
Gary S. Hauk

Follow this and additional works at: http://preserve.lehigh.edu/etd

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
THE WRITER-KNIGHT:
A CRITICAL STUDY OF MALORY, STEINBECK, AND
THE ACTS OF KING ARTHUR AND HIS NOBLE KNIGHTS

by
Gary S. Hauk

A Thesis
Presented to the Graduate Committee
of Lehigh University
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts
in
the Department of English

Lehigh University
1977
This thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

September 12, 1977
(date)

Professor in Charge

Chairman of Department
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Albert E. Hartung, whose invaluable guidance during our discussions of Malory and Steinbeck sparked more than a few of the insights in this essay.

"We can make majors and officers every year, but not scholars..."

--The Anatomy of Melancholy

iii
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

A look at Sir Thomas Malory's Morte d'Arthur and its recent "translation," John Steinbeck's Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights, and the times in which the works were written, reveals that the two writers achieved remarkably similar feats; for both began their novels as translations of earlier Arthurian stories; and each ended by creating a work of art that touches the universal at the same time it strives to address the unique time and culture of its conception—in Malory's case, England of the 1460's, and in Steinbeck's, America of the 1950's.

That Malory made his French sources accessible to his contemporaries one can conclude from studying his narrative techniques and theme, which fit into the mainstream of fifteenth-century romance. In adapting the Morte Arthure, Malory made the lengthy, ornate, diffuse, and archaic narrative of the alliterative English poem clearer and more intelligible to his audience. In adapting the French Suite du Merlin, prose Lancelot, and Queste del Saint Graal, he gave the English nobility not only readable prose but also scenes of jousts and tournaments similar to contemporary accounts of knightly pastimes. And, finally, Malory reworked the purely religious theme of the Grail Quest in the French sources to make it more secular. Thus, in preferring to exalt courtesy, generosity, mercy, and stability in knighthood rather than the French ideals of serving the Creator, defending the Church, and offering to
Christ the treasure of one's soul, Malory exhorts his countrymen to espouse ideals that might save England from the chaos of the late-fifteenth century.

The letters of Steinbeck reveal that he, too, set out merely to put Malory's book into the language of twentieth-century America. As he proceeded, however, the mores, neuroses, virtues, and sins of his culture found their way into his prose, and his work began to evolve into something very different in idiom and plot from the *Morte d'Arthur*; fifteenth-century romance was transformed into twentieth-century novel. Nevertheless, like Malory, Steinbeck wrote a book for his time in three respects. First, he portrayed realistically, through minor characters and necromancers, the weakness of heart that he believed to be the spirit of his age. Secondly, in reacting against this weakness, Steinbeck called for aspiration to ideals perhaps long dead. And, thirdly, Steinbeck achieved his call to perfection through what is for him a new genre--the myth fable that was gaining popularity after World War II. In all three respects, *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* fits securely into the mainstream of letters and life in America during the 1950's.
Preface

"Eat no onions nor garlic, for we are to utter sweet breath."
---A Midsummer Night's Dream

The mind of a writer is a deep and unholy well of desires and half-remembered dreams, and much of the time not even he can see through the silver gloom to the bottom. A welling of words, of images suspended, turning upon one another in a confusion of inarticulable feeling, a sense of time and timelessness, other worlds, dimensions of this world unknown but glimpsed, eternal voices and smells of the past and visions of forests of night—all of this floats up from the dark through the back door of consciousness and out, out of reach, intangible. The writer tries to name the unnameable and finds the name a poor artificial thing. He grasps for a sudden glitter in the sand but scoops up broken shells. Mermaids and sea-dragons, sirens of a beckoning ocean, float by, and he follows; but he must always return to the harsh weather of the surface, and so lose his chance to capture fantastic shapes of tranquillity below. His life is a constant submerging into dreams which hold him all too briefly.

The writer himself cannot fully understand his mind, but can only try to speak in a familiar tongue about half-known truths. And inevitably, to use Eliot's words, each attempt to speak clearly is a wholly new start, and a different kind
of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the
better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say,
or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it.
("East Coker")

The writer is caught between two worlds, all of his efforts thwarted, all of his direction turned around, all of his attempts at translation defeated in part by the very thing he tries to translate—"the human heart in conflict with itself." He can only lose. And he must lose before he begins. He cannot speak of what he intends or what end he hopes to achieve, for like the polar explorer he finds his compass pulling him away from true North toward a no-less real, but no-less impalpable, magical magnetic Pole.

How much more hopeless, then, is the fate of the man in pursuit of the writer. The pursued swims through the depths guided by his own light, while the pursuer must follow the dim light ahead and rely on the weakness of his eyes. Rushing to keep up, turning first one way then another, taking short-cuts instinctively, gasping for air momentarily before diving back to the chase, the man in pursuit seeks nothing less than the full exploration of every crevice of the writer's mind. And all the while he is conscious of the depth of his own dark well waiting to be peered into.

Like the stacks in Borges's Library of Babel, the possibilities of pursuit seem limitless; In the blank mist of the fifth
century A.D., a man distinguished himself as a military leader, and the mind of Western man has not been the same since. A preacher in despair over the sins of his time and the weakness of his nation's leaders mentioned the military leader whom he had never seen, and later a would-be historian collected a muddle of narrative which adds to the preacher's diatribe and layers it with the fabulous. Later still the poets went to work, and, fertilized by their imagination and the vanity of their patrons and liege-lords, the story of the popular general grew limbs both monstrous and beautiful. Chroniclers wrote pseudo-history, romancers wrote popular entertainment, poets-laureate and obscure novelists and didactic teachers watered the tree of legend until it shot higher and branched farther and leaved more fully and blossomed more gloriously than ever before.

Among the names of the legend-growers, that of Sir Thomas Malory sounds like a bold incantation. Thought by some to have been the disgrace of fifteenth-century Warwickshire, and by others a Lancastrian Yorkshireman swept up in the politics of the Wars of the Roses, he had in any case one of the most reflective and searching minds ever confined by an English jail; and the product of his talent influenced the lives of countless other self-searching souls, including those of a nine-year-old boy growing up in Salinas, California, and a 24-year-old graduate student shrivelling up in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

The nine-year-old boy became a famous and wealthy American
novelist who spent the last years of his life trying to understand
the mind of Malory, who he thought had written a book of and for
the fifteenth century, and whom he tried to emulate by translating
that book for his own troubled century. Somewhere in the swirls
of darkness, however, he got lost; trying to find his way through
the mind of one great writer, he lost the way back to his own
rich well of thoughts and ideas.

