its impending superlativeness, and I suggest that Chrétien intended this first third of portrait to sneakily lower his audience's expectations. His public could not have been astounded to learn that Blanchefleur's fur was plush rather than thinning (1800), and that her collar was correctly executed (1803). But then, in the next lines, the narrator ratchets up the rhetoric:

Et se je onques fis devise
 En biauté que Diex eüst mise
 En cors de feme ne en face,
 Or me replaist que une en face
 Ou je ne me[n]tirai de mot.
 Desliee fu et si ot
 Les chaveus tiex, s'estre poïst,

Que bien quidast qui les veïst
 Que il fuissent tot de fin or,
 Tant estoient luisant et sor. (1805-1814)

Suddenly the focus has moved away from the subject of the portrait to the narrator, and offers a sort of mental throat-clearing: regardless of his past portraits, this new one, unlike the others, will be the pure truth (1805-09). By the narrator's own decree (with none of Blanche fleur's physical features yet mentioned), she is cited as his most beautiful subject. Next, as tradition requires, he begins at the top of the beautiful woman's body—the top of the head—to tell of her radiant blonde hair (1810-14). Continuing, still rigorously following tradition, the narrator moves downward, systematically denoting Blanche fleur's stunning features:

Le front ot haut et blanc et plain
 Come s'il fust ovrez a main,
 Et que de main d'ome ovrez fust
 De pierre ou d'yvoire ou de fust.
 Sorciex brunez et large entr'ueil,
 En la teste furent li oeil
 Vair et riant, cler et fendu;
 Le nez ot droit et estendu,
 Et miex avenoit en son vis
 Li vermeus sor le blanc assis
 Que li sinoples sor l'argent.
 Por embler sen et cuer de gent
 Fist Diex en li passemerville,
 C'onques puis ne fist sa pareille
 Ne devant faite ne l'avoit. (1815-29)

The narrator makes passing reference to Blanche fleur's rosy cheeks against her pale skin (1823-24), a color pairing that will resurface, strikingly, nearly 2,500 lines later in the iconic scene where

the lost and shattered Perceval comes upon a few drops of blood that have landed upon a layer of fresh snow and thinks of her complexion (4192-4210). By crediting God with the creation of Blanchefleur (1828), Chrétien changed a key detail found in all such earlier portraits: they, by contrast, had given creative credit for their beautiful women to Nature (Busby *Chrétien* 27). This small but elevating tweak, a quick step away from tradition, must have caught the ear of medieval audiences, as well as its pairing with the literally marvelous noun *passemerveille* in the same verse.

More than eight centuries after this portrait's composition, modern critics are divided about its aesthetic appeal. For Kelly, the portrait is a success, albeit stereotypical: "Blanchefleur is presented in a brief, but highly conventional portrait: gorgeous dress, extraordinarily beautiful features" ("Description" 205). But for Emmanuèle Baumgartner, the portrait is "[u]n accroc important" that is "lourdement pris en charge," and perhaps intended to slyly show, in its excess, that Perceval is still unable to see human beings correctly: "Clin d'oeil de Chrétien à son public, pour lui montrer qu'il n'a pas perdu la main, ou manière biaisée de signaler que son héros, à l'aise avec la description de châteaux forts, n'est pas encore à même de détailler un visage de femme dont il ne retiendra finalement que l'essentiel, *li vermauz sor le blan assis...?*" (50). There is no question, however, that medieval audiences responded well to the portrait, as it quickly became a classic and was copied by subsequent romancers (Busby *Chrétien* 27, Kelly "Description" 206).

The artificial division of Blanchefleur's portrait here into three segments reveals the first portion to be rather uninspired, if not bland, the second to contain an unanticipated narrator's boast of artistic purity and triumph, the third to feature a long, enthused string of concrete physical details credited, for the first time in romance, to God and resulting in a marvel. Taken in a single sweep, Blanchefleur's portrait seems a bit choppy, a bit heterogeneous. Marie-Noëlle Lefay-Toury points out the gentle undercurrent of trouble in the description by comparing it to the painter Francisco de Goya's subtly unflattering tableaux of the Spanish royal family (283). Lefay-Toury finds no traits as sinister as those of King Charles IV in Perceval's love interest, but believes her to be a bit of an operator: "Blanchefleur, heureusement, n'est pas aussi noire; juste

un peu coquette, juste un peu intéressée” (283). It is possible that the unevenness and variance from formulaic tradition that Chrétien put into Blanchefleur’s portrait were designed as a winking warning to the audience that this stunning beauty was not entirely pure, nor entirely to be trusted.¹³

The Third Example: The Hideous Damsel Arrives at Court

The Hideous Damsel is unique in Chrétien’s *oeuvre*: she is the only physically ugly female character he ever penned (Lefay-Toury 284). The audience meets her at roughly the midpoint of the text as Chrétien left it, and at a seemingly optimistic point in the narrative. Perceval has recently happened by chance upon King Arthur’s traveling court, where, fortuitously, Gawain is present as well. The two knights, the text’s twin protagonists, begin to bond amiably, but then the Hideous Damsel arrives with disastrous news. Her physical appearance is singularly shocking:

