

Zeitschrift: Vox Romanica
Herausgeber: Collegium Romanicum Helvetiorum
Band: 36 (1977)

Artikel: The terms cortois, cortoise and corteisie in the works of Chrétien de Troyes
Autor: Collins, Frank
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-28579>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 23.08.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

The Terms *cortois*, *cortoise* and *corteisie* in the works of Chrétien de Troyes

The decision to study the terms *cortois*, *cortoise* and *corteisie* in context in the works of Chrétien de Troyes is prompted by the observation that the existing interpretations of his ideal tend to stress a courtliness made up of excellence in three main areas. These correspond to three levels of meaning for the term *courtoisie* which G. Gorcy has isolated in his study of the term in 15th-century texts¹. At one level, courtliness entails the semantic series: «*courtoisie/vaillance/prouesse/noblesse/honneur*». These are the qualities of the brave and supreme warrior-knight. At the second level, courtliness entails the semantic series: «*courtoisie/loyauté/largesse/sagesse/amour*». These terms indicate the courtly hero's noble character and social grace. Finally, at the third level, courtliness entails the semantic series: «*courtoisie/grâce/beauté/belles manières*», emphasizing the courtly hero's physical attractiveness. This is an external reflection of his equally admirable and attractive inner character. If Chrétien's heroes and heroines display excellence in these three areas, what balance is struck between them in the case of each particular hero or heroine? Are the three kinds of perfection equally important in the case of any or all of the principal characters? Is any one area consistently more important than the two other, for the principal characters of all of the romances? Finally, as reflected in the changing emphasis given to one or two of the three levels of excellence, are there any significant changes that can be traced in Chrétien's concept of the courtly hero and heroine?

These questions are not answered here through a structural semantic analysis of the meaning of the terms *cortois*, *cortoise* and *corteisie* in the romances of Chrétien de Troyes. These terms simply provide a useful point of entry into the texts in search of the vocabulary of courtly excellence, the lexical companions of these key terms. However, since this point of entry is in fact a set of terms it is important to keep in mind certain guiding principles of semantic study. Attention is paid to «la confrontation de termes exprimant des concepts voisins», as stated by Gougenheim². Also, following the advice of Hemming³, weight is attached to the frequency of occurrence of *cortois*, *cortoise* and *corteisie* in the five romances⁴.

¹ G. GORCY, «*Courtois*» et «*courtoisie*» d'après quelques textes du Moyen Français, *Bulletin des Jeunes Romanistes* 4 (1961), 15–25.

² G. GOUGENHEIM, *Notes sur le vocabulaire de Robert de Clari et de Villehardouin*, *R* 68 (1944–45), 401.

³ T.D. HEMMING, *Lexicology and Old French*, *MLR* 62 (1968), 818–823.

⁴ Cf. tables 3 and 6 of this study.

Finally, it is necessary to define what is meant by the «context» in which the terms under study are found, for it is this concept which determines how much of the text preceding and following the term under study will be included in the analysis of that occurrence of the term. In a study of a group of Middle English words, Gören Kjellmer speaks of the «potential meaning» which words from an early text can have for the modern reader⁵. “That a word with this nebulous potential meaning can function and be understood in a sentence by a modern reader is due to the workings of its context. Each new context in which the word occurs removes some of the vagueness of the potential meaning and pinpoints what elements of the potential meaning are applicable in the given situation. The meaning which the word has in each new context, its occasional meaning, can thus be seen as the realization of an underlying entity, its lexical meaning. It is by studying the occasional meanings of a word that we can define the shape of its lexical meaning” (p. 28). What is especially important here is the notion of context, for it is not restricted simply to the lexical companions of the terms under study. Each such immediate context is subject to the influence of the greater context in which it is found, what Kjellmer refers to as, “the verbal context being enclosed in a kind of situational context” (p. 32). In his search for detail relevant to each occasional meaning, Kjellmer tells us that he “proceeds on an intuitive basis, making use of whatever information seems relevant in the context without relying on any overall contextual system, i.e. advancing in the same way as the normal reader or listener when interpreting a piece of text” (p. 34).