The 24-year-old graduate student leaped—in an impetuous way
more typical of undergraduates than of graduate students—into the
mind of the novelist and found himself pursuing a pursuer, making
a second—but this time hesitant—leap into the mind of Malory.
Two leaps into wells within a well: he will have to swim strongly
to get out again.
Chapter One

"Bless thee, Bottom! bless thee! thou art translated."
--A Midsummer Night's Dream

The name most commonly near the top of lists like "Ten Famous People I'd like to Invite to Dinner" and "Seven Artists of the Past I'd Like to Talk To" is probably William Shakespeare. The reason is simple: Every actor, teacher, student, and reader of Shakespeare would like to ask the Bard whether he himself wrote those millions of words of glorious verse or, as Mark Twain once asserted, it was simply another man with the same name. Inevitably mystery must shroud the life of any great artist because of the very mystery of the nature of art and genius; but the fog grows thicker, of course, the farther back in time one looks.

Perhaps the artists themselves would welcome the opportunity to hide. Sir Thomas Malory, for instance, has enjoyed a certain scandalous notoriety ever since the 1920's, when Edward Cobb and E.K. Chambers concluded independently of each other that Malory was a prisoner in need of "good deliverance,"¹ and the mystery of the

writer-knight's identity has spurred an academic quest almost as intense and fraught with the danger of ambush and fantastic vision as the Grail Quest itself. Among writers, the ghost of Sir Thomas Malory must often feel like the Hollywood starlet whose public has little time to watch her films because they are reading the latest biographical gossip about her in *People* magazine.

In many respects even contemporary authors share the fate of Malory, for although the facts of their lives are far more completely documented, the relationship between those facts and the writers' works is lost in mystery. Biographical criticism remains the most readable criticism—though not necessarily the most accurate—simply because of the mystery: What significance do the events of a writer's life have for his works? It may even be that by fathoming the lives of modern writers, critics can begin to understand the fragments they know about the lives of writers in the past.

When John Steinbeck began thinking seriously about trying his hand at writing a version of *Le Morte d'Arthur*, he wrote to his editor in 1958 that he would try "to put it into a language which is understandable and acceptable to a modern-day reader."² Seeing himself as essentially

a translator or paraphraser of someone else's masterpiece rather than as an inventive creator of his own great work of Arthurian literature, Steinbeck set out to make Malory's work "accessible" to the reader of his century, which, though similar to Malory's in many superficial ways, had nevertheless grown out of a vastly different conception of the universe.

One cannot say for sure that Steinbeck's stated intention was not also Malory's. The possibility is intriguing. One can only state, however, that regardless of what Malory wanted to do, he seems in two respects to have written a book for and of his time, a book more to the taste and temperament of his contemporaries than the books he translated. For the *Morte d'Arthur* both speaks in a mood and tone that its age longed for in literature and reflects the knightly activities of the nobility so well that it is sometimes impossible to determine whether art in the fifteenth century imitated life or life art.

R.W. Chambers has noted that "the world to which the *Morte Darthur* belongs had passed away before the book was finished," and that "the England of the *Paston Letters* had little room for Arthurian chivalry." Nevertheless,

---

Malory’s work had gone through four editions by the time Elizabeth ascended the throne in 1558, and so great was its appeal that Northumberland and Somerset and Thomas Wyatt—three of the greatest social and political movers of Henry VIII’s court—declared their eagerness to defend the King’s "Castle of Loyalty" and the four maidens to whom he had given it. "The whole story reads like a chapter in Malory, with Henry, like Arthur, entering the lists and tilting against his own knights, though with better success." It sounds also like a later craze caused by another English book: The last years of the eighteenth century saw the formation of societies in France and Germany for exchanging snuff boxes and remembering sentimentally Yorick’s encounter with Father Lorenzo in Sterne’s *Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy*. That the mood of the period and the taste for sentiment increased the sales of Sterne’s little book there can be no doubt. That the mood and tenor of Malory’s age made his work widely popular—not in spite of but because of its archaisms—seems probable. The pastimes and reading habits of the nobility support this conclusion.

As Larry Benson has pointed out so conclusively, prose romance did not die out in the fifteenth century but in fact gained new popularity:

4 Ibid., p. cxl.
At the time Malby wrote it would have been surprising if he had written anything but a Morte Darthur organized as one continuous narrative. Malory moreover wrote a peculiarly fifteenth-century Arthurian work, for his book belongs to a genre of one volume prose histories that were popular at the time, a genre in which the old cycles were reduced to brief continuous narratives but in which, of course, there are few traces of our ideas of prose fiction.\(^5\)

The English aristocracy as well as the Burgundian court of the fifteenth century had a taste for Arthurian romance which, far from growing out of the middle class, replaced verse romance at the command of the nobility. Thus, Sir Thomas Malory, miles, stood comfortably within the literary mainstream of his century.\(^6\)

In the same way, although John Steinbeck had made his reputation as a realistic novelist and had begun his work on Malory when, as John Gardner has said, "realism was still king,"\(^7\) he nevertheless moved in the course of writing The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights from realism to the mytho-fabulous. And one might say that he, like Malory, was writing for an aristocracy of readers--readers who had acquired a taste for the mythic.


\(^6\) Ibid., pp. 19-21.

in Faulkner’s evocations of Yoknapatawpha and a taste for the fabulous in such recently published works as J.R.R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings (1954), William Golding’s Lord of the Flies (1954), the ficciones of Jorge Luis Borges, and the growing trend toward science fiction and other "escapist" literature. In attempting to reformulate for his time the myth of Arthur, Steinbeck in fact anticipated by ten years the reworkings of other myths by Gardner, Thomas Pynchon, and John Barth.

To understand precisely what Steinbeck did—or began to do—to the Morte d'Arthur to "modernize" the book, it will be helpful to understand what Malory did to modernize his "bookes of Frensshe." The changes Malory made fall under three main headings—narrative detail, narrative sequence, and theme. Again, however, in considering theme one cannot speak of what Malory intended his theme to be, if he intended anything; but one can speak of what the theme of the work appears to be compared to what the themes of the French sources appear to be. And inevitably the alterations in theme will appear to grow out of the alterations in narrative sequence and detail. Therefore, in order to talk about theme one needs to talk first about narrative techniques.