Dusques al tier jor que il virent
 Une damoisele qui vint
 Sor une falve mule, et tint
 En sa main destre une corgie.
 La damoisele fu trechie
 A .ii. treches tortes et noires;
 Et se les paroles sont voires
 Tels com li livres les devise,
 Onques rien si laide a devise
 Ne fu neüs dedans enfer.
 Ainc ne veïstes si noir fer
 Come ele ot le col et les mains,
 Et encor estoit ce del mains
 A l’autre laidece qu’ele ot,
 Que si oeil estoient dui clot,
 Petit ausi com oeil de rat.

Ses nez fu de singe ou de chat,
 Et ses levres d'asne ou de buef;
 Si dent sambloient miol d'oef,
 De color tant estoient rous,
 Et si ot barbe comme bous.
 Enmi le pis ot une boche,
 Devers l'eschine sambloit croche;
 Et s'ot les rains et les espaulles
 Trop bien faites por mener baulles,
 S'ot boche el dos et jambes torte
 Qui vont ausi com .ii. roortes,
 Trop bien faites por mener dance. (4610-37)

This description begins plainly, even banally, with the damsel's black braids (4614-15), pauses for a verification of the source material (4616-17), and then quickly becomes a lengthy string of unsophisticated, literally beastly comparisons.

As an amalgamation of animal-kingdom body parts, the Hideous Damsel seems at first repulsive and only half-human, but she is in fact far from a monster: when arriving, she greets—rather than insults or ignores—all of the members of the court except Perceval (4642-44), and, after criticizing the Welshman, tells Arthur why she must leave, rather than departing without explanation (4685-87). While she does publicly expose the suffering caused by Perceval's silence at the Grail Castle (4646-83), this charge is true rather than slanderous, and she simultaneously announces to the assembled knights the possibility of guaranteed combat for any and all at Castle Pride, and the chance to win the greatest honor in the world by saving the besieged young woman near the peak of Mount Esclair (4688-4714). So while it is true that her arrival destroys a moment of warm hospitality and brotherhood and more or less banishes Perceval, it also offers the other knights the professionally essential opportunity to distinguish themselves.

As Keith Busby points out, mule-mounted damsels arriving at Arthur's court with a message are hardly a rare occurrence in medieval romance, but the Hideous Damsel's description "is a parody by inversion of the traditional female portrait" that, in its choice of details, purposely and systematically gets each of them wrong: her hair should be golden yellow, not black; her neck and hands alabaster, not black; her eyes like a falcon's, not a rat's; and so on (*Chrétien* 46-47). The technique of placing a strange or unusual visual image in a text to serve as an *aide-mémoire* dates back to ancient treatises on rhetoric (Kelly *Romance* 51). But for Zrinka Stahuljak *et al.*, the Hideous Damsel's shocking appearance is meant not necessarily to prompt recollection of her blistering speech to Perceval, but perhaps to prompt recollection of memory *tout court*:

Chrétien's compilation of animal features in the Hideous Damsel offers a narrative representation similar to the images of animals and animal-human hybrid creatures that appear in the margins of medieval books as mnemonic devices, but the Hideous Damsel is not attached to any memory grid such as those found in books of memory. This surprising portrait may emphasize the oracular function of this maiden, and if the maiden is described as a memory image, her portrait may point to the importance of remembering her speech, but it seems more likely that her vividly grotesque appearance may recall memory itself. (153-54)

We have, then, in the Hideous Damsel far more than just an ugly bearer of bad news. Although present in the text for only a few dozen lines, she plays four roles: an entertainingly grotesque parody of the standard beautiful woman's portrait; an uninvited and unexpected disperser of the court; a messenger simultaneously bringing scorn (for Perceval) and adventure (for the other knights); and an ambulatory symbol of memory. This fourth role is of particular note, as the *Conte du Graal's* plot relies so heavily on Perceval's inability to process and master the lessons given to him.

We conclude by citing Evelyn Birge Vitz, who, considering Chrétien's romances in general, writes that "...his descriptions of people are very much 'set pieces.' All beautiful women are so essentially in the same ways; the same goes for men" (152-53). This statement is certainly true for the descriptions in the *Conte du Graal* that we have labeled as belonging to the second type, but it does not do justice to the three expanded portraits we have studied. Each of the three

is radically different in nature: the first is an excited and exciting misreading; the second is a fractured exaggeration of a cliché; and the third is a mounted horror show that nonetheless speaks the truth. The first—seen through an adolescent’s child-like eyes—is primitive, even primal, and more metonymic than concrete; the second speaks of sublime beauty at length, its emphasis on craftsmanship and materials; the third speaks of sublime ugliness at length, its hideousness built, like a collage, on substitutional animal parts affixed to a deformed human body. In these three instances, we must acknowledge Chrétien’s ability to create indelible and distinct characters who are, quite literally, built from different raw materials. Always a self-aware and self-conscious poet, his extended portraits form a catalogue of his remarkably diverse descriptive skills.

But the three portraits also share several characteristics. In each case the arrival of the person or people described is unanticipated, having in no way been prefigured by an announcement or even a subtle hint from the narrator or any characters. Secondly, the descriptions all unfold “in real time”; that is, the audience hears the portraits at the exact same moment as the characters who are present in the scenes witness them. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, each portrait serves to drive the story forward: Perceval’s encounter with the knights jumpstarts the entire plot; Blanchefleur’s arrival in the romance prompts Perceval to take on his first great chivalric challenge, at which he excels; and the Hideous Damsel’s entrance shocks the court and bifurcates the narrative, sending Perceval and Gawain out separately immediately thereafter.

It is well on the one hand to point out Chrétien’s economical, even minimal, descriptive style, and on the other to applaud his ability to create rich and vivid visual portraits. But it is his ability to smoothly combine these two seemingly incompatible traits within the dense and complicated narrative of the *Conte du Graal* that is worthy of particular recognition. The three extended descriptions we have studied, when combined, total only seventy-five lines, or less than one percent of the romance. And yet each of the three is a determinative piece of the storytelling act whose impact—on the witnessing characters and on the audience—reaches far beyond the subject’s physical beauty or ugliness. Chrétien’s ability to simultaneously make each of these

portraits surprising, entertaining, ambiguous, atypical, and essential to the plot is a beautiful thing indeed.

EAST STROUDSBURG UNIVERSITY

Notes

¹ Space limitations will not allow for a plot summary of this intricate text, but for such a summary see Baumgartner 21-34 or Busby *Chrétien* 16-86.

² On Chrétien's formal education, see Uitti 17-34. On his descriptive style, see Kelly's "Description" and *Romance* 291-305.

³ Sandra Hindman, for example, writes that "[i]n all, Chrétien wrote five captivating verse romances, unusually vivid stories full of marvelous adventures and keen psychological insight..." (1), while Joseph Duggan describes Chrétien as "a word-painter of vivid scenes that have lingered in the imagination of readers and writers" (289).

⁴ This tally includes only descriptions of *human* beauty or ugliness; it does not take into account instances where Chrétien describes beautiful, ugly, or singular clothing. Also excluded from consideration are Chrétien's descriptions of characters who are fatigued, exhausted, malnourished, and so forth. It is surprising to our modern expectations that there is essentially no information detailing what Perceval and Gawain actually look like: two lines tell us that Perceval has bright, laughing eyes (974-75), and a single line tells us that Gawain has a mustache (5135).

⁵ While the number of times Chrétien uses the Old French word *bel* in the text in reference to human characters is an objective data point, how many times the adjective should be translated as "handsome" or "pretty" or "beautiful" in modern English rather than "sweet" or "dear" is, admittedly, subjective. I have not counted in this tally the use of *gent*, an adjective sometimes translated into modern English as "lovely" but more often as "noble" or "courteous." In the *Conte du Graal*, Chrétien occasionally describes the appearance of a character as both *bel* and *gent* in a single verse, which would make the translation of *gent* as "lovely" in such a context redundant.

⁶ On the development of stereotypical human portraiture of beauty, see Kelly “Description” 194-96. We today might object to the fact that the *Conte du Graal* names three different men the most handsome, and two different women the most beautiful. See note 7, below. Kelly comments, however, that “[t]o perceive individuals in any modern sense in characters of medieval romance is anachronistic” (*Romance* 231). On the contrast between the medieval notion of type and the modern notion of the individual, see *Romance* 231-40.

⁷ It should be noted that two female characters, Clarissant and the queen (Guinevere, although her proper name is not used in the text), receive two such descriptions each. The seven superlative portraits are as follows: Perceval (1864-74); Kay (2793-2807); Guinevere (4587-91); Clarissant (7539-43); Clarissant (7899-7908); Guinevere (8176-98), and Guiromelant (8544-46).

⁸ We may say at minimum of the squire’s portrait that it forms a natural pair with that of the Hideous Damsel in its grotesqueness, and that this character’s shocking appearance and attitude must have prompted medieval audiences to understand that Gawain still found himself in an unsafe, otherworldly region.

⁹ All quotations are taken from Keith Busby’s critical edition of the *Conte du Graal*.

¹⁰ Lacy writes: “What interests him is form; that is, the physical trappings and the rules of knighthood” (26).

¹¹ The present study will not treat the four verse sequels that were written by subsequent poets in the half-century that followed Chrétien’s death and that, as we have them in their manuscript form today, either extend his incomplete romance (the *First*, *Second*, and *Fourth* (*sic*) *Continuations*) or bring it to a close (the *Third Continuation*).

¹² On the public performance of medieval French romance, see Vitz, especially 188-207.

¹³ On the ambiguous figure of Blanchefleur and her questionable sincerity, see Lacy 62-64.

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