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by
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The Acts of *King Arthur* and His Noble Knights

JOHN STEINBECK

King Arthur held Whitsun¹ court at Winchester, that ancient royal town favored by God and His clergy as well as the seat and tomb of many kings. The roads were clogged with eager people, knights returning to stamp in court the record of their deeds, of bishops, clergy, monks, of the defeated fettered to their paroles,² the prisoners of honor. And on Itchen water, pathway from Solent³ and the sea, the little ships brought succulents, lampreys, eels and oysters, plaice and sea trout, while barges loaded with casks of whale oil and casks of wine came tide borne. Bellowing oxen walked to the spits on their own four hooves, while geese and swans, sheep and swine, waited their turn in hurdle pens. Every householder with a strip of colored cloth, a ribbon, any textile gaiety, hung it from a window to flap its small festival, and those in lack tied boughs of pine and laurel over their doors. **A**

In the great hall of the castle on the hill the king sat high, and next below the fair elite company of the Round Table, noble and decorous as kings themselves, while at the long trestle boards the people were as fitted as toes in a tight shoe.

Then while the glistening meat dripped down the tables, it was the custom for the defeated to celebrate the deeds of those who had overcome them, while the victor dipped his head in **disparagement** of his greatness and fended off the compliments with small defensive gestures of his hands. And as at public penitence sins are given stature they do not deserve, little sins grow up and baby sins are born, so those knights who lately claimed mercy perchance might raise the exploits of the brave and merciful beyond reasonable gratitude for their lives and in anticipation of some small notice of value.

This no one said of Lancelot, sitting with bowed head in his golden-lettered seat at the Round Table. Some said he nodded and perhaps dozed, for the testimony to his greatness was long and the monotony of his victories

A STYLE

Reread lines 1–12, noting Steinbeck’s **long, flowing sentences**. Why do you think Steinbeck begins this part of his retelling of Arthurian legend in this way?

disparagement

(dĭ-spär’ĭj-mənt) *n.*
belittlement

ANALYZE VISUALS

What **character traits** are suggested in this portrait of King Arthur?

1. **Whitsun**: another name for Pentecost. In Arthurian legend, Pentecost is one of the times at which the knights meet at Camelot to renew their oaths and receive new missions.

2. **fettered to their paroles**: bound by their word of honor to lay down arms.

3. **Itchen . . . Solent**: waterways in southern England.

Detail of *King Arthur* (1903), Charles Ernest Butler. Oil on canvas, 123.2 cm × 73.7 cm. Private collection. Christopher Wood Gallery, London. © Bridgeman Art Library.



continued for many hours. Lancelot's immaculate fame had grown so great that men took pride in being unhorsed by him—even this notice was an honor. And since he had won many victories, it is possible that knights he had never seen claimed to have been overthrown by him. It was a way to claim attention for a moment. And as he dozed and wished to be elsewhere, he heard his deeds **exalted** beyond his recognition, and some mighty exploits once attributed to other men were brought bright-painted out and laid on the shining pile of his achievements. There is a seat of worth beyond the reach of envy whose occupant ceases to be a man and becomes the receptacle of the wishful longings of the world, a seat most often reserved for the dead, from whom neither **reprisal** nor reward may be expected, but at this time Sir Lancelot was its unchallenged tenant. And he vaguely heard his strength favorably compared with elephants, his ferocity with lions, his agility with deer, his cleverness with foxes, his beauty with the stars, his justice with Solon,⁴ his stern probity with St. Michael, his humility with newborn lambs; his military niche would have caused the Archangel Gabriel⁵ to raise his head. Sometimes the guests paused in their chewing the better to hear, and a man who sipped his metheglin⁶ drew frowns. **B**

Arthur on his dais⁷ sat very still and did not fiddle with his bread, and beside him sat lovely Guinevere, still as a painted statue of herself. Only her inward eyes confessed her **vagrant** thoughts. And Lancelot studied the open pages of his hands—not large hands, but delicate where they were not knobby and scarred with old wounds. His hands were fine-textured—soft of skin and very white, protected by the pliant leather lining of his gauntlets. **C**

The great hall was not still, not all upturned listening. Everywhere was movement as people came and went, some serving huge planks of meat and baskets of bread, round and flat like a plate. And there were restless ones who could not sit still, while everyone under burden of half-chewed meat and the floods and freshets of mead and beer found necessity for repeated departures and returns.