Of the two elements of narration, detail and sequence, the first comprises everything but action and dialogue:
hence, physical descriptions of characters and setting, background information, authorial explanation of characters' motives, and texture and style. One of the first things most commentators on Malory point out is that his prose style is unique and alive because he ripped out the stitching of the embroidered French tales and spun a simpler English broadcloth. In pointing out Malory's craftsmanship in rewriting the English alliterative Morte Arthure, the first of the books Malory translated, Eugène Vinaver has stated that Malory's "object in adapting the Morte Arthure was to rewrite an alliterative poem in a form accessible to fifteenth-century readers. To do this it was not enough to reduce the amount of alliteration and modernize the vocabulary. The whole texture of the poem had to undergo a radical change." Thus one finds Malory throwing out what Vinaver calls "rhetorical matter,"


shortening the verse by getting rid of descriptive ornamentation, artificially long speeches and inflated phraseology—in short, making the ornate and diffuse narrative of the alliterative **Morte** clearer and more intelligible.

Still, some critics disagree about the ultimate worth of Malory's weaving. C.S. Lewis, in one of his frequent disagreements with Vinaver, says that Malory not only wanders from style to style but also is more indebted to his sources than Vinaver allows:

Whatever Malory's intentions—if he had any intentions—may have been, it is agreed on all hands that he has changed the tale very little. . . . But there is no question of a great artist giving to a pupil's work those strokes of genius which make all the difference.' Rather, a deft pupil has added touches here and there to a work which, in its majestic entirety, he could never have conceived, and from which his own skill has been chiefly learned. Though he has in fact improved it, it was (by our standards, not by those of the Middle Ages) rather cheek of him to try. But even if he had done harm, he would not have done much harm.10

One can concede something to Lewis here: Malory did remain faithful to the works he was translating. But he nevertheless retained sufficient control over his material to produce something new and ultimately "his own." Some of Malory's sentences compare in eloquence, brevity, and

---

clarity to the best prose of any period, and whole passages of the *Morte* read like poetry, most of it Malory's work. And for Lewis to assert that because no one man did conceive the *Morte* therefore it is beyond the conception of one man, is not only to forget the achievement of his friend Tolkien but also to deny the power of the imagination which Lewis so frequently extolled.

Still, the question is that of Malory's scheme of adapting his sources for his own era, and whether or not Malory's style was completely original, it suited his fifteenth-century audience more than the intricacies of the French prose. 11 Where the French author narrated, Malory substituted dialogue; where the French rambled, Malory indulged his "natural preference . . . for crisp and compact construction." 12

Malory gave his audience more than simply readable prose, however; he gave them precisely the kind of adventure story they wanted, with scenes and characters drawn directly from the life they knew. While looking back nostalgically to the flowering of an age of ideal chivalry that never existed, 13 Malory's book throbs with the very

11 Benson, p. 24.

12 Vinaver, p. cvii.

life of his own century, during which the chivalric tradition as found in the *Morte* reached its peak.

Until the fourteenth century, the kind of tournaments and jousts that Malory delights in serving to his readers were regarded as frivolous; the council of Clermont had gone so far as to forbid them, and Bromyard could write that "the tournaments of the rich are the torments of the poor."\(^{14}\) By the end of the fifteenth century, however, *pas d'armes* (like the one kept by the two knights slain by Beaumains in "The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkeney") were common, tournaments were won on scorecards, and knights even rode through Europe sending captives back to their ladies Lancelot-style.\(^{15}\) Codes of knightly conduct, similar to the one sworn by the Round Table knights after Arthur's wedding, were established by Charles VI and Boucicaut, and the lives of the most famous men of the age—Richard Beauchamp and Charles the Fearless of Burgundy and James IV—read like tales from romances. In short, as Benson has summarized the era, "The more romantic life became, the more realistic romances seemed, so that sometimes, as Martin de Riquer has shown, it is difficult to separate fiction from reality in both fifteenth-century

\(^{14}\) Benson, p. 167.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., p. 158.
romances and in contemporary chronicles."

What stands out in this chronicle of details—what ought to shock like a bucket of cold water in the face—is Malory's portrayal of a life familiar to the nobility of his time. Perhaps the term "realism" in its most recent usage cannot apply, though certainly Malory is realistic in the same way that Chaucer and the author of Secunda Pastorum are realistic. At any rate, Vinaver concludes from the evidence of the additions Malory has made that he had "a highly realistic view of life, a firm belief in the importance of wealth, and an almost pathetic concern with material comforts." It sounds as though Malory has his feet planted firmly in the middle class of twentieth-century America, and of course Vinaver's statement is colored by the date (1947) of his writing it. Nevertheless, Malory seems to take pains to make his work more realistic than the French. He eliminates much of the fantastic and the irrational, and he takes the scenes of adventure out of the undefined Logres of the French and brings them into the recognizable English landscape. Malory neglects the magical and—where the French emphasizes the faerie element in an incident—stresses the human:

16 Ibid., p. 169.

17 Vinaver, p. xxii.
In the story of Arthur's fight with Accolon what impresses Malory is not the part played by the enchanted sword and its scabbard which render Arthur invulnerable, but the seemingly monstrous fact that Accolon is fighting against his anointed lord; to make this humanly credible he blackens Accolon's character and uses the story as an example of criminal behaviour, not of the power of witchcraft.\[18\]

Other incidents of this sort come to mind. When Malory narrates the birth of Arthur, he cannot avoid Merlin's magical intervention. Yet he does change the incident in a practical way by making Merlin—who in the French story is merely a shape-shifter and prophet-priest—into the king's chief counsellor. Thus, as Thomas L. Wright has noted, the supernatural here does more than entertain the reader, it serves as a practical reminder of Arthur's destiny.\[19\]

Lewis, again disagreeing with Vinaver, has pointed out that Malory's elimination of some of the supernatural elements does not necessarily indicate his lack of interest in fantasy, but in fact increases the effect of the supernatural aspects he retains: "It is possible to imagine a burly, commonsensible man who was always trying to turn the faerie world of the romance into something much more earthy and realistic. . . . But a quite different picture is pos-

---

18 Ibid., pp. 1276-7.

A simple and serious delight in marvellous narrative most emphatically does not involve any indifference to details. Granting Lewis's point that in tying things together Malory does not weaken the marvels by multiplying them, one nevertheless must agree with Vinaver that Malory attempts from time to time to provide a "realistic explanation of supernatural events." Lancelot's healing of his fellow knights in the episode of the Chapel Perilous and "The Healing of Sir Urry" certainly qualifies as supernatural; that Lancelot heals them because of his vows to damsels and fellow knights and because he is the best knight in the world is an attempt (though not entirely successful) to bring the supernatural into the realm of the humanly explainable. Thus, in matters both chivalric and magical, narrative detail reflects the age in which Malory wrote and reveals his interest in the daily life of his time. More significant to any discussion of how Malory adjusted his book to his time, however, are narrative sequence and its bearing on theme.

