

Sir Launcelot: “The Floure of Knyghthode” ? *¹

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Throughout the history of the King Arthur legend, Launcelot, the “flower of knighthood,” has been portrayed as a romantic hero, the model of chivalry. In *Morte d'Arthur*, by Sir Thomas Malory, it first appears that Malory follows this traditional characterization of Launcelot. Malory begins the *Morte* with the statement “in all tournaments, jousts, and deeds of arms, both of life and death, he [Launcelot] passed all other knights, and at no time was he overcome.” Most readers accept as matter of fact that Launcelot is the greatest knight of the Round Table. After all, he is often referred to as the “most courteous knight now alive,” “peerless of courtesy and knighthood” and the “noblest in the world of knights.” However, is it correct to accept Launcelot’s reputation as “the flower of knighthood” as absolute truth? Is it possible that Launcelot’s chivalry is a facade which, when examined closely, will collapse and reveal a persona other than that of “the perfect knight”? I will show that after closely examining Launcelot’s character, it becomes apparent that this supposed paragon of knighthood has many flaws. Not only does he fail to maintain King Arthur’s code of chivalry, but he is also vain and cowardly. I therefore conclude that it is not correct to accept Launcelot’s reputation as absolute. It will be obvious that not only is much of Launcelot’s chivalry a facade, the facade is fragile and disintegrates to reveal a character who is definitely not “the flower of knighthood.”

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in all turnementes, justys, and dedys of armys, both of lyff and deth, he passed all other knyghts, and at no tyme was he ovircom but yf hit were by treson other inchauntement. So this Sir Launcelot encrested so mervaylously in worship and honoure; therefore he is the fyrste knyght that the Frey[n]sh booke makyth me[n]cion of aftir kynge Arthure com frome Rome.

[in all tournaments, jousts, and deeds of arms, both of life and death, he passed all other knights, and at

no time was he overcome except by treason or enchantment. So Sir Launcelot increased marvelously in worship and honor; therefore he is the first knight mentioned in the French book after Arthur returns from Rome.]

(253. All quotations taken from *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. Eugène Vinaver, 2nd ed., 3 vols. paged consecutively.)

In this paragraph, apparently original to Malory, the reader is first made aware of Launcelot’s significance in the *Morte* (Wilson 21). Most readers accept as a matter of fact that Launcelot is the

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greatest knight of the Round Table. After all, he is often referred to as the "curtyest knyght... that now lyvyth" [most courteous knight now alive] (270), "pereles of curtesy and of knyghthode" [peerless of courtesy and knighthood] (410), and the "noblyst of the worlde of knyghtes" [noblest in the world of knights] (408). However, is it correct to accept Launcelot's reputation as "the floure of knyghthode" (791) as absolute truth? Is it possible that Launcelot's chivalry is a façade which, when examined closely, will collapse and reveal a persona other than that of "the perfect knight"?

Before examining Launcelot's character, we must establish an ideal of knightly chivalric behavior. Malory's concept of chivalry is clearly defined when Arthur instructs the knights of the Round Table

never to do outerage nothir mourthir, and allwayes to flee treson, give mercy unto hym that askith mercy, uppon payne of forfiture [of their] worship and lordship of kyng Arthure for evirmore; and allwayes to do ladyes, damsels, and jantilwomen and wydowes [socour:] strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them uppon payne of dethe. Also that no man take no batayles in a wrongfull quarell for no love ne for no worldis goodis. So unto thys were all knyghtis sworne of the Table Rounde both olde and yonge. And every yere so were the[y] sworne at the hygh feste of Pentecoste.

[never to commit excess or murder, always flee treason, give mercy unto him that asks for mercy, upon risk of damaging their and Authur's reputations; always help ladies, damsels, gentlewomen, and widows; to strengthen them in their correct observances, and never to force them—upon pain of death. Also that no knight take battle in a wrongful quarrel—neither for love or worldly goods. So unto this were all the knights of the Round Table sworn—both old and young. And every year at the

high feast of Pentecost they renewed this oath.]
(119-120)

According to this chivalric code, Round Table knights should fight only for the cause of right; always defend ladies; be courteous, merciful, and gentle; and never commit crimes of excess, murder, or treason. However, as Janet Jesmok mentions in "A Knyght Wyveless", "in the early sections of the *Morte*, Malory develops this code of chivalry through the successes and (more often) failures of Arthurian knights like Gawain, Pellinore, Balin, and Torre" (316). It is not until Launcelot's introduction into the *Morte* that Malory provides the reader with a "knight who comes closest to perfection and whose actions provide a chivalric model of courtesy and martial excellence" (Jesmok 316). However, wouldn't you expect that a "model of chivalry" would obey the chivalric code? Not only is Launcelot inconsistent in his obedience to the code, but throughout the *Morte*, he proceeds to break not one point, but almost every point of Arthur's code of chivalry.