Lancelot exhausted the theme of his hands and squinted down the long hall and watched the movement with eyes so nearly closed that he could not see faces. And he thought how he knew everyone by carriage. The knights in long full floor-brushing robes walked lightly or thought their feet barely touched the ground because their bodies were released from their crushing boxes of iron. Their feet were long and slender because, being horsemen, they had never widened and flattened their feet with walking. The ladies, full-skirted, moved like water, but this was schooled and designed, taught to little girls with the help of whips on raw ankles, while their shoulders were bound back with nail-studded harnesses and their heads held high and rigid by painful collars

exalt (ɪg-zôlt') *v.* to glorify, praise, or honor

reprisal (rĭ-prī'zəl) *n.* retaliation in the form of harm or injury similar to that received

B MAKE INFERENCES

Reread lines 25–45. Why are the knights so extravagant in their praise of Lancelot?

vagrant (vā'grənt) *adj.* wandering

C MAKE INFERENCES

Reread lines 46–51. Which details reveal the awkwardness that Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot feel during the feast?

4. **Solon:** an Athenian statesman and lawgiver who lived in the sixth century B.C.

5. **St. Michael . . . Archangel Gabriel:** In several religious traditions, Michael and Gabriel are archangels, the chief messengers of God. Both are celebrated as warriors against evil.

6. **metheglin** (mə-thĕg'lin): a liquor made from honey.

7. **dais** (dā'īs): a raised platform used for a seat of honor.

of woven willow or, for the forgetful, by supports of painted wire, for to learn the high proud head on a swan's neck, to learn to flow like water, is not easy
70 for a little girl as she becomes a gentlewoman. But knights and ladies both matched their movements to their garments; the sweep and rhythm of a long gown informs the manner of its moving. It is not necessary to inspect a serf or a slave, his shoulder wide and sloping from burdens, legs short and thick and crooked, feet splayed and widespread, the whole frame slowly crushed by weights. In the great hall the serving people walked under burdens with the slow weight of oxen and scuttled like crabs, crooked and nervous when the weight was gone. **D**

A pause in the recital of his virtues drew Lancelot's attention. The knight who had tried to kill him in a tree had finished, and among the benches Sir
80 Kay was rising to his feet. Lancelot could hear his voice before he spoke, reciting deeds like leaves and bags and barrels. Before his friend could reach the center of the hall, Sir Lancelot wriggled to his feet and approached the dais. "My lord king," he said, "forgive me if I ask leave to go. An old wound has broken open."

Arthur smiled down on him. "I have the same old wound," he said. "We'll go together. Perhaps you will come to the tower room when we have attended to our wounds." And he signed the trumpets to end the gathering, and the bodyguards to clear the hall. **E**

The stone stairway to the king's room was in the thickness of the wall of
90 the round tower of the keep. At short intervals a deep embrasure⁸ and a long, beveled arrow slit commanded some aspect of the town below.

No armed men guarded this stairway. They were below and had passed Sir Lancelot in. The king's room was round, a horizontal slice of the tower, windowless save for the arrow slits, entered by a narrow arched door. It was a sparsely furnished room, carpeted with rushes. A wide bed, and at its foot a carved oaken chest, a bench before the fireplace, and several stools completed the furnishing. But the raw stone of the tower was plastered over and painted with solemn figures of men and angels walking hand in hand. Two candles and the reeky fire gave the only light. **F**

100 When Lancelot entered, the queen stood up from the bench before the fire, saying, "I will retire, my lords."

"No, stay," said Arthur.

"Stay," said Lancelot.

The king was stretched comfortably in the bed. His bare feet projecting from his long saffron⁹ robe caressed each other, the toes curled downward.

The queen was lovely in the firelight, all lean, down-flowing lines of green samite.¹⁰ She wore her little mouth-corner smile of concealed amusement, and

D STYLE

In lines 60–77, Steinbeck describes various members of medieval society. What **similes** and **metaphors** help you understand these people and their differences?

E MAKE INFERENCES

Reread lines 78–88. What can you infer about Lancelot and Arthur on the basis of their sudden departure from the banquet hall?

F GRAMMAR AND STYLE

Reread lines 92–99. Notice how Steinbeck varies the beginnings of his sentences, here through the use of adjectives, conjunctions, pronouns, and articles.

8. **embrasure** (ēm-brā'zhər): an opening in a wall, narrowing toward the outside.