Enough has been written about Malory's unweaving of the French entrelacement in the prose Tristan and the Suite du Merlin to merit avoiding further comment on it in this

20 Lewis, p. 12.

21 Vinaver, p. 1402.
Let it suffice that Malory did his readers a favor in unknitting a complex pattern of narrative. His role as editor, however, goes beyond merely making a convoluted tale into a straightforward one. In modernizing the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, Malory stopped short of continuing to the catastrophe at the end of the tale, and, although he wanted primarily to write an uncomplicated and fast-moving narrative, he adapted his source to his purpose by making Arthur more gentle and chivalric, even while celebrating him as a military hero. Once again he proves to be writing for his time, taking for his theme the chivalry palatable to his readers.

Rewriting the *Queste del Saint Graal* and the *Suite du Merlin*, Malory revised the entire thrust of the matter from spiritual mystery to secular adventure. Reworking the prose *Lancelot*, he cut away hundreds of pages of complex plot to avoid bringing in the relationship of Lancelot and Guinevere, and to concentrate solely on the development of Lancelot as knight. At the end of "The Tale of King Arthur" he invents the code by which medieval chivalry is...
remembered, and the code is "not a set of rules for knights approaching, through the Grail quest, the great spiritual challenge of their careers; rather, it is a code suitable for an ambitious, high-minded order just setting out toward adventure." Malory's job becomes one of cutting and pasting so that the adventures of Gawain, Tor, and Pellinor, and the invented adventures of Ywain and Marhalt, come together to exemplify the laws of the code. "Malory was inextricably indebted to the Suite du Merlin for characters and episodes in the 'Tale of King Arthur,' but a comparison of his version with the Suite reveals a difference of purpose that is fundamental: Malory aims at a more secular idealism and . . . a more comprehensive Arthurian history than that foreseen in the Suite."  

For Malory, chivalry is an austere ideal very different from the knighthood he had found in the French romances, where chivalry is either the background for love or a spiritual test. While the French writer distinguishes between chevaillierie celestiale and chevaillierie terrienne, preferring the former, Malory distinguishes between right

24 Wright, p. 39.

25 Ibid., p. 12.

and wrong conduct in chivalry, preferring "virtuous living"—hardly the same sort of high spiritual ideal the French writer had in mind. In the French romance the perfect knight serves the Creator, defends the Holy Church, and offers to Christ the treasure of his soul, with which he has been entrusted; Malory praises "knyghtly dedys and vertuous lyvyng" (II, 891). The French writer exalts Bors for his religious life; Malory exalts him for his "stable" life. For Malory the choice is not between the religious and the worldly but between the ethical-active and the unethical-active.

Malory in fact holds the same view as Langland and Gower and many other English medieval moralists. No man need leave the Order to which he has been called, but every man must begin really to fulfill the functions for which that Order exists. The recall is not from knighthood to the cloister, but from knighthood as it has come to be . . . to knighthood as it was intended to be. . . . Admittedly, then, the story is ethical as against mystical. But we must not say "ethical as against religious."28

Lewis speaks convincingly in favor of retaining a partly religious interpretation of the Grail Quest. Certainly any quest, even in the work of a modern writer, must bear the inevitable burden of religious value—much more so a quest

27 Lewis, p. 16.

28 Ibid., p. 16.
so laden with Christian symbology in a work so close to
the Age of Faith. But the problem of the translator’s role
comes in, and one might well argue with Vinaver that what-
ever is sacred in Malory remains vestigially from the
French. Malory moves from disorder to coherence to chaos,
as does the Suite du Merlin, but order in the Suite comes
from the directing motive of the Grail. The test in the
Suite is purely spiritual, not social, whereas "it is above
all else the struggle of man with himself that lies at the
heart of Le Morte Darthur." By thus shifting the empha-
sis of his work from the theory to the practice of chiv-
alry, and giving adventure the moral basis of embracing
good chivalry and avoiding the bad, Malory succeeded in not
only modernizing but also "anglicizing" his sources.

The key to understanding Malory’s book is, of course,
Lancelot. Charles Williams has rightly said that "Lancelot,
for all the errands upon which he rides, is never merely a
knight-errant. He affirms friendship, courtesy, justice,
and nobility"—the ingredients of Malory’s conception of

29 Vinaver, p. xxv.
30 Wright, p. 63.
32 Charles Williams, "The Figure of Arthur," in
"Arthurian Torso," Taliessin Through Logres (Grand Rapids,
chivalry. Malory chose as his source for "The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot" the Agravain section of the Old French prose Lancelot, although he breaks from the French each time it deals with Lancelot's prowess as a lover rather than his prowess as a knight-errant. Lumiansky believes that the primary function of Malory's rendering of the story is to show the Lancelot-Guinevere relationship before adultery, and although this is partly true, it is by no means his sole intention. Throughout the tale the focus is almost entirely on Lancelot, and even when Guinevere's name sneaks in, the relationship itself is kept well in the background. Lancelot appears simply as a "knight adventurous who lives for 'arms and tournaments, battles and adventures.'" Whatever later developments may arise, Malory is here concerned only with making Lancelot the "best knyght of a sinful man."