The chivalric code clearly states that knights are "never to do... morthir" [never to commit murder]. However, Launcelot does — not once, but twice. Launcelot commits these ignoble acts in part IV of "The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere," "The Knight of the Cart." After receiving word that Mellyagaunce has abducted Guenevere, Launcelot immediately arms himself and goes in pursuit. Expecting to be followed, Mellyagaunce sets an ambush for Launcelot. The result of this ambush is that Launcelot's horse is "shotte... with many arowys," [shot with many arrows] forcing him to proceed on foot. After walking for a while, Launcelot becomes encumbered of his armor but does not remove it because he fears the treachery of Mellyagaunce. Serendipitously, he comes upon a peasant gathering wood. Launcelot requests that the carter give him a ride to Mellyagaunce's castle, but the carter replies: "Thou shalt nat go with me!" [You will not go with me!]. Therefore, in a

fit of anger Launcelot "lepe to hym and gaff hym backwarde with hys gauntelet a rere mayne, that he felle to the earth starke dede..." [Launcelot "leaped on him and gave him such a blow with his gauntlet that he fell to the earth stark dead"] (1126). After killing the peasant, Launcelot commandeers the cart and continues his pursuit of Mellyagaunce. Obviously, what is good fortune for Launcelot is not necessarily good fortune for others. In his haste to save Queen Guinevere, Launcelot ignores his code of chivalry and murders this innocent, unarmed, serf. Because serfs were considered lower class citizens and even property of the nobility, their death was not a great concern except perhaps as a loss of labor. However, Launcelot's murder of this serf violates not only his knightly code, but also a moral (or religious) code. As David Harrington mentions, "Malory's heroes show little compunction about violating the doctrines of the church, unless such teachings just happen to coincide with the principles of chivalry." For instance, although "hand-to-hand combat [and] the killing of others in quarrels were opposed to church doctrine," "killing a man is permissible within the rules of fair play" (67). Although this places Launcelot's conduct in a religious gray area, it is obvious that even if the carter had been armed, he would have had little chance against a knight of Launcelot's caliber. Therefore, it is obvious that Launcelot's actions were definitely not within the boundaries of "fair play."

Closely following his disreputable slaying of the carter, Launcelot commits a second murder. This murder breaks almost every point of the chivalric code. Not only does it violate Launcelot's chivalric oath to "give mercy unto hym that askith mercy" [give mercy to he who asks for mercy], it also breaks his vow that he will not "take no batayles in a wrongfull quarell for no love ne for no worldis goodis" [will not fight in any wrongful quarrels neither for love nor for worldly possessions]. To make matters worse, the reason Launcelot commits this murder is to hide an act of treason—sleeping with the queen. We see that after the matter of the

kidnapping has been settled and the queen is safe, Launcelot schedules a rendezvous with Guenevere. Launcelot goes to her window that night and, after a brief conversation with Guenevere through her bedroom window, forces his way through the iron bars and into the queen's chamber. In the process of removing the barriers between himself and his love, Launcelot "kutte the brawne of hys hondys thorowoute to the bone" [cut the palm of his hand to the bone]. However, Launcelot is not one to let a minor wound deter him. Therefore, he "wente to bedde with the quene and toke no force of hys hurt honde, but toke hys pleasaunce and hys lykyng until hit was the dawnyng of the day; for wyte you well he slept nat..." [went to bed with the queen and took no notice of his hurt hand, but took his pleasure and joy until it was morning, for understand well that he slept not] (1130-1131). Besides being the first incident in which Malory reveals that Launcelot and Guenevere are having an affair, this scene also brings about the first accusation that the lovers are treasonous to King Arthur.