9. **saffron**: golden yellow, like the spice of that name.

10. **samite**: a heavy silk fabric.



Queen Guinevere's Maying, John Collier. Bradford Art Galleries and Museums, West Yorkshire, UK. Photo © Bridgeman Art Library.

her bold golden eyes were the same color as her hair, and odd it was that her lashes and slender brows were dark, an oddity contrived with kohl¹¹ brought
110 in a small enameled pot from an outland by a far-wandering knight.

“How are you holding up?” Arthur asked.

“Not well, my lord. It’s harder than the quest.”

“Did you really do all the things they said you did?”

Lancelot chuckled. “Truthfully, I don’t know. It sounds different when they tell about it. And most of them feel it necessary to add a little. When I remember leaping eight feet, they tell it at fifty, and frankly I don’t recall several of those giants at all.” **G**

The queen made room for him on the fire bench, and he took his seat, back to the fire.

120 Guinevere said, “The damsel—what’s her name—talked about fair queen enchantresses,¹² but she was so excited that her words tumbled over each other. I couldn’t make out what happened.”

Lancelot looked nervously away. “You know how excitable young girls are,” he said. “A little back-country necromancy¹³ in a pasture.”

“But she spoke particularly of queens.”

“My lady, I think everyone is a queen to her. It’s like the giants—makes the story richer.”

“Then they were not queens?”

130 “Well, for that matter, when you get into the field of enchantment, everyone is a queen, or thinks she is. Next time she tells it, the little damsel will be a queen. I do think, my lord, there’s too much of that kind of thing going on. It’s a bad sign, a kind of restlessness, when people go in for fortunetelling and all such things. Maybe there should be a law about it.”

“There is,” said Arthur. “But it’s not in secular hands. The Church is supposed to take care of that.”

“Yes, but some of the nunneries are going in for it.”

“Well, I’ll put a bug in the archbishop’s ear.”¹⁴

The queen observed, “I gather you rescued damsels by the dozen.” She put her fingers on his arm and a searing shock ran through his body, and his
140 mouth opened in amazement at a hollow ache that pressed upward against his ribs and shortened his breath. **H**

After a moment she said, “How many damsels did you rescue?”

His mouth was dry. “Of course there were a few, madame. There always are.”

“And all of them made love to you?”

“That they did not, madame. There you protect me.”

“I?”

“Yes. Since with my lord’s permission I swore to serve you all my life

G MAKE INFERENCES

How are Lancelot’s remarks in lines 114–117 consistent with his earlier behavior at the banquet? Explain.

H STYLE

Review the **dialogue** in lines 120–138. Which words and phrases in this exchange sound particularly realistic? Explain.

11. **kohl**: a cosmetic preparation used as eye makeup.

12. **fair queen enchantresses**: Morgan le Fay and three other queens, the four of whom, as related in “Sir Launcelot du Lake,” imprisoned Launcelot, demanding that he take one of them as his lover.

13. **necromancy**: magic.

14. **put a bug in the archbishop’s ear**: alert the archbishop in a quiet way.

and gave my knightly courtly love¹⁵ to you, I am sheltered from damsels by your name.”

150 “And do you want to be sheltered?”

“Yes, my lady. I am a fighting man. I have neither time nor inclination for any other kind of love. I hope this pleases you, my lady. I sent many prisoners to ask your mercy.”

“I never saw such a crop of them,” Arthur said. “You must have swept some counties clean.”

Guinevere touched him on the arm again and with side-glancing golden eyes saw the spasm that shook him. “While we are on this subject, I want **I** to mention one lady you did not save. When I saw her, she was a headless corpse and not in good condition, and the man who brought her in was
160 half crazed.”¹⁶

“I am ashamed of that,” said Lancelot. “She was under my protection, and I failed her. I suppose it was my shame that made me force the man to do it. I’m sorry. I hope you released him from the burden.”

“Not at all,” she said. “I wanted him away before the feast reeked up the heavens. I sent him with his burden to the Pope. His friend will not improve on the way. And if his loss of interest in ladies continues, he may turn out to be a very holy man, a hermit or something of that nature, if he isn’t a maniac first.”

The king rose on his elbow. “We will have to work out some system,” he said. “The rules of errantry¹⁷ are too loose, and the quests overlap. Besides, I
170 wonder how long we can leave justice in the hands of men who are themselves unstable. I don’t mean you, my friend. But there may come a time when order and organization from the crown will be necessary.”