Albert E. Hartung has noted the "considerable changes" Malory makes in transforming the rather brutal Lancelot of the French source into the most courteous knight, and has


34 Tucker, p. 70.

35 Vinaver, p. 1398.
suggested that Malory's interest lay "not in the proliferation of knightly feats, but in the development of his unique conception of Lancelot's character." In the Belleus and the Perys de Foreste Savage episodes of the French book, Lancelot's chasing and killing a wounded, unarmed knight and his merciless hacking of a terrified, fainting robber do little to raise him to the "controlled, just, and fair" conception which Malory carefully creates. Each of the episodes in "The Tale of Sir Launcelot" exemplifies an element of the chivalric ideal that Lancelot embodies, and it is significant that Malory modifies all of the ones he takes from his source and even adds one found nowhere else (the Phelot incident). Malory thus carefully balances the incidents of Lancelot's life so that after "The Dolorous Death" of Lancelot we look back on his life and see the qualities that Ector catalogues in his lament. Gaheris praises Lancelot as a warrior after the defeat of Tarquin, and the damsel praises him as "the curtest knyght"--precisely the two qualities Ector stresses most in his eulogy.

The first half of the tale has established Lancelot as a faithful lover.


37 Ibid., pp. 256-8.
(the Morgan episode) and an ideal knight, generous to his foes (Belleus), skilled in jousts (deed of arms "for lyff" at Bagdemagus's tournament) and battles ("for deth" in the fight with Tarquin), and one who uses his prowess to serve his fellows (rescue of Lionel and the others) and to punish an oppressor of ladies (the Perys episode). 38

Malory has achieved this portrait not only by disentangling the narrative of the French source but also by adjusting the motives of his characters as well as narrative detail. 39

Clearly, Malory felt no compunction in changing the Arthurian matter as he found it so that it suited his own, quite different ends. He may have regarded himself as others continue to regard him—as simply a "translator." I doubt it. His accomplishment is not one of translation merely but a transformation of a prolix and convoluted collection of tales, with little appeal for a fifteenth-century English aristocratic audience, into an absorbing and surprisingly realistic tragedy firmly imprinted with the stamp of his bold and rowdy age. Specifically, Malory used realistic narrative detail drawn from contemporary chivalry, narrated in a style digestible by his fifteenth-century audience, to present a possibility of salvation for his disorderly age—a "return" to ideals that never were.

38 Benson, p. 86.

39 Hartung, pp. 254-6.
And yet the book contains all of the old truths that never change. Five hundred years have not dulled the tragedy of the withering of chivalry. Our age, no less than Malory's, needs the promise of seeing the Grail before our fall, the proof that the best "of a sinful man" may still look back on his life and smile at its "sweetest savour." Not all readers have the patience to wade through the archaisms and run-on sentences of Malory's by-now ancient prose, just as few men in his day could wade through the French books. Just as he "modernized" and "anglicized" the books of French, so it remains for someone to "modernize" and "Americanize" the "book of Kyng Arthur, and of his noble knyghts." John Steinbeck tried.
"Why should a man whose blood is warm within,  
Sit like his grandsire cut in alabaster?"

--The Merchant of Venice

Chapter Two

In his short story "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,"¹ Jorge Luis Borges describes the curious method by which a twentieth-century "Symbolist from Nîmes" sets out to write Don Quixote, by Miguel de Cervantes. Menard begins by learning Spanish of the seventeenth century, trying to "recover the Catholic faith," and forgetting all the history of Europe from 1602 to 1918—in other words, by becoming Miguel de Cervantes. Ultimately Menard rejects this course as too simple, and follows the more difficult route of writing draft after draft of his story about the Don and Sancho. Although he manages to complete only "the ninth and thirty-eighth chapters of the first part of Don Quixote and a fragment of chapter twenty-two," his work remains a monument to the imagination: "To compose the Quixote at the beginning of the seventeenth century was a reasonable undertaking . . . ; at the beginning of the twentieth, it is almost impossible. It is not in vain that three hundred

years have gone by." Yet the narrator of the story of Menard's literary stunt—actually writing the identical words of Cervantes without merely transcribing them—concludes that "Menard's fragmentary Quixote is more subtle than Cervantes'"! Indeed, though Cervantes's text and Menard's are word-for-word the same, "the second is almost infinitely richer" because of its contemporary birth in a world that has not only read Cervantes and Swift and Poe and Yeats but also witnessed the French Revolution, Waterloo, Verdun, and the Great Depression.

Seen in the light of this profound and amusing story, John Steinbeck's quest of the Morte d'Arthur of Sir Thomas Malory appears by no means—if one may use the expression—quixotic, but a huge, impossible task for any writer to undertake on behalf of his imagination. Steinbeck's letters indicate that he aimed at Malory to hit the Morte, in much the same way that the imaginary Menard originally aimed at Cervantes to hit the Quixote. Steinbeck pored studiously over hundreds of books on the Middle Ages, trying to understand Malory's age. On a strangely Borgesian note, he writes in March 1958, "I think it is possible through knowledge and discipline for a modern man to understand, and, to a certain extent, live into a fifteenth-century mind, but the reverse would be completely impossible. . . . while I may not be able to understand all of Malory's mind, at least
I know what he could not have thought or felt" (Acts, p. 316). The intervening five hundred years have enriched Malory's book, not diminished it, and the experience that the twentieth-century reader brings to the Morte d'Arthur creates a hundred new significant implications.

Nevertheless, though the novelist in pursuit of the knight-romancer, like the fictional poet in pursuit of the soldier-novelist, did not fail altogether to glimpse the elusive quarry, he fell far short of capturing the chimera he had set out to catch. Steinbeck's editor, Elizabeth Otis, has suggested that one of the biggest problems Steinbeck had in writing The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights was his getting "so involved with Malory" that he couldn't free himself from the presence of his predecessor. And Elaine Steinbeck has said that her late husband despised of ever living up to the original. Under such a burden of tradition, with so remarkable a writer as Malory to emulate, even a writer of Steinbeck's stature could not keep his invention from flagging. The problem of the novelist is in this instance what Vinaver calls the problem of the critic, for "the more he is bent on his task, the less he can conceive of himself and the author as two distinct individuals whose ways of thinking and writing are inevitably unlike, who are both liable to err." Invention failed because the

2 Vinaver, p. xcii.
story had already been invented.

Still, in the section of the *Morte* that Steinbeck completed, the story of Arthur and Lancelot and Guinevere achieves a remarkable transformation from fifteenth-century romance to twentieth-century novel in three respects. First, it portrays realistically, through minor characters and necromancers, what Steinbeck believed to be the spirit of his age—a weakness of heart, almost a snivelling failure to regard life fully. Secondly, in reacting against the cowardice of the 1950's, the new work calls for aspiration to ideals perhaps long dead, maybe only sleeping. Both of these elements in Steinbeck's work can be seen in Malory's: the first in his exhortation to Englishmen to put their fickleness behind them ("the moste kynge and nobelyst knyght of the worlde, . . . might nat these Englyshemen holde them contente with hym. . . . Alas! thys ys a greate defaughte of us Englysshemen, for there may no thynge us please no terme"—III, 1229.); the second in his general nostalgia for a lost code of chivalry ("And ryght so faryth the love nowadayes, sone hote sone colde. Thys ys no stabylyte. But the olde love was nat so"—III, 1120.). The final aspect of Steinbeck's work—the one I shall take up first—is the mythological.