The next morning, after discovering blood from Launcelot's wounded hand on Guenevere's sheets, Mellyagaunce "demed in her that she was false to the kyng and that some of the wounded knyghtes had lyene by her all that nyght" [charged that she was false to the king and that some of the wounded knights had lain with her all the night] (1132). Mellyagaunce accuses the queen of treason and challenges Launcelot to defend her honor. By accepting Mellyagaunce's challenge, Launcelot is fighting against right. It is ironic that even a fallen knight such as Mellyagaunce can give Launcelot advice in this area. He remonstrates "I rede yow beware what ye do; for thoughe ye ar never so good a knyght, as I wote wel ye ar renowned the beste knyght of the wor[ld]de, yet shulde ye be avysed to do batayle in a wronge quarell, for God wolle have a stroke in every batayle" [I warn you to beware what you do, for although you are a great knight, as I know well you are known as the best knight of the world, yet you should be advised to avoid battle

in a wrongful quarrel, for God will have a stroke in every battle] (1133). As if to protect himself from God's vengeance, Launcelot places himself technically in the right by bending the truth and swearing that "thys nyght there lay none of thes ten knyghtes wounded with my lady, quene Gwenyver" [this night there lay none of these ten wounded knights with my lady, Queen Guenevere] (1133). Launcelot knows that this statement is true since he was the knight that slept with the queen that night. After making this statement, Launcelot is eager to fight Mellyagaunce. It is in the course of this battle that Launcelot breaks yet another point in the code of chivalry. Early in the battle, Mellyagaunce realizes that he is overmatched. Fearful of losing his life, Mellyagaunce cries to Launcelot "Moste noble knyght, Sir Launcelot, save my lyff! For I yelde me unto you, and I requyre you, as ye be a knyght and felow of the Table Rounde, sle me nat, for I yelde me as overcomyn....," [most noble knight, Sir Launcelot, save my life! For I yield unto you, and I require you, as a true knight of the Round Table, slay me not, for I yield and am overcome...] (1138). However, Launcelot knows that he and Guenevere are guilty of treason and wants to remove the threat that Mellyagaunce represents to their safety. Therefore, after looking to Guenevere and receiving "sygnys that she wolde have [Mellyagaunce] dede" [signs that she would have Mellyagaunce dead], Launcelot forces the battle onward and slays Sir Mellyagaunce (1139). In this scene, we see that not only does Launcelot fight in a wrongful quarrel, but, as Irene Joynt points out, he also fights for purely selfish reasons. We are told that Launcelot "had lever than all the good in the world that he myght be *revenged* upon hym [Mellyagaunce]" [rather than all good in the world, Launcelot wished to be *revenged* upon him Mellyagaunce] (1138. italics mine). Therefore it is plain to see that Launcelot is fighting in the spirit of personal vengeance and hatred.

It is through one of a knight's primary occupations, seeking adventure, that we discover more of

Launcelot's failings. As Beverly Kennedy mentions in her essay, "Notions of Adventure in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*," Middle-English use of the term "adventure" includes an extraordinary range of possibilities. The Middle English dictionary lists many definitions, including such diverse meanings as: fate, fortune, accident, danger, a daring feat, or a miracle (Kennedy 38). However, no matter how the term is defined, one fact remains clear: Launcelot is exceptionally adept at seeking out adventure. It is through adventure, or avoidance of adventure, that we discover another of Launcelot's failings—pride.

Although it is permissible for knights to seek worldly fame—except on the Sankgreal quest—, it is apparent that Launcelot is excessive in his pursuit of prestige. In fact, Launcelot carries his quest for fame to such an extreme that it becomes a matter of pride and vainglory. This appears in the fact that Launcelot commands all of his prisoners to yield not to King Arthur as do the other Round Table knights, but "unto quene Gwenyvere" (274). This action is supposedly based on Launcelot's undying love for the queen and Launcelot himself admits that "all my grete dedis of armys that I have done for the moste party was for the quenys sake..." [all my great deeds of arms, I have done mostly for the Queen's sake] (897). However, due to the great number of prisoners he sends to the queen and the oddity of this action, Launcelot brings inordinate attention to himself, thus underlining his reputation as number one knight. As Marian MacCurdy points out, Launcelot "represents one who is so under the power of the feminine that he is consumed by it and loses his identity as a knight" (12). Perhaps Launcelot's actions are not based solely on his love for Guenevere, but also on his love of himself and his pride.

Throughout the *Morte*, we see occasions where Launcelot is guilty of pride. Launcelot is justifiably proud of his reputation as the number one knight in King Arthur's court. However, on two occasions we see that Launcelot is so fearful of defeat and a subsequent loss of standing that he avoids conflict if

he is unsure of victory. The first instance in which we see this cowardly action is when Launcelot is almost defeated by Gareth. As Gareth departs for his first quest, he jousts with, and defeats, Sir Kay. After his first victory, Gareth challenges Launcelot. After both knights are unhorsed in the joust, they proceed to fight with swords. However, after fighting for a while, Launcelot

felte hym (Gareth) so bygge that he mervayled of his strength, for he fought more lyker a gyaunte than a knyght, and his fyghtyng was so passyng durable and passyng perelous. For Sir Launcelot had so much ado with hym that he dred hymself to be shamed, and seyde, 'Beawymaynes, feyght nat so sore! Your quarell and myne is nat grete but we may sone leve of.'

