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Perceval's Puerile Perceptions: The First Scene of the *Conte du Graal* as an Index of Medieval Concepts of Human Development Theory

Leah Tether

*Durham University, School of Modern Languages and Cultures, Elvet Riverside,
New Elvet, Durham, DH1 3JT*

Tel: +44 (0)191 334 3461/(0)7939 437868

Fax: +44 (0)191 334 3421

E-mail: l.r.tether@dur.ac.uk

Abstract: Utilising the first scene of Chrétien de Troyes's *Conte du Graal*, this paper explores the problematic nature of applying modern psychological theory to medieval literature, and proposes how medieval literature itself may actually provide a useful, and relatively untapped, source for understanding contemporaneous concepts of cognitive and perceptual development. Specifically, it demonstrates how the oddly childlike characteristics of Chrétien's Perceval, in this often-named *Bildungsroman*, can be interpreted as mirroring particular schemes of development imagined by Classical and Medieval thinkers such as Aristotle, Augustine and Boethius. The level of influence and popularity enjoyed by the *Conte*, and indeed by Chrétien's other works, implies that any scheme of development which can be demonstrated as central to Chrétien's narrative(s) may have been more widely authoritative. As such, medieval literature may offer the medieval scholar acres of unploughed territory from which to glean a more complete understanding of psychoanalysis in the Middle Ages.

Keywords: Perceval – Perception – Childhood – Faculty Psychology – Development

Perceval's Puerile Perceptions:

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The study of literature has long been enriched and informed by psychoanalytical discourse and scientific theories of human development. The application of human development theory to literature has become commonplace due to the modern fascination with the working of the human mind. Contemporary theory on psychological and psychosomatic processes such as childhood development, the mechanisms of cognition and perceptual maturation has found its way, with relative ease, into the analysis and criticism of modern literature.¹ For medieval studies scholars, however, the application of such theory to medieval literature presents a number of *impasses*. The comparatively limited composition of psychological criticism and theory in the Middle Ages, coupled with the fact that what has survived may represent only a small fragment of the full picture, means that the medieval studies scholar has little choice but to apply modern theory to his medieval subject. And however persuasive this modern theory may be, the question always remains as to whether any real significance can be attached to such analyses, as they do not, and cannot, prove anything conclusively about the medieval psyche on these particular subjects, except how it appears from a modern perspective. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to demonstrate how, in the absence of contemporary theory and criticism, another medieval resource may be used to inform a modern audience about the prevalence and influence of particular schemes of childhood and perceptual maturation in the Middle Ages. Literature constitutes one of the most important corpuses of extant written material from the Middle Ages and, as a significant representation of taste, culture, opinion and the collective imagination, the information contained within literature has the potential to unlock the answers to many of the questions posed by scholars concerning the medieval concept of developmental theory. Further, a valuable by-product of the acquisition of a better understanding of such theoretical matters may be the facilitation of the psychological analysis of other works of medieval literature. This is an area which, naturally, has wide-reaching corollaries – far too wide to be fully examined in a short paper such as this – thus I intend to consider it here purely on the micro-level in order to provide a lens for further study. As such, I shall examine just one scene from one text with the aim of determining how effectively literature might be employed for this purpose.

The text I have chosen is Chrétien de Troyes's *Conte du Graal*, a romance of considerable significance and lasting impact. If any medieval author is to be trusted as having enjoyed the privilege of popular appeal, then Chrétien de Troyes must surely be it. His romances are extant in large numbers of manuscripts (the *Conte* appears in sixteen Old French manuscripts alone) which serve as testament to the popularity of their contemporary reception. And the *Conte*'s central Grail theme, in particular, has influenced the development of literature and culture right up to the modern day. It is, however, the oddly childlike behaviour and

¹ The naissance of the term *Bildungsroman*, for example, is a good example of the impact of modern psychoanalysis and human development theory on literary studies.

subsequent development of its main protagonist, Perceval, which has long intrigued literary critics. A number postulate that Chrétien did not intend his text to centre on the general significance of the Grail, rather on the effect of the Grail upon the cognitive and perceptual maturation of Perceval. In other words, they propose that the *Conte du Graal* be read as a *Bildungsroman*.² If this is so, its first scene – which introduces the reader to the various oddities of Perceval’s character – should provide clues as to the medieval concept of perceptual cognition in its earliest stages.