Certainly mythology is not the domain of twentieth-century writers only, for Malory himself achieves the plane
of myth in the Morte. But since Joyce, the best writers have been preoccupied with working tradition and myth into new meanings:

By apprehending the present and the past as simultaneous realities, the major figures of twentieth-century literature have worked private worlds into epic proportions, reinventing the image of the self (Proust), a city (Joyce), a country (Yeats, or a tradition (Eliot and Pound) as the reflected image of a civilization.

No doubt this is Malory's accomplishment also. He has in a large sense mythologized fifteenth-century England for all of the generations following him. Scholars will argue whether the deeds of Beauchamp and Edward IV provided models for the deeds of Gareth and Lancelot and Arthur; but Beauchamp and Edward have gone with their acts into the murk of history while out of the swirling mist of legend the created heroes of Malory have emerged more largely and more importantly, and their timeless acts have lost all need of historical ground. Precisely this timelessness is what Steinbeck wanted to achieve with the language and feeling of his nation. Few writers in America during the 1950's knew as much about the American culture or saw it as clearly or communed with its great artists and politicians as intimately as Steinbeck did. Yet he felt the need to write about that culture not realistically, as he had been writing for

3 Howard Moss, "Great Themes and Grand Connections," The New Yorker, 1 August 1977, p. 67.
decades, but in a more profound and perhaps more enduring form.

The myth of Arthur seems, in retrospect at least, well suited to Steinbeck's needs. While chasing the personality of Malory—and chasing him before William Matthews showed that the Warwickshire criminal was not the most probable candidate for authorship of the Morte—Steinbeck drew a few clear and well-articulated conclusions about his age and Malory's. "It seems to me," he writes to Professor and Mrs. Vinaver, "that our time has more parallels with the fifteenth century than, let us say, the nineteenth century did, so that we may be able to understand it more nearly accurately than the Pre-Raphaelite guardsmen of the Victorian round table. For we are as unconsciously savage and as realistically self-seeking as the people of the Middle Ages." Although Steinbeck sees significance even in the similarity in form and use of the fifteenth-century sword and the twentieth-century guided missile, he is finally impressed by the similarity of the moods of the two ages. The "writer of the Morte did not know what had happened, what was happening, nor what was going to happen. He was caught as we are now. In forlornness" (Acts, p. 315). His

economic and political world heaved with revolution as the church tottered, civil war ravaged the land, and "the subhuman serfs," like the economically oppressed American blacks of the mid-twentieth century, moved for a better life. Haunted by uncertainty, looking into a blank and frightening future, the writer of the *Morte d'Arthur* "could only look forward to the coming changes . . . with horrified misgivings" (*Acts*, p. 315).

If Malory could reach back to the tradition of romance to re-form his collapsing world, why could Steinbeck not do the same? He had already observed that popular taste was swept up in the romance of the television western, which seemed to have so many affinities with the romance of chivalry—larger-than-life heroes like Duke Wayne and Rory Calhoun, mounted on their chargers, fighting evil on its own ground, rescuing the helpless, winning the girl. Even the enemy is the same: "if you change Indians or outlaws for Saxons and Picts and Danes, you have exactly the same story. . . . The application with the present is very close, and also the present day with its uncertainties very closely parallels the uncertainties of the fifteenth century" (*Acts*, p. 314). Thus, Steinbeck concluded, his work would be not a "period piece" but "one with applications in the present day and definite roots in our living literature."

All of the superficial correspondences fall easily
into place. But the correspondences go deeper than the surface, as deep as myth. To show a culture its weaknesses and to point the road to strength (in any realistic mode) always amounts to moralizing. And not every culture will put up with sermons from its writers, particularly the successful ones. Where realism will not serve, mythology will. Dante may have offended the souls of many dead Florentines (and a few living), but he did so by creating a vision with all the universal power of myth. Malory felt the need for higher ideals, more noble enterprises, and he told his culture so through the myth of Arthur. And this is Steinbeck's success also.

When Steinbeck was in England researching his work, Alan Lerner was working on Camelot, the musical stage adaptation of T.H. White's Once and Future King. While Steinbeck admired Lerner's talents and considered White's book a "marvelously wrought work," he nevertheless resisted the temptation to work with the popular appeal of Arthur. He cared less for entertaining his contemporaries than for striving for something more durable:

... in turning over the lumber of the past I'm looking for the future. This is no nostalgia for the finished and safe. My looking is not for a dead Arthur but for one sleeping. And if sleeping, he is sleeping everywhere, not alone in a cave in Cornwall. (Acts, pp. 326-7.)

Steinbeck is looking for the fourth dimension, for "dura-
tion," and for language to measure time "beyond sun, moon and
year."

The appeal of the Arthurian cycle is not its timelessness
but its being rooted in a vague historical time. Although
chivalric order can be placed relatively in a time frame, both
Malory and Steinbeck project Arthur against a "huge, timeless,
almost formal curtain of the 'before'" (Acts, p. 359). By
doing so they make the problems of Arthur and Lancelot the
problems of our time, of the fifteenth century, of all time.
Speaking of Steinbeck's narration of "The Noble Tale of Sir
Lancelot of the Lake," John Gardner says:

What we have here is myth newly imagined, revitalized, charged with contemporary
meaning. . . . [The passage showing
Lancelot in Morgan's dungeon encapsulates] Steinbeck's whole purpose at this stage
--a purpose close to Malory's yet utterly transformed--to show in the manner of a
fabulator how plain reality is transformed by magic, by the lure of visions that
ennoble though they ultimately betray. It's a theme we've encountered before in
Steinbeck but a theme that has here the simplicity and power of myth. 5

This is exactly what Steinbeck shot for--"the remote feeling of
the myth, not the intimate feeling of today's man who in his
daily thoughts may change tomorrow but who in his deeper per-
ceptions, I am convinced, does not change at all" (Acts, p. 343).