[felt him (Gareth) so powerful that he marveled at his strength, for he fought more like a giant than a knight, and his fighting was so durable and perilous that Launcelot feared he would be shamed. So he said, 'Beaumains, fight no more! Our quarrel is not so great that we may not easily quit fighting.'](299. parenthesis mine)

Had Launcelot been defeated in this battle with Gareth, he would have been doubly shamed. Not only would it have been Launcelot's first defeat, but, since Gareth was as yet un-knighted, it would have been defeat at the hands of a supposed kitchen servant. Therefore, when Launcelot sees that he might suffer ignominious defeat, he halts the fight and proceeds to knight Gareth.

A second occasion where Launcelot refuses to fight in order to save his reputation is found in "The Castle of Maidens." During a tournament, Launcelot observes that a certain knight bearing a black shield, Sir Trystram, is outfighting all the other knights. Launcelot is curious about this knight and determines to search him out and challenge him. So Launcelot draws his sword and goes

in search of Sir Trystram. However, upon finding Trystram and observing how spectacularly he is fighting, Launcelot says to himself:

'A! mercy Jesu!... syth the firste tyme that ever I bare armys saw I never one knyght do so mervaylous dedys of armys. And if I shoulde... sette upon thys knyght now, I ded shame to myself.'

['Mercy of Jesus!... This is the first time since I first bore arms that I ever saw one knight do so many marvelous deeds of arms. And if I set upon this knight now, I might be shamed.'](526)

Launcelot's refusal to fight Sir Trystram may be interpreted in two manners. First, since Trystram has been fighting for some time, it is possible that Launcelot believes that he is too tired to fight any longer. In this case, by allowing a tired knight to rest, Launcelot would be acting out of courtesy and politeness. However, in light of Launcelot's apparent obsession with pride, it is possible that Launcelot avoids Trystram for reasons similar to those he had when calling off the fight with Gareth—he is afraid of defeat and loss of standing among the knights of the Round Table.

Launcelot's pride is a primary reason that he is unsuccessful in the quest for the Sankgreal—the greatest adventure of King Arthur's knights. In his first adventure during the Grail quest, Launcelot finds himself outside a richly decorated chapel but is unable to enter. He lies down to rest and, during a period of half-waking/half-sleeping, he sees a knight healed by the Grail. Launcelot attempts to approach the Grail, but he is "ouertaken with synne" [overtaken with sin] and cannot move (894). When he awakens, Launcelot realizes that it is because of his sin that he has been dishonored. He acknowledges that "'whan [he] sought worldly adventures for worldely desyres [he] ever encheved them and had the bettir in every place, and never was [he] discomfite in no quarell, were hit ryght

were hit wronge” [when I sought worldly adventures for worldly desires, I always achieved them and was the best in every situation, and was never defeated in any quarrel, were it right or wrong] (896. brackets mine). Robert Kelly points out that although this might sound as if Malory is distinguishing between “secular” and “celestial” chivalry, he is not. Kelly says that “Worldly adventures for worldly desires’ is not ‘secular’ knighthood, but false knighthood, equatable with a condition of pride” (181). Launcelot then confesses his long-concealed adultery, but his chief sin is vainglory, not adultery (Kelly 182).

Later in the Grail quest, when Launcelot sides with the black knights, we see that because he believes he can lead the losing knights to victory, he is once more guilty of pride (931). Malory’s hermit makes it clear that Launcelot was unable to defeat the white knights because of his pride. He says that it is because of “bobbaunce and pryde of the worlde... that thou sholde know God frome vayneglory of the worlde; hit ys nat worth a pears. An for grete pryde thou madist grete sorow that thou haddist nat overcom all the whyght knyghtes” [boasting and pride of the world... that you should know God from vainglory of the world; it is not worth anything. And for great pride, you made great sorrow, and you were unable to overcome the white knights] (933-934). As a result of this lecture from the hermit, Launcelot vows to change his ways and live in accordance with God’s will.

Although Launcelot has supposedly reformed himself during the Grail quest, in “The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere,” it is soon obvious that he has reverted to his pre-Grail actions. In the beginning of the first episode, that of “The Poisoned Apple,” we see that Launcelot has “forgate the promyse and the perfeccion that he made in the queste” and he and the queen now “loved togydirs more hotter than they dud toforehonde” [forgot the promise and the perfection that he made in the Grail quest, and he and the queen now loved together hotter than they did before] (1045). We also

see that while Launcelot defends many “ladyes and damesels... for the plesure of oure Lorde Jesu Cryst,” [ladies and damsels for the pleasure of our Lord Jesus Christ] he distances himself from Gwenyvere not for God’s sake, but “to eschew the sclawndir and noyse” [to avoid slander and noise at the court] (1045). It is obvious that “Launcelot has reserved this one area of his life apart from his obligations to God and knighthood” (Kelly 184).

As the story progresses, we see that Launcelot again disobeys much of the chivalric code. He again commits treason with the queen, fights against right, and eventually murders two unarmed knights — Gaherys and Gareth (1177). It is Launcelot’s refusal to reform his character that brings about his greatest sin—the destruction of King Arthur’s kingdom. Launcelot continues his affair with the queen until Arthur, after being informed by Agravain, is forced to take action. At this point, the end is inevitable. We see that it is only after the death of both Arthur and Guenevere that Launcelot finally grasps the consequences of his actions.

‘whan I remembre of hir beaulte and of hir noblesse, that was bothe wyth hyr kyng and wyth hyr, so whan I sawe his corps and hir corps so lye togyders, truly myn herte wold not serve to susteyne my careful body. Also whan I remember me how by my defaute and myn orgule and my pryde that they were bothe layed ful lowe, that were pereles that ever was lyvyng of Cristen people, wyt you wel... this remembred, of their kyndenes and myn unkyndenes, sanke so to myn herte that I myght not susteyne myself.’

[When I remember their beauty and their nobleness, that was both with her king and with her, so when I saw his corpse and her corpse lying together, truly, my heart would not serve to sustain my sorrowful body. Also, when I remember how by my lacking and my pride and my arrogance that they were both

killed, who were most peerless that ever lived of Christian people, know you well, that remembering this, their kindness and my unfaithfulness, my heart sinks so that I cannot sustain myself] (1256).

After closely examining Launcelot's character, we discover that this supposed paragon of knighthood has many flaws. Not only does he fail to maintain King Arthur's code of chivalry, but he is also vain and cowardly. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that it is not correct to accept Launcelot's reputation as absolute. It is now obvious that not only is much of Launcelot's chivalry a facade, the facade is fragile and disintegrates to reveal a character who is definitely not "the floure of knyghthode."

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騎士道の花

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Arthur王の伝説の歴史を通じて、「騎士道の花」である Launcelot は常にロマン主義的英雄、騎士道精神のお手本として描かれてきた。Sir Thomas Malory による *Morte d'Arthur* においても、Malory もこの伝統に従って Launcelot の人物造形を行なっているように見える。Malory は *Morte* の冒頭において、「生死を賭けたあらゆる決闘、馬上試合、武勲において彼 (Launcelot) は他のすべての騎士たちを凌いでいた。そしていつの時代においても彼を負かすことのできる者はいなかった」と述べている。おおかたの読者は Launcelot が円卓の騎士たちの中で最も偉大な騎士であることを自明のこととして受けとめており、確かに作品全体を通じて彼はしばしば「現存の騎士の中で最も礼儀正しい騎士」、「礼儀正しさと騎士道において並ぶ者のない」、「騎士の世界でもっとも高貴な」騎士として言及されている。しかしながら、「騎士道の花」としての Launcelot の名声を絶対的な真実として受け入れることは正しいことなのであろうか。Launcelot の騎士道精神は実は見せかけに過ぎず、注意深く見てみると、その見せかけは崩れ、「完璧な騎士」ではない別のペルソナが露呈されるということはないだろうか。本論では Launcelot の性格造形を詳細に検討することによって、この騎士道の鑑だということになっている人物に実はいろいろな欠点があることを示す。彼は Arthur 王の騎士道の規範

に背いているだけでなく、虚栄心が強く、臆病でもある。よって筆者は Launcelot の名声を絶対的なものとして受け入れることは正しくないと結論づける。Launcelot の騎士道精神はその大部分が見せかけであり、しかもその見せかけは薄っぺらですぐに剥がれ、その下から決して「騎士道の花」とはいえない人物が顔を出すのである。