The setting for this scene is commonplace enough – a beautiful spring morning – but the phrase with which Chrétien introduces his protagonist, ‘li fix a la veve dame/ De la gaste forest’ (vv. 74–75³), is surprising. This is not so much because the reader does not learn his name, but because the text identifies both characters only tangentially: he as the son of his mother, she as ‘[d]e la gaste forest’. There are, in other words, no details: no indications as to age, appearance, class or ancestry. All we gather is how much he takes pleasure in sensual aspects such as the warmth of the spring morning and the song of the birds:

Ensi en la forest s’en entre.
Et maintenant li cuers del ventre
Por le dolç tans li resjoï,
Et por le chant que il oï
Des oisiæx qui joie faisoient;
Toutes ces choses li plaisoient. (vv. 85–90, my italics)

It is as if he is entirely given over to his senses (‘li cuers del ventre’), particularly those of touch and sound; indeed, it is as if he is receptive only to these ‘surface’ pleasures. As we meet him, he is engaged in a game of javelin-throwing, which again seems to have no purpose other than to give him a sensual satisfaction:

Et cil qui bien lancier savoit
Des gaveloz que il avoit,
Aloit environ lui lançant
Une eure [arriere] et autre avant,
Une eure en bas et autre en haut... (vv. 95–99)

It is at this point that five armed knights appear, making all sorts of noises unfamiliar to the youth. Chrétien’s lexicon here insists once again, disconcertingly, on the sensual:

Et molt grant *noise* demenoient
Les armes de ciæx qui venoient;
Car sovent *hurtoient* as armes
Li rain des chaines et des charmes.
Les lances as escus *hurtoient*,
Et tout li hauberc *fremissoient*;
Sone li fuz, *sone* li fers
Et des escus et des haubers. (vv. 103–10, my italics)

² For example, Micha (1951, p.122) who describes it as a ‘roman de l’initiation’ and Simons (1988) who looks at Chrétien’s interest in education and development in the *Conte*.

³ All textual references are to Busby (1993).

Perceval's reaction is surprising. He appears not to know what they are, and imagines at first that they might be devils. At this point, for the reader, it is hard to know whether to attribute this to simplicity, or childlike ignorance:

«Par m'ame,
Voir me dist ma mere, ma dame,
Qui me dist que deable sont
Plus esfreeé que rien del mont,
Et si dist por moi enseingnier
Que por aus se doit an seingnier,
Mes cest ensaig desdaignerai,
Que ja voir ne m'en seigneraï,...» (vv. 113–20)

This initial notion that he is somewhat childlike is then strengthened by Perceval's rather odd dependence on his mother's advice to interpret the things he sees. Indeed, when the knights actually come into view, his belief that they are devils soon changes. Owing to their 'bel' (v. 136) appearance, he now believes them to be angels, as his mother has told him that angels are 'beles choses' (v. 144). This false syllogism⁴ makes it clear that his mother has given him some elementary tools of perception and unusual principles of reasoning, but that much beyond this he cannot comprehend:

Ne me dist pas ma mere fable,
Qui me dist que li angle estoient
Les plus *beles* choses qui soient,
Fors Diex qui est plus *biex* que tuit.
Chi voi je Damedieu, ce quit,
Car .i. si *bel* en i esgart
Que li autre, se Diex me gart,
N'ont mie de *biauté* la disme. (vv. 142–49, my italics)

There is also further emphasis on the importance, for Perceval, of surface appearance, and particularly concerning his perceptions of the knights' armour; indeed, Perceval appears quite astounded by how beautiful the knights look. None of the terms used, though, is at all out of the way: listeners to the romance would have found them familiar as descriptors of arms and armour from other sources of the time.⁵ What is remarkable, though, is the subject of Perceval's apparent focus: he is fascinated, rather like a very young child, by the sheer detail, light and colours of what the knights wear, but he appears unable to react to the event itself. And Chrétien makes a particular point of focusing his narrative specifically on the depiction of Perceval's apparently material, sensual world by, for example, peppering the narrative with verbs of sensation such as 'veoir', and related verbs such as 'connui' (v. 176), which seem to imply that for Perceval, seeing, in its

⁴ Chrétien may be playing with a logical fallacy here given that, as an educated man, he very likely studied logic, thus he would have expected his audience to recognise this as a fundamental fallacy, which serves as additional evidence that Chrétien's contemporary audience would have perceived Perceval as naïve.

⁵ Just one example is 'fremianz' in v. 129, which comes from *formillier* in French (*schimmern* in German) and is used almost exclusively with hauberks, according to Tobler-Lommatzsch (1952-, III, column 2120).

simplest form, equates to understanding. For example, after the knight has explained that he is not God, but a knight, Perceval says:

—Ainc mes chevalier ne *connui*,
Fait li vallés, *ne nul n'en vi*
N'onques mais *parler n'en oï*;
Mais vous estes plus biax que Diex. (vv. 176–79, my italics)

Chrétien's repetitive use of verbs of sensation is an ingenious way of expressing the fact that for the boy fully to comprehend something, he has to have already seen it. This is a sketch of a process of cognition which assumes that understanding ('connui') is a function of seeing ('vi') and also of hearing ('parler n'en oï'). That is, Perceval cannot distinguish between perceiving, identifying and understanding – all, to him, mean the same. He is confined to the mere seeing/hearing, or perceptual, aspect, whereby he can do no more than register sense impressions, without being able to relate them to any process of identification or understanding.

This childlike fascination with surface appearance is further emphasised when Perceval goes on to bombard the knights with questions about their armour (vv. 189–276, for example '«Que est iche que vos tenez?»' (v. 191)). His only desire seems to be to find out the name and the function of the various knightly accessories; indeed he appears to attach a disproportionate significance to learning the names of things. For example, Perceval defines the knights as 'Vos qui *avez non* chevaliers', (v. 190, my italics), and the objects they carry, in turn, serve to define them as 'knights'. Perceval, as we know, is defined not in his essence – that is, in his identity – but only in relation to others (e.g. 'li fix a la veve dame' (v. 74)); it seems, here, as if the knights, for him, are defined not by their function, still less by their identities, rather by the objects that go with their physical selves. By thus defining the knights metonymically, Chrétien alerts us immediately to a distinct oddity of perception that seems inherent in the way Perceval views his surroundings. This reliance on metonymic interpretation is further confirmed when Perceval later asks about the whereabouts of Arthur who, the knights have told him, provided their armour. Perceval names him the 'roi qui les chevaliers fet' (v. 333), because metonymically, just as a knight is defined by his armour, to Perceval a king is defined by the fact he can create knights by providing that armour. This conception of naming and identification is again something which suggests, to the modern reader, a certain childlike quality to this protagonist, and this instinctive reaction is more than just a passing one. Such matters as naming are, of course, considered important to the scientific understanding of child development.⁶

There are, then, three main aspects to the apparently childlike behaviour of Perceval. First, that he has a distinct fascination for sensual effects like sound and light, or surface appearance – appearing incapable of perceiving beyond them; second, that his perceptions are circumscribed by those of his mother; third, that he sees naming as a definition of function. As we have said, a modern reader, surely, cannot avoid finding Perceval's preoccupations and perceptions, with objects and the way he covets them, with names, with his own individual needs, distinctly childlike, not to say infantile. The question this paper poses and tries to

⁶ See, for example, Dale (1969), and more recently Rymes (1996) and Gopnik and Meltzoff (1992).

answer, however, is whether this literary portrayal can elucidate the medieval understanding of the same matters.

The modern understanding of childhood in the Middle Ages, and of the ways in which it was viewed and theorised, was, for a long time, defined largely by Philippe Ariès's seminal *L'Enfant et la vie familiale*.⁷ Briefly, Ariès argues that in the Middle Ages, childhood was not considered a separate or autonomous stage in human development, nor was it thought that childhood, as a transitional phase between infancy and adulthood, was worth attention in its own right. Children in the Middle Ages, Ariès considers, were thought of as largely ignorant, lacking intellectual and perceptual identity; in medieval society, they were perceived as little more than small-scale adults and there existed none of the modern preoccupations with education and the physical, moral and sexual problems of childhood. This does not mean that children were forsaken, neglected or despised; simply, Ariès is suggesting that there was no awareness of that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult.⁸ More recent scholarship, however, suggests that the understanding of childhood in the Middle Ages was more complex than Ariès seemed to suggest – and indeed, that his theories may have been too sweeping and distinctly selective.⁹ Certainly the Perceval of this first scene, with his insistence on the sensual, his fascination with naming and his limited but intense perceptions, corresponds so closely to modern conceptions of childhood and perceptual development that it seems unlikely that at least some of the modern audience's assumptions would not have resonated with those of their medieval counterparts. As such, it becomes necessary to engage with the following line of enquiry: did the Middle Ages theorise childhood in any material way? And if so, what authorities are available on which we can draw for a more nuanced, more specific image of what childhood meant in the Middle Ages? Two of the *auctoritates* most influential in the Middle Ages were Aristotle and Augustine. Aristotle's works had only recently been translated into Latin and, as a result, his philosophies were enjoying considerable esteem in medieval philosophical scholarship. Augustine, in the confused, changing landscape of the crumbling Roman Empire, provided an all-embracing view of the Christian faith and, as such, his theological and philosophical opinions became particularly cherished in the volatile Middle Ages.¹⁰ Neither of these two great philosophers, it is true, addresses childhood directly, but both provide a vision of childhood and of perceptual development to be gleaned from incidentals within their works.

In Aristotle's *Politics*, in his discussion of the distinguishing features of reasonable creatures, he produces a rather revealing statement:

The deliberative faculty of children is imperfect, and so when we attribute virtues to them, we use a different standard from the one that is appropriate for free male adults. [...] Children will develop the capacity to deliberate, but during their immaturity they live emotionally and without reflection.¹¹

⁷ Ariès (1974). This work has often formed the starting point for many subsequent discussions, like, for example, the various essays in Goldberg and Riddy (2004). I think you need to say a bit more here. What sort of conclusions, what sort of attitude characterises these essays.

⁸ Ariès (1974, p.177).

⁹ For example, see, among others, Heywood (2001, p. 110); Shahar (1992, p. 3); Schultz (1995, pp. 2–5).

¹⁰ Kretzman, Kenny and Penborg (1982), Heywood (2001 pp. 14–15), Shahar (1992, p. 15), Nelson (1994, pp. 81–114) and Orme (2001, pp. 14–15).

¹¹ Aristotle (1910–52, 1260a–12–18).

There are several phrases here which merit exploration in the present context. First, Aristotle's contention that it is proper to 'use a different standard' when discussing children. This implies, of course, that for Aristotle a specific, and definable, phase or *stage* of human development is identifiable, and that it should be separated from normal, adult-centred life. Second, and especially in the context of the *Conte du Graal*, the contention that children live 'emotionally and without reflection' seems to imply that children are unable to intellectualise: that they live 'in the moment', focused only on what is sensual. This recognition of a separate, distinct identity for the child – and one which differs significantly from adulthood – also bears a considerable resemblance to the state which Chrétien imagines for Perceval, who appears unable to deliberate autonomously,¹² and whose emotions, it seems, lack mature control and are reliant instead on his mother's advice. This is confirmed elsewhere in Aristotle's scattered comments on childhood; in another significant passage from the *Ethics*, the philosopher suggests that a child lacks the capacity for reason and displays a distinct attraction for sensual pleasures, without restraint or thought for the consequences:

Children ... live as their *desires* impel them, and it is in them that the *appetite for pleasant things* is strongest; so unless this is rendered docile and submissive to authority it will pass all bounds. For in an irrational being *the appetite for what gives it pleasure* is insatiable and indiscriminate, and the exercise of the desire increases its innate tendency; and if these appetites are strong and violent, they actually drive out reason.¹³

The phrases italicised here are important. What is noticeable is the vocabulary of the senses, and the emphasis on pleasure as opposed to rationality – and of course we cannot but be reminded of Perceval, and his absolute delight in those things which gratify his senses.

Finally, and again significantly for the portrait of Perceval, Aristotle stresses that there is not just one stage of life that encompasses the whole of childhood, rather that there are various discernible stages throughout the cognitive and perceptual development of a child:

The stage of life through which children pass down to the age of seven is bound to be one of home training; and young as they are they will be likely to contract vulgar habits from anything vulgar they hear or see.¹⁴

This suggests that, if Perceval's behaviour in this first scene of the *Conte* is reminiscent of one of Aristotle's suggested 'stages of childhood', then perhaps Chrétien is indeed pointing to just such a developmental transition.

To summarise: Aristotle considers that children are able to perceive, to react to, and to be gratified by, sensory stimulation; that they absorb everything, but their lack of experience means that they do not have the capacity to interpret their perceptions correctly. I am not, of course, suggesting that Chrétien read Aristotle – but of course, of all the philosophers of the ancient world, it was Aristotle who was the most influential and the most read and paraphrased in the Middle Ages. It would, therefore, be no surprise to find what Chrétien says having affinities with

¹² cf. particularly my previous comments on false syllogisms, above.

¹³ Aristotle (1976, p. 141), my italics. See also M. F. Burnyeat's (1999, pp. 215–17) discussion of the child's love of sensual pleasures.

¹⁴ Aristotle (1948, p. 387).

the philosopher's views. But as suggested, there is another, more contemporary, source who exerted considerable influence on the medieval concept of childhood and perceptual development, and he is Augustine of Hippo (354-430).

Augustine is usually considered the instigator of the medieval idea that a child was born in sin, being the fruit of his parents' sexual intercourse,¹⁵ and that this thus affected the course of his ultimate development. Most crucially, Augustine sees childhood as a period in which reason and understanding (in other words, the tools of perception) are still dormant. This militates against the view that childhood should be judged on the same lines as is adulthood: a child, he suggests, should not be thought of as good or innocent, but rather as simply subject to basic drives which are not yet managed by reason.¹⁶ In his *Confessions*, Augustine also considers how learning in childhood may affect a child's perception and process of cognition. Specifically, Augustine considers that the roots of cognition, and of learning to understand lie in the correct perception of worldly objects:

Learning begins with sense perception, that is, with 'the rational knowledge of temporal things'. But it must rise up to the higher intellectual level, that is, to 'the intellectual knowledge of eternal things'. It is on this level that absolute truth is to be found by the effort of pure thought. It is the function of the curriculum of the liberal arts to set the intelligence of the learner free by leading him gradually from concentration on sense experience to purely intellectual inquiry.¹⁷

This citation explains that, in terms of mental or cognitive development – and this is particularly valuable for this discussion of the *Conte* – Augustine, seems to postulate a two-stage model.¹⁸ At the earliest stage – what might be termed the infant stage – sensory perceptions and 'sense experience' are paramount: the child is merely absorbent, and not reflective. His or her first developmental stage will involve, as he calls it, 'rational knowledge' – that is, an understanding of the factual, material world around them or a comprehension of the surface of things and their initial appearance. A second stage, he says, involves 'intellectual knowledge': that is, a wider comprehension of the world: going beyond mere appearance, knowing and understanding what lies behind the obvious and realising that simple objects may have higher meanings or significances. A full intellectual and moral development – that is, the understanding of absolute truth – can only be achieved by passing through these successive stages (ideally, of course, and as Augustine understands it, assisted by the full educational experience as adumbrated in the ancient and medieval curriculum). If this model is applied to Perceval, it would appear that his intelligence has not yet been released in the sense which Augustine suggests, as the boy is still confined to sensual experience, and appears unable to perceive and interpret correctly what it is that he experiences. As such, he might conditionally be placed in the earliest stage of Augustine's model of cognitive development.

¹⁵ Shahar (1992, p. 15); Heywood (2001, pp. 14-15).

¹⁶ Shahar (1992, p. 15).

¹⁷ Howie (1969, p. 197).

¹⁸ And of course, the notion that there are a number of 'stages' within cognition means that Augustine shares a common notion with Aristotle on this point.

The matter of sense perception¹⁹ has been shown to be central to the schemes of cognitive development posited by both Aristotle and Augustine. This, coupled with the fact that Chrétien seems to be making Perceval's own sense perceptions the key to understanding his rather odd character, demonstrates that medieval concepts of *perceptual* development in general, and their specific influence on the wider study of *childhood* development, warrant further investigation. In terms of childhood development, Augustine, crucially, insists unequivocally that the key to perception is the sense of sight; given that the majority of Perceval's sensual gratifications come through the sense of sight, this seems particularly appropriate:

Vision is the understanding which belongs to the soul; it is achieved by the combination of the sense of sight and the sensible object. If either is taken away, nothing can be seen.²⁰

Augustine's point, of course, is in essence philosophical: sight is that one of the senses which most governs understanding. But since it was noted, above, how far Chrétien stresses Perceval's fascination with light and shining objects, it is reasonable to consider whether this too is not evidence of a particular vision of childhood mentalities, and the development of the child from sensual to intellectual/moral being. Indeed, Augustine, like Aristotle, envisages a number of stages as being present underneath the overarching heading of childhood. What he suggests is essentially a three-stage model, incorporating moral, spiritual and perceptual development. The first of these stages is *infantia*, which sometimes incorporates two sub-stages within it, thus creating what could loosely be termed a four-staged version, the characteristics of which may be tabled as follows:

1. *Infantia* (first sub-stage): This stage includes a need for constant maternal attention, a reliance on instinctual drives, an ignorance of language and thought and a demanding nature.
2. *Infantia* (second sub-stage): This stage develops characteristics such as covetousness (particularly of objects), a recognition of parental authority, an initial sense of identity and, most importantly for us, an ability to perceive but not to reason.
3. *Pueritia*: Here, one can expect to see characteristics such as being able to reason and discriminate in order, for example, to distinguish between good and evil, to perceive the significance of identity and, most importantly, to be able to perceive and accurately apply data gathered to new situations.
4. *Adolescentia*: At this stage, the child achieves a fully formed power of judgment and perception, whereby he can understand the full significance of identity, and of underlying symbols and objects, such that he may be both receptive to and reflective upon them.²¹

The importance of Augustine's model around the time of the *Conte*'s composition is confirmed by the appearance of a strikingly similar three-stage scheme in the encyclopedic work of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, to which I return below.²²

¹⁹ Sense perception, that is, as constituting the main route to learning and understanding.

²⁰ Howie (1969, pp. 204–5).

²¹ See Shahar (1992, pp. 21–31) for a lengthier description of the characteristics of each stage. See also Heywood (2001, p. 14).

²² *De Proprietatibus Rerum*, c. 1225–1230, first published 1470 (suggesting the work's continued influence). For reference to the three-stage scheme of childhood, see Bartholomaeus Anglicus (1964, book XI, chapters 1 and 5). See also the fourteenth-century translation: Bartholomaeus Anglicus (1975, I, pp. 291–2 and pp. 300–1).

Significantly, Perceval's behaviour conforms almost precisely to the initial stage of this model: *infantia*. Our first experience of him in the forest does indeed give us the image of a boy who is fascinated by objects and their names, entirely reliant on his mother's education and instinctive urges (reflected by his playfulness and violent petulance) and, most vitally, who has a tendency towards the all too literal interpretation of the things he perceives. But of even more crucial importance are three characteristics considered typical of the second sub-stage of *infantia*; first, his ability to perceive, but not to understand, conveyed in his focus on mere surface appearance; second, his apparent belief that naming is equal to defining. These are to him, it seems, his means of attaching significance to what he sees and perceives, but in reality, of course, neither of them can actually achieve that end. The third characteristic – again typical of the Aristotelian/Augustinian model – is his covetousness, which is particularly manifest in his adulation of and desire for the knights' armour. Thus, it is possible to confirm that Perceval is indeed conforming not only to a medieval idea of cognition, but also to one specifically of childhood, one which, it is likely, would have been recognisable to a medieval audience. It seems, in other words, that Perceval's *perceptions*, as imagined by Chrétien, resonate distinctly with a particular medieval conception of childhood whereby the key to understanding developmental processes, once again, lies with the attainment of a specific understanding of concepts of perceptual maturation. I will expand on this in a moment. It is, therefore, important to understand more about perception specifically, as medieval theories of the development of perception must be considerably more complex than can be derived from rather occasional comments in treatises designed for other purposes. It is therefore important to understand the medieval concepts of perception in their fullest context.

The theories of perception commonest in the Middle Ages are found in the so-called faculty psychologies, wherein each mental power is assigned to its proper cell or ventricle in the head according to its function, in an orderly progression of cognition from the first sensation to the idea.²³ It is known just how important the idea of faculty psychology was by the vast body of material written on it, and we also know that an educated medieval writer, and perhaps too a medieval audience, may have had some idea, if not a solid knowledge, of faculty psychology as such knowledge was not confined to the recondite and scholastic environment. It figures, for instance, in Bartholomaeus's already mentioned, influential and popular, encyclopedia:

Sensus verso communis siue interior diuiditur in tre partes secundum tres cerebri regions. Nam in cerebro tres sunt cellule: scilicet anterior, in qua virtus *ymaginatiua* operatur, que quideri ea que sensus extrinsecus apprehendit interius ordinat et componit,...est et media cellula, scilicet *logistica*, in qua sensibilis ratio siue estimatiua virtus dominatur; est iterum et tertia postrema, que est *memoratiua*, que ea que apprehensa sunt per ymaginationem siue rationem in thesauro memorie retinet et custodit.²⁴

²³Bundy (1976, p. 179). Kolve (1984) also gives a pleasingly succinct and intelligible account.

²⁴Bartholomaeus Anglicus (1979, book III, chapter 10, my italics).

Theorists²⁵ tell us that much of medieval faculty psychology begins with Avicenna, who essentially holds that the heart takes a position of absolute primacy in matters of the body, but that the sensitive faculties are not actually located there. Rather he suggests in his *Canon of Medicine*²⁶ that whilst it is arguable that the heart may be the principal organ of sensation, it is not the seat of what is known as the common sense: that is, where sensations are initially collected before being passed on for further interpretation.²⁷ Avicenna holds that just as there are five outward senses, so there are five inward wits. Initially, perception and cognition begin in the outer senses (which are located in the front ventricle of the brain), and then this information is passed on to the inward wits (situated in the middle ventricle); each of the inward wits processes information in a different way, resulting in a number of different forms of understanding, ranging from the mere perception of an object to the using of information gathered from an object already perceived in order to imagine new forms of that object; for example, having seen a man and something flying, and fusing the two to create a ‘flying man’, which cannot exist in reality, but which can exist in the imagination. In this scheme, it seems that Perceval somehow only has access to the first ‘wit’ whereby he can perceive, but not actually derive understanding from, that perception.

Avicenna’s model, of course, though widely influential, was subject to variation by a number of other thinkers.²⁸ Perhaps the clearest, most comprehensive and consistent of these is that of Boethius. Boethius addresses perception in the context of a discussion of free will versus divine foreknowledge and how they can coexist, since either term would seem to rule out the possibility of the other. Boethius suggests that the solution to this problem lies in making proper distinctions between ways of knowing, and that knowing is actualised by our ‘wits’: the five outer senses, which together form the first faculty in the ‘hierarchy of faculties’.²⁹ These ‘wits’ tell us about phenomena in their material form: e.g. the touch, taste, smell, sight and sound of an object. Once an object has been perceived, one can progress to the second faculty in the hierarchy, which is ‘imagination’, in which one cannot only recall the object, but also invent an altered image of the object (as with the ‘flying man’ example above). Higher still, and representing the third stage in the processing of the information collected by the five wits, is the third faculty, the faculty of ‘reason’, which is capable of relating the object to all associated objects, conceiving its universal class; for example, one should be able to accurately reason that a cat and a lion are actually from the same family, by recognising and analysing both their similarities and differences. Likewise, one should be able to understand relative differences within the same class, for example that one of two similar objects may be of better quality than the other, owing to the perceiver’s previous experience with factors such as what material it is made from, or the apparent skill of the craftsman.

²⁵ See Bundy (1976, p. 178 and pp. 182–83); but for an admirably lucid description of Avicenna’s theories, see Harvey (1975, pp. 21–53). It is mainly Harvey’s version that I shall be drawing upon in my own description of Avicenna’s theories.

²⁶ The Gruner edition of Avicenna (1930) provides an accessible version of the *Canon*.

²⁷ Harvey (1975, p. 39).

²⁸ For example, Albertus Magnus’s ‘De Apprehensione’ (1890–99) which includes his theory of ‘memory’, or the artificiality of memory. In this analysis however, we are more interested in the development of natural memory; for an illuminating discussion of memory in the Middle Ages, see Yates (1966, pp. 50–104).

²⁹ Boethius (1969, pp. 99–104).

The fourth way of knowing – one beyond the human – is possessed only by divine Providence, whose unique faculty, called ‘intelligence’, knows a thing not only exists within the world of matter, and as an image, and as a universal class, but also that it exists in perpetuity within the divine thought, e.g. that an object may exist in advance of, and will endure beyond, the material creation – in essence, it becomes an object which is constructed entirely by the bearer – one not necessitating any previous experience. This is effectively a kind of spiritual maturity, whereby the bearer possesses the ability to understand higher significances beyond the earthly plain and without physical prompting.³⁰ Access to each of these faculties is dependent upon the bearer having mastered the respective preceding faculty (or faculties): ‘In this hierarchy of faculties, each power comprehends all that is proper to the power(s) below it, but the lower has no access to anything higher.’³¹ In this way, the constructed image was considered superior to the reproduced image as the constructive power was thought able to transcend not only sense experience, but also the particular mental images by which it enters the memory, that is, if you could imagine an entirely new image, this would be superior to remembering an image already seen, as this ability is only available to those with access to the highest faculty in the hierarchy.³²

This ‘hierarchy of faculties’, as imagined by Boethius and others, can be applied quite strikingly to the image of the infantile Perceval. In this initial scene, for example, Perceval is capable only of perceiving objects; he cannot yet internalise those perceptions, reflect on them and fully understand their significance, so that his behaviour is reminiscent of the first faculty, that which consists of the ‘wits’, whereby one simply perceives an object via the senses, but cannot interpret accurately. In sum:

1. Among many odd characteristics, perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Perceval lies in his apparent perceptual inabilities: that is, in the fact that, perceptually, he seems confined simply to the reception of surface appearance, lacking the capacity then to reflect upon the perceived object and make an accurate judgment as to its significance.
2. This oddity of perception seems to correspond to the characteristics that medieval audiences would, it seems, have recognised as distinctly childlike, according to schemes of development set out by Aristotle and, later, Augustine – I speak specifically here of the stage of *infantia* which is most often associated with children of a young age – considerably younger, in fact, than we presume Perceval must be. This prompts us to explore theories of perception not just within models of childhood, but also more generally.
3. In those theories of perception, we discover, Perceval’s perceptual capabilities come at the least sophisticated end of the medieval scheme of development – residing firmly in the ‘wits’ (that is, where he may receive information, but not interpret it further).

So, just as Perceval’s behaviour conformed to the very first stage of a medieval model of cognitive and childhood development, now it is clear that he also

³⁰ This description of the faculties is a reworking of Boethius (1969, pp. 155–69); however I also found illuminating and make use of Kolve’s (1984, pp. 20–22) version of Boethius’s theories, as it provides excellent, more modern analogies. This final stage in development might perhaps be equated to ‘knowledge’ of the Grail – a matter which limitations of space make it impossible to discuss here, but which it may be interesting to discuss at a later date.

³¹ Kolve (1984, pp. 20–21).

³² Kolve (1984, p. 27).

operates at the very first stage of a particular medieval model of perceptual development. This has important implications in terms of this paper's thesis, that literary sources contain harnessable knowledge about medieval psychological theory, as this analysis confirms, first, that Chrétien may be developing, in the person of Perceval, a particular concept of childhood development in which perception plays a pre-eminent role. And, if Chrétien is able to make a particular scheme of development so crucial to the characterisation of Perceval, this surely implies that he expected to share this distinctive concept of perceptual and childhood development with his readers.

Secondly, and beyond this brief initial scene, if a similar understanding of cognitive development could be shown as affecting the rest of the *Conte* then this would provide further weight to the evidence of this first scene, that human development theory was, as suspected, prevalent in the Middle Ages. More importantly, though, it would shed more tangible light on which particular models may have been most influential. For instance, while this first scene apparently indicates that the development of the main character is in its earliest stages, it may well be that there is a developmental progression as the text continues. By way of a brief example, the famous Grail scene itself (vv. 3130–319) raises questions as to Perceval's developing range of perceptual capabilities, so that where, in this first scene, he is unable to perceive anything other than the surface and sensual, here he is able to detect that the objects before him hold a greater significance than their mere surface appearance would suggest, but he is unable, still, to interpret with complete accuracy:

Et li vallés les *vit* passer,
Ne n'osa mie demander
Del graal cui l'en en servoit,
Que toz jors en son cuer avoit
La parole au prodome sage. (vv. 3243–7, my italics)

In the context of the models of development discussed above, these new perceptual capabilities would almost certainly place Perceval at one of the later stages of development than he appears to be in the first scene. Taking Boethius's model as a case in point, this ability to perceive and thus judge the worthiness of an object, would suggest he may now be in possession of the faculty of reason.

The widely accepted reliability of Chrétien's authorship suggests that, in making reference (conscious or otherwise) to these specific theoretical schemes, it could be inferred that these were the ones which enjoyed particular influence at the time. This, as initially suggested, lends the modern reader a crucially reliable insight not only into some of the ways in which childhood, perceptual and cognitive development were viewed, but also into which specific schemes thereof may have commanded the highest levels of popularity. That one single literary scene can be demonstrated as supplying such a wealth of information strongly supports the original thesis of this paper, that literary sources harbour considerable knowledge about medieval psychological theory, and that the resulting understanding can subsequently be used to further medieval studies in an interdisciplinary sense. First, a full analysis of the rest of Chrétien's enigmatic *Conte du Graal* would be required to add significant weight to this conclusion, after which the analysis could justifiably be broadened to incorporate the scrutiny

of other works of medieval literature under this light.³³ Just as ‘Perceval’s Puerile Perceptions’ have led this author to better understand Chrétien’s narrative objectives via his literary depiction of human development theory, so the modern scholar may become gradually more enlightened as to the narrative aspirations of previously opaque works of medieval literature by means of literary portrayals of other psychological theory.

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³³ Possible subjects for future studies of this could, for example, be Marc in *Ysaïe le Triste* and Passelion in the *Roman de Perceforest*. On the former, Beardsmore (1979) has already demonstrated that childhood holds a particular significance in the structuring of the narrative, while the latter has been shown by Taylor (1997) to place particular importance on naming as a method of interpretation.

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