5 Gardner, p. 36.
Both the personal and the universal dreams are here in Steinbeck's work. Whether he felt that those dreams were also Malory's, at any rate he manages to make them ours because of their timelessness. But some myths appeal more strongly than others to certain eras and cultures, or at least find more pertinent application. One thinks of the medieval cult of the Virgin and its importance to the minds and imaginations of Western Europe; or the Norse sagas that influenced Wagner, Hitler, and the fate of the German people during a period of 70 years; or the myth of Albion that found its best statement in Blake and helped to stir an island to empire; or the two-fold myth of the noble savage that taught a growing nation respect for a people's simplicity at the same time it taught that nation to slaughter them as sub-humans in order to achieve its "manifest destiny."

On a less grand scale than these, the myth of King Arthur and his noble knights applied to the middle decade of the twentieth century in America no less than it did to the end of the fifteenth century in England. Steinbeck, like Malory, wrote from life and thus presented in a form familiar to his audience the possibility of salvation for his own disorderly age—a return to ideals that never were but might be.
Chapter Three

"The noisome weeds, that without profit suck
The soul's fertility from wholesome flowers."
--Richard II

Carved into a chalk hill near Cerne Abbas, in Dorset, England, a human figure several hundred feet high stares quietly for eternity out over the English countryside. Although he swings a club over his head, he stands less in frightening defense of ancient Celtic territory than as a symbol of fertility for a civilization dead many centuries.

In July 1959, John Steinbeck visited this Celtic monument while doing research for his translation of Sir Thomas Malory's Morte d'Arthur, and although he mentions it nowhere in his published letters, it is possible that he attached greater significance to it than most Arthurians might; for it is the last great monument of a dying civilization, and in 1959 John Steinbeck had an obsession with dying greatness. He himself felt that he had passed his prime, both as a man and as a writer, and the burden of this passing weighed heavily on him. In a letter to Elia Kazan written in October 1958, he says, "The great crime I have committed against literature is living too long and writing too much, and not good enough" (Letters, pp. 595-6). Con-
tinually while working on the *Morte* he writes to his friends in a brooding awareness of having missed a mark he had set for himself; "I think it is true," he says of Lancelot and himself, "that any man, novelist or not, when he comes to maturity has a very deep sense that he will not win the Quest" (*Acts*, p. 304).

In his last decade Steinbeck set out on what he had always considered the Quest for which his entire life had been only preparation—translating Malory's great and lasting prose rendering of the legend of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table. For Steinbeck, this work would be his monument, his Cerne Abbas, "the largest and I hope the most important work I have ever undertaken" (*Acts*, p. 310). That he failed to complete the work—failed, as John Gardner has pointed out, to give even the fragment he did complete a unity of tone and texture—is "exactly the kind of petty modern tragedy he hated."¹ Of the three main aspects of Steinbeck's work, this aspect of petty failure--more than the mythic and more than the idealistic--gives his work its tone and reflects the time of its birth.

Increasingly toward the end of the Eisenhower decade Steinbeck's letters show an acute and accurate perception of the dissatisfaction of a people who 15 years earlier had "conquered the world" and "made it safe for democracy," and

¹ Gardner, p. 31.
who now had become firmly settled in their Levittowns and
vitiated by material comfort. Writing to Adlai Stevenson
on Guy Fawkes Day, 1959, he expresses feelings that would
later echo loudly in The Winter of Our Discontent:

Back from Camelot, and, reading the papers
not at all sure it was wise. Two first
impressions. First a creeping, all-per-
vading, nerve-gas of immorality which
starts in the nursery and does not stop
before it reaches the highest offices,
both corporate and governmental. Two, a
nervous restlessness, a hunger, a thirst,
a yearning for something unknown—perhaps
morality. Then there's the violence,
cruelty and hypocrisy symptomatic of a people
which has too much, and last the surly,
ill-temper which only shows up in humans
when they are frightened.

Adlai, do you remember two kinds of
Christmases? There is one kind in a house
where there is little and a present repre-
sents not only love but sacrifice. The one
single package is opened with a kind of
slow wonder, almost reverence. . . .

Then there is the other kind of
Christmas with presents piled high, the
gifts of guilty parents as bribes because
they have nothing else to give. The
wrappings are ripped off and the presents
thrown down and at the end the child
says—"Is that all?"

Well, it seems to me that America now
is like that second kind of Christmas.
Having too many THINGS they spend their
hours on the couch searching for a soul.
A strange species we are. . . .
(Letters, pp. 651-2.)

The following year would bring a new administration that
the people—some of them, anyway, liked to compare to
Camelot; in many ways the comparison seemed valid, from the
inaugural call for a new code of ideals to the great,
calamitous mistakes and felicitous triumphs in foreign affairs to the final catastrophic death. But in the winter of 1959, John Steinbeck could see only the failings of a society made petty and mean by a thousand trivial deformities.

While Malory also wrote about failure, he treated the failure of greatness, not the failure of weakness; he wrote about unused energy—an immense power for good defeated because no one threw the switch—not about thwarted striving for unworthy goals. Malory the monarchist writes the tragedy of a king; Steinbeck the democrat writes the tragedy of a people. Ultimately the tragedy of Malory's work lies in the figure of Arthur, a king felled by his own determination to bring order and law to his kingdom, while the tragedy of Steinbeck's work lies in the dozen minor characters, sketched in the lines of modern realism, whose horizons are more narrow than Arthur's, and whose shortcomings therefore are more pitiable and wretched.

Whatever clues to the meanness of the human soul one may find in Malory lie hidden in the density of his weaving. Steinbeck tries to make them more clear. Of all the great characters in Arthurian legend, none has so black a reputation as Morgan le Fay, and she well deserves it. Magic has a blackness by its very mystery, and when used to perpetuate evil, as Morgan uses it, it becomes the child of
the devil. Yet it is clear that Malory seems unwilling to do much with Magic, preferring instead to make his theories of chivalry and kingship central by a use of realism, as in the episode of Accolon's treason. Furthermore, where Malory cannot avoid Morgan's necromantic powers --her escape from Arthur by turning herself and her men into stones, for instance--she becomes a figure of awesome force.