Thus, in the present study, each occurrence of the terms *cortois*, *cortoise* and *corteisie* is explored in order to find whether one, two, or all three levels of courtly excellence are involved, and what vocabulary expresses each level of excellence. It is not just the immediate lexical context of the three terms which bears upon the search for the areas of excellence involved, but also often the details of the situation of the passage, which include the participating reader’s recollection of preceding developments, and anticipation of events to come. As in Kjellmer’s study, then, there is no systematized delimiting of context for each occurrence of the terms *cortois*, *cortoise* and *corteisie*. It is instead what Kjellmer calls “the amorphous, unlimited, and multi-dimensional substance in the midst of which lies the object of this inquiry” (p. 34).

This study yields observations of two different orders. It can indicate the different aspects of courtly perfection emphasized in different romances, and it can provide evidence of any changes in Chrétien’s appreciation of the terms’ usefulness.

In studying the extent to which *cortois*, *cortoise* and *corteisie* indicate one, two, or all three areas of excellence on the part of the heroes of the five romances, we find that it is only in *Erec et Enide* and in *Cligès* that the terms are ever associated with

⁵ GÖREN KJELLMER, *Context and Meaning. A Study of Distributional and Semantic Relations in a Group of Middle English Words*, Stockholm (Almqvist & Wiksell) 1971, p. 28.

the third level, that of the hero's physical attractiveness. This element of courtly perfection is of special importance to these stories, for in them we have true love being discovered by the young couples, Erec and Enide, Alexandre and Soredamors, and Cligès and Fénice. For these young ladies the physical beauty of the hero provides an important initial attraction which allows them ultimately to discover their knight's total courtly perfection. In *Yvain* and in the *Roman de la Charrete*, we are not dealing with a love between very young and impressionable people. Yvain and Laudine are mature adults who are not allowed the luxury of a slow and timid discovery of love, with a culmination in marriage. The event which initially brings them together is nearly calamitous for both, and the rift produced by Yvain's neglect can only be reconciled by a maturing in understanding and sense of responsibility on the part of both. There is no need for the poet to emphasize Yvain's physical beauty in a context in which his social and moral, as well as his martial qualities, are of such pre-eminent importance to his development towards a courtliness capable of winning back his lady.

Likewise, neither Lancelot nor the queen he loves are adolescents first discovering love. Theirs is a love which can never be openly celebrated, and indeed whose secret moments of joy are won at high cost. Like Laudine, Guenevere has outgrown the necessity to be dazzled by the physical beauty of the knight she loves.

Finally, in the *Roman de Perceval*, the love story of Perceval and Blanchefleur is not central to the romance. It is an important step in Perceval's growth, but it is not given enough attention to warrant an emphasis on his physical beauty such as would be the case if the love story of these two young people were the whole story.

It is not surprising, then, to discover the absence of terms indicating the hero's physical beauty in those passages of *Yvain*, the *Roman de la Charrete*, and the *Roman de Perceval* in which the terms *cortois* and *corteisie* occur.

A study of the frequency with which terms associated with *cortois* and *corteisie* refer to a hero's excellence as a warrior-knight reinforces the statement of the importance of this quality for Erec and for Yvain. For Erec, there is a necessity to put an end to the accusations of *recréantise*, and for Yvain, there is the necessity to balance his excellence as a warrior-knight with an excellence made up of the social and moral virtues of generosity, loyalty, and a commitment to his marriage so that he might win back his lady. This he accomplishes only when, after being cured of his madness, he engages solely in adventures in which he can perform a service to those in need. The two levels of excellence are integrated, and reinforce each other. In those passages in which the terms *cortois* and *corteisie* are used to describe Yvain, this equilibrium is reflected numerically by the equal distribution of terms indicating military prowess and success on the one hand, and social and moral superiority on the other.

In *Cligès* and in the *Roman de la Charrete*, fewer of the terms associated with the words *cortois* and *corteisie* refer to the hero's military excellence than is the case in

Erec et Enide and *Yvain*. The number of such terms is not insignificant, but it is reduced enough in both cases to indicate that this competence and bravery are not of equal importance to social and moral qualities in the resolution of the crises in the heroes' lives, and in their claim to courtliness. This is also true of the *Roman de Perceval*, in which all of the terms associated with *cortois* and *corteisie* are used to describe this kind of superiority. This is to be expected, given the importance of the hero's spiritual growth in this romance.

The constant feature to be observed is that, although for each romance we can detect a distinctive emphasis on one or all three levels of excellence, in all of the romances the element of social and moral grace and superiority is the one most often indicated by the lexical companions of the words *cortois* and *corteisie* when the latter refers to the hero. In *Yvain* this spotlight is shared with military superiority, but this is on an equal basis and does not belie the observation that this is the *sine qua non* of Chrétien's heroes' claim to courtliness⁶.

When studying the frequency with which terms associated with *cortoise* and *corteisie* refer to one, two, or all three areas of courtly excellence in Chrétien's heroines, it is found, as is the case with his heroes, that the social and moral element is of foremost importance⁷. The total absence of the terms *cortoise* and *corteisie* to describe Guenevere in the *Roman de la Charrete* will be discussed at a later stage when any changes in Chrétien's appreciation of the usefulness of the terms are discussed.

As is to be expected, the figures show that the area of courtliness which involves bravery and supremacy in combat is not part of the heroines' courtliness. They do, however, recall that one incident in which courage and initiative in the face of danger are explicitly associated with the term *cortoise*, when Enide, rejecting the advances of Galoain, arranges a successful escape from that place of danger for herself and for Erec⁸.

It might be expected that the physical beauty of Chrétien's ladies would be a constant in those passages in which the terms *cortoise* and *corteisie* occur, but in fact, terms indicating this beauty are associated with these words only in *Erec et Enide*, *Cligès*, and the *Roman de Perceval*, and, even in these works, the frequency of the use of these terms is considerably less than that of the terms indicating social and moral grace and perfection, for it is in this area that there is struggle, self-discovery, and progressively greater attainment. Again, it can be noted that physical beauty is explicitly associated with the terms *cortoise* and *corteisie* in the cases of love between young and impressionable people only. In the love story of Yvain and Laudine, with

⁶ Cf. table 2 of this study.

⁷ Cf. table 4 of this study.

⁸ CHRÉTIEN DE TROYES, *Erec et Enide*, ed. by MARIO ROQUES, Paris 1966, v. 3632.

the enormous social and political problems attendant upon the circumstances of their meeting, the poet cannot linger long over the description of the lady's beauty. Likewise, the ultimate point of her courtliness occurs within her, when she finally checks her excessive pride and anger and understands her knight's need to balance love and marriage with a constant renewal of his worth and honour in chivalry. Physical beauty is secondary to these critical social and moral questions.

The second important group of observations resulting from a quantitative record of the occurrences of the terms *cortois*, *cortoise* and *corteisie* concerns not the lexical companions of the terms and the areas of excellence they indicate, but rather the frequency of the use of the terms themselves.

The terms are used most frequently in *Yvain* and the *Roman de Perceval*, yet it is only in *Erec et Enide* that there is a significant restriction of their use to describing the hero and the heroine only⁹. This suggests that Chrétien not only attached less significance to the terms after the completion of *Erec et Enide*, but actually subsequently weakened their impact by multiplying their occurrence in an indiscriminate fashion on the one hand, and on the other, totally omitting them, as is the case with the terms *cortoise* and *corteisie*, which are never used to describe Guenevere in the *Roman de la Charrete*. Chrétien may have decided to avoid these terms out of a fear of any connection they may have had with the courtly phenomenon of the adulterous *fin'amors*. The conventions of this love ethic also called for the subservient knight to live forever with an unfulfilled love for an unattainable lady. This would run counter to the kind of love relationship which Chrétien proposed. "L'amour exemplaire, c'est l'amour tel qu'il ne subsiste aucune ombre entre les amants, et qu'il règne entre eux l'égalité absolue qui unit un couple où chacun des partenaires atteint un mérite égal"¹⁰.

In *Erec et Enide* the terms *cortois*, *cortoise* and *corteisie* in no way endanger the portrayal of a love developing in this direction. In *Yvain*, and in the *Roman de la Charrete*, however, excessive feminine pride must be shed while at the same time the ladies' knights seek to make themselves worthy of love. Finally, in the *Roman de Perceval*, the worldly aspects of courtly love are played down in the interests of spiritual excellence. Thus, for these works, terms with any connotations of *fin'amors* conventions may have appeared dangerous to Chrétien. These interpretations can only remain speculative, but it is a fact, borne out by a quantitative recording, that only in *Erec et Enide* are the terms *cortois*, *cortoise* and *corteisie* almost exclusively restricted to describing the central hero and heroine.

As has been stated above, the study of these terms reveals that the *sine qua non* of Chrétien's heroes' and heroines' claim to courtliness is grace and perfection in

⁹ Cf. tables 3 and 6 of this study.

¹⁰ JEAN-CHARLES PAYEN, *Les valeurs humaines chez Chrétien de Troyes*, in: *Mélanges offerts à Rita Leuvene*, Gembloux 1969, vol. 2, p. 1094.

their social and moral conduct and motivation. This observation was made while the terms under study were being investigated for the presence and importance of all three levels of courtly excellence, in order that the unique character of each hero and heroine might be appreciated in terms of the particular balance he or she strikes between them. The constant emphasis, in all of Chrétien's romances, on the social and moral aspects of courtliness suggests not only the obvious conclusion that these are the most important to his ideal, but also that the other two principal levels of excellence find their meaning and purpose only when considered in terms of that same social and moral ideal.

In *Erec et Enide*, although the couple must set out to recover their lost chivalric honour, it is not prowess which emerges as the principal element of their courtliness. The real lesson they learn is that prowess, unless it finds its inspiration and its purpose in love, involves a knight in nothing more than gratuitous and frivolous combat. Together Erec and Enide discover a mature and generous love which they know will never jeopardize Erec's chivalry, a chivalry whose honour and glory lie in the generous service it provides to individuals in need and to society as a whole. Thus, despite the great importance attached to the first level of excellence in *Erec et Enide*, that excellence serves an ideal which is of the second and most important level of courtliness.

In *Cligès* although military prowess and physical beauty play an important role in the initial attraction between Alexandre and Soredamors, as well as between Cligès and Fénice, these two ideals are again seen to be secondary to the ideal of a social and moral courtly excellence. This romance demonstrates Chrétien's belief that love should be celebrated in marriage. When a couple is committed to preserving their love within the context of an institution which is vital to the overall social structure, they are actively contributing to the harmony and stability of their society, and they are repudiating those aspects of conventional courtly love which can cause them to lead an isolated, selfish, and anti-social life. Conventional courtly love places an excessive emphasis on the service of love and on the pleasures of sensual love. This is inconsonant with Chrétien's ideal of conjugal love, with its emphasis on mutual trust and loyalty and its potential for inspiring generous social action. Further, in its fatalistic overtones, conventional courtly love goes contrary to Chrétien's concept of a love which the knight and the lady attempt in every way to understand. They attempt to understand the manner in which it operates upon them individually, as well as the manner in which it leads them to appreciate their joint responsibility toward society.

In *Yvain* the social and moral ideal is again supreme, even in those passages in which military supremacy is being described and praised. The hero's acts of prowess are motivated by compassion, generosity, and a commitment to social order. They are a force in the process of self-discovery and thus aid in his re-definition of the rela-

tionship between love and chivalry. The honour won through chivalry helps Yvain and Laudine to discover the glory of a love freely given and received. They are able to re-define their marriage in terms not only of their commitment to each other, but also in terms of a continuing commitment to their society.

The *Roman de la Charrete* demonstrates the primary importance to courtliness of social and moral excellence, through its presentation of love. The hero and heroine not only love, but must love¹¹. This is the supreme courtly activity. Love brings not only personal fulfilment and exaltation, but also social refinement and distinction. Having freely chosen to love Guenevere, Lancelot displays a single-minded determination to win her love. Guenevere too, after having determined that Lancelot is worthy of her love and will do nothing that will jeopardize her role as queen, obeys the injunction to love. Once again, the search for fulfilment in love is bound up with Chrétien's concept of the courtly person's social responsibilities. If Lancelot succeeds in proving his merit to Guenevere, it is in part due to his reputation for generous acts of prowess and his unfailing defence of Arthur's sovereignty. Guenevere, in turn, accepts Lancelot's love only when she has assured herself that her action will in no way threaten her position as queen and thereby disrupt the stability and harmony of Arthur's kingdom.

The terms associated with *cortois*, *cortoise* and *corteisie* in the *Roman de Perceval* refer exclusively to the hero's social and moral greatness. Although Perceval quickly establishes his military competence and bravery after leaving his mother's home, it is not until he accepts the reproach of the Demoiselle Hideuse that he begins to understand the generous and socially responsive motives which must inspire the courtly warrior's prowess. Then, only after he has pursued this ideal for five years is he ready to understand the even greater glory of a chivalry inspired by religious ideals.

Gustave Cohen has described Chrétien's heroes as handsome, brave, exuberant, loyal, generous, ardent in love, and devoted to justice. The heroines are beautiful, faithful, gracious, and sensuous¹². The attempt to verify this picture through a study of Chrétien's use of the terms *cortois*, *cortoise* and *corteisie*, reveals that Chrétien places his greatest emphasis on the social and moral qualities of his principal characters. It is true that military excellence and physical beauty are also important characteristics of the courtly hero and heroine, but Chrétien embraces these ideals only when they are entirely free of any selfish motivation. He thus places them at the service of his greatest ideal, a hero and heroine committed to true love, and who find in that love the force and inspiration for a generous, compassionate, and exemplary life.

¹¹ HENRI DUPIN, *La courtoisie au Moyen Age*, Paris 1937, p. 93.

¹² GUSTAVE COHEN, *Un grand romancier d'amour et d'aventure au XII^e siècle. Chrétien de Troyes et son œuvre*, Paris 1948, p. 505.

Table 1. The number of terms associated with *cortois* and *cortoise* which belong to either series 1, 2, or 3, when these two terms are used in connection with central heroes only.

	Series 1	Series 2	Series 3
<i>Erec</i>	11/31 = 36%	14/31 = 45%	6/31 = 19%
<i>Cligès</i>	3/13 = 23%	7/13 = 54%	3/13 = 23%
<i>Yvain</i>	4/8 = 50%	4/8 = 50%	—
<i>Charrete</i>	1/8 = 12.5%	7/8 = 87.5%	—
<i>Perceval</i>	—	4/4 = 100%	—

Table 2. Series listed in the order of their importance to the central heroes of the romances, as shown by the figures in table 1.

<i>Erec</i>	<i>Cligès</i>	<i>Yvain</i>	<i>Charrete</i>	<i>Perceval</i>
Series 2	Series 2	Series 1 and 2	Series 2	Series 2
Series 1	Series 1 and 3		Series 1	
Series 3		No Series 3	No Series 3	No Series 1 or 3

Table 3. The five romances in descending order according to the number of occurrences of *cortois* and *cortoise* connected with central heroes only.

<i>Erec</i>	<i>cortois</i> 6	<i>cortoise</i> 2	8/9 = 89%
<i>Cligès</i>	<i>cortois</i> 3 (2 Alexandre 1 Cligès)	<i>cortoise</i> 1 (Alexandre)	4/8 = 50%
<i>Charrete</i>	<i>cortois</i> 2 (1 Gauvain 1 Gauvain and Lancelot)	<i>cortoise</i> 3 (2 Lancelot 1 Gauvain)	5/12 = 42%
<i>Perceval</i>	<i>cortois</i> 3 (2 Gauvain 1 Perceval)	<i>cortoise</i> 2 (1 Perceval 1 Gauvain)	5/14 = 36%
<i>Yvain</i>	<i>cortois</i> 2	<i>cortoise</i> 4	6/18 = 33.3%

Table 4. The number of terms associated with *cortoise* and *corteisie* which belong to either series 1, 2, or 3, when these two terms are used in connection with central heroines only.

	Series 1	Series 2	Series 3
<i>Erec</i>	$1/17 = 6\%$	$11/17 = 65\%$	$5/17 = 29\%$
<i>Cligès</i>	—	$2/3 = 66\frac{2}{3}\%$	$1/3 = 33\frac{1}{3}\%$
<i>Yvain</i>	—	$1/1 = 100\%$	—
<i>Charrete</i>	—	—	—
<i>Perceval</i>	—	$7/9 = 78\%$	$2/9 = 22\%$

Table 5. Series listed in the order of their importance to the central heroines of the romances, as shown by the figures in table 3.

<i>Erec</i>	<i>Cligès</i>	<i>Yvain</i>	<i>Charrete</i>	<i>Perceval</i>
Series 2	Series 2	Series 2	—	Series 2
Series 3	Series 3	—	—	Series 3

Table 6. The five romances in descending order according to the number of occurrences of *cortoise* and *corteisie* connected with central heroines only.

<i>Erec</i>	<i>cortoise</i> 5	<i>corteisie</i> 1	$6/6 = 100\%$
<i>Cligès</i>	<i>cortoise</i> —	<i>corteisie</i> 1 (Fénice)	$1/2 = 50\%$
<i>Perceval</i>	<i>cortoise</i> 2 (Blanchefleur 1 Guenevere 1)	<i>cortoise</i> —	$2/11 = 18\%$
<i>Yvain</i>	<i>cortoise</i> 1	<i>corteisie</i> —	$1/8 = 12.5\%$