The queen stood up. “My lords, will you grant me permission to leave you now? I know you will wish to speak of great things foreign and perhaps tiresome to a lady’s ears.”

The king said, “Surely, my lady. Go to your rest.”

“No, sire—not rest. If I do not lay out the designs for the needlepoint, my ladies will have no work tomorrow.”

“But these are feast days, my dear.”

180 “I like to give them something every day, my lord. They’re lazy things and some of them so woolly in the mind that they forget how to thread a needle from day to day. Forgive me, my lords.”

She swept from the room with proud and powerful steps, and the little breeze she made in the still air carried a strange scent to Lancelot, a perfume which sent a shivering excitement coursing through his body. It was an odor he did not, could not, know, for it was the smell of Guinevere distilled by her

I MAKE INFERENCES

Reread lines 138–157.

Describe Lancelot’s feelings for Guinevere.

Which details helped you make your inference?

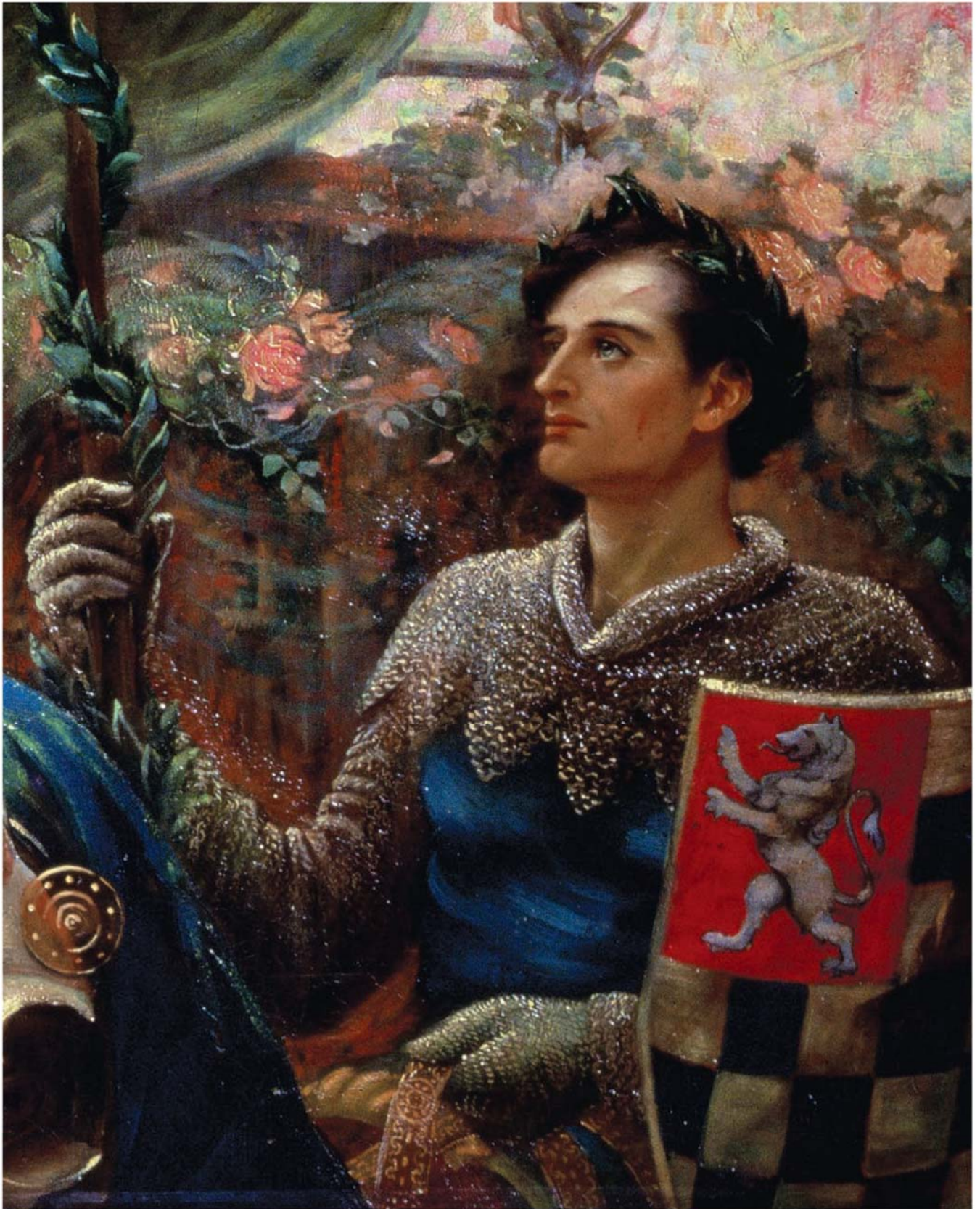
ANALYZE VISUALS

How does this painting depict Lancelot as an ideal knight?

15. **courtly love**: a sentimental reflection of the feudal relationship between a knight and his lord. The knight serves his chosen lady with the same obedience and loyalty he owes his lord. The knight’s love for the lady inspires him to seek adventure and achieve great deeds.

16. **When I saw her . . . half crazed**: Guinevere is referring to a woman Lancelot was unable to save—a woman who was beheaded by her jealous husband. As punishment, Lancelot commanded the husband to take the woman’s body to Guinevere and to throw himself on her mercy.

17. **errantry** (ĕr’ən-trĕ): the knightly pursuit of adventure.



Detail of *Lancelot and Guinevere*, Herbert James Draper. Private collection. Bohams, London. Photo © Bridgeman Art Library.

own skin. And as she passed through the door and descended the steps, he saw himself leap up and follow her, although he did not move. And when she was gone, the room was bleak, and the glory was gone from it, and Sir Lancelot
190 was dog-weary, tired almost to weeping. **I**

“What a queen she is,” said King Arthur softly. “And what a woman equally. Merlin was with me when I chose her. He tried to dissuade me with his usual doomful prophecies. That was one of the few times I differed with him. Well, my choice has proved him fallible. She has shown the world what a queen should be. All other women lose their sheen when she is present.”

Lancelot said, “Yes, my lord,” and for no reason he knew, except perhaps the **intemperate** dullness of the feast, he felt lost, and a cold knife of loneliness pressed against his heart. **K**

The king was chuckling. “It is the device of ladies that their lords have great
200 matters to discuss, when if the truth were told, we bore them. And I hope the truth is never told. Why, you look **haggard**, my friend. Are you feverish? Did you mean that about an old wound opening?”

“No. The wound was what you thought it was, my lord. But it is true that I can fight, travel, live on berries, fight again, go without sleeping, and come out fresh and fierce, but sitting still at Whitsun feast has wearied me to death.”

Arthur said, “I can see it. We’ll discuss the realm’s health another time. Go to your bed now. Have you your old quarters?”


“No—better ones. Sir Kay has cleared five knights from the lovely lordly
210 rooms over the north gate. He did it in memory of an adventure which we, God help us, will have to listen to tomorrow. I accept your dismissal, my lord.”

And Lancelot knelt down and took the king’s beloved hand in both of his and kissed it. “Good night, my liege¹⁸ lord, my liege friend,” he said and then stumbled blindly from the room and felt his way down the curving stone steps past the arrow slits.

As he came to the level of the next landing, Guinevere issued silently from a darkened entrance. He could see her in the thin light from the arrow slit. She took his arm and led him to her dark chamber and closed the oaken door.

“A strange thing happened,” she said softly. “When I left you, I thought
220 you followed me. I was so sure of it I did not even look around to verify it. You were there behind me. And when I came to my own door, I said good night to you, so certain I was that you were there.”

He could see her outline in the dark and smell the scent which was herself. “My lady,” he said, “when you left the room, I saw myself follow you as though I were another person looking on.”

Their bodies locked together as though a trap had sprung. Their mouths met, and each devoured the other. Each frantic heartbeat at the walls of ribs trying to get to the other until their held breaths burst out and Lancelot, dizzied, found the door and blundered down the stairs. And he was weeping bitterly.  **L**

STYLE

Reread lines 183–190, noting Steinbeck’s **imagery**—words that appeal to the senses. Which images help you understand Guinevere and her effect on Lancelot?

intemperate

(ĭn-tĕm’pĕr-ĭt) *adj.*
extreme

K STYLE

Consider Steinbeck’s **tone**, or attitude, in lines 191–198. What details suggest that he has great sympathy for both Arthur and Lancelot?

haggard (hăg’ĕrd) *adj.*

appearing worn and exhausted

L MAKE INFERENCES

Reread the final paragraph of the selection. Why does Lancelot weep?

18. **liege** (lēj): under feudal law, entitled to the service or allegiance of subjects.