Where Malory diminishes Morgan's power, however, Steinbeck takes pains to emphasize it; but in Steinbeck's hands Morgan loses rather than gains stature by resorting to magic. For Steinbeck, the fascination of the Accolon incident lay not in the treason of a subject against his king, since he knew that a modern reader would have little notion about just how strong the bond of liegeship was:

There is no doubt in my mind that Malory considered him [Arthur] a hero but he was also a king anointed. . . . I know that in some of the later stories Arthur is to us only a kind of Scheherazade, but he was also the heart of the brotherhood. . . . But what is lost to the modern reader is that Malory never lost track of the importance of the king. (Acts, pp. 322-3.)

The word "treason" resounds throughout Malory's account of Arthur's fight with accolon, and on finding out his unknown enemy's identity Accolon cries, aware of his crime, "Fayre swete lorde, have mercy on me, for I knew you nat" (I, 146).
Steinbeck takes no great pains to absolve Accolon of the charge of treason. There is no getting around it. But he does show much more clearly than Malory that Accolon acts under the spell of Morgan. In Malory, Accolon awakes beside a deep well after being separated from Arthur and Uriens:

And there com oute of that fountayne a pype of sylver, and oute of that pype ran water all on hyghe in a stone of marbil. Whan Sir Accolon sawe this he blyssed him and seyde, 'Jesu, save my lorde kynge Arthure and kynge Uryence, for thes damysels in this shippe hath betrayed us. They were fendis and no women. And if I may ascape this mysadventure I shall destroye them, all that I may fynde of thes false damysels that faryth thus with theire inchauntementes. (I, 140.)

A dwarf "with grete mowthe and a flatte nose" rides up and salutes and kisses Accolon and bides him to fight "wyth a knyght."

In Steinbeck's version of this scene, he retains all of Malory but adds several pointed and important references to "Morgan's spell."

He awakened close beside a deep well where a movement in his sleep would have cast him down. From the well there issued a silver pipe spouting water into a marble fountain. Morgan's magic had weakened with her absence, so that Accolon blessed himself, and he said aloud, "Jesus save my lord King Arthur and Sir Uryens. Those were not ladies in the ship but fiends from hell. If I can come clear of this misadventure I will destroy them and all others who practice evil magic."

And at that moment an ugly dwarf with thick lips and a flat nose came out of the forest and saluted Sir Accolon.
"I come from Morgan le Fay," said the dwarf, and the spell settled back on the knight. (Acts, p. 113, italics mine.)

Soon Accolon is "deep enchanted."

That Accolon has committed treason loses none of its significance, but that he has done so because of Morgan's magic seems the important thing to Steinbeck. After the fight, Malory's Arthur grants Accolon mercy only because Accolon "knewest me nat":

"but I fele be thy wordis that thou haste agreed to the deth of my persone, and therefore thou art a traytoure; but I wyte the the less for my sistir Morgan le Fay by hir false crauftis made the to agre to hir fals lustes. But I [shall] be sore avenged uppon hir, that all Crystendom shall speke of hit. God knowyth I have honoured hir and worshipped hir more than all my kyn, and more have I trusted hir than my wyff and all my kin aftir." (I, 146.)

Translating this passage, Steinbeck again remains faithful to the sense of it, but chooses to stress Morgan's "jealousy and lust of the flesh and hunger for power" and her practice of "the black arts" (Acts, p. 118).

The words "jealousy," "lust," and "hunger" summarize Steinbeck's conception of Morgan, and that conception is one of weakness. Thus, rather than use the Accolon episode to make an obscure point about the loyalty of a medieval knight to his king, Steinbeck has rewritten the story to provide important clues to understanding in modern terms an important Arthurian character. Morgan, as all of the necro-
mancers but Merlin, uses magic out of weakness. Magic becomes, as Lancelot discovers while sitting in Morgan's dungeon, the tool of the jealous, the deformed—those weak and hungry for comfort:

"... you know how children, when they are forbidden something they want, sometimes scream and storm and sometimes even hurt themselves in rage. Then they grow quiet and vengeful. But they are not strong enough to revenge themselves on the one they consider their oppressor. Such a one sometimes stamps on an ant, saying, 'That's for you, Nursie,' or kicks a dog and calls him brother, or pulls the wings from a fly and destroys his father. And then, because his world has disappointed him, he builds his own world where he is king, where he rules not only men and women and animals but clouds and stars and sky... In his dream he builds not only a world but remakes himself as he would wish to be. ... Usually he makes peace with the world and works out compromises so that the two will not hurt each other badly..."

"Some few do not make peace. And some of these are locked away as hopelessly insane and full of fantasy. But there are others more clever who, through black arts, learn to make the dream substantial. This is enchantment and necromancy... wizards and witches are children, living in a world they made without the leavening of pity or the mathematics of organization. [They] are crippled, vengeful children with power." (Acts, pp. 242-3.)

A fifteenth-century writer would not have written the anachronism of an armored knight speaking about insane asylums. But more important, only a twentieth-century writer could have seen Arthur's half-sister and great
enemy in these psychological terms.

Witchcraft and the American Dream grew out of our landscape together. If Nathaniel Hawthorne in "Young Goodman Brown" was the first American writer of stature to put the two together in literature, Arthur Miller followed his lead in The Crucible, first produced in 1953. Beneath the surface of wholesome American decency hides the primal force of the vast and wild North American continent, able to erupt uncontrollably, as it did in Salem three hundred years ago, and as it did twenty-five years ago under the flagellation of McCarthy. This was not lost on Steinbeck, who observes in a letter to Chase Horton in March 1957, that the "knight prisoner was unfortunate but not guilt-ridden. And that makes one suspect all the stories of Knights taken prisoner by sorcery. Until recently we could destroy a man by simply naming him a communist and he could be charged by a known liar and still be destroyed" (Acts, p. 302). One looks in vain to find a difference between the jealous and lustful Morgan and the petty, envious "committee men, neither very brave nor very intelligent" (Letters, p. 555). The characterization grew, in part at least, from Steinbeck's observation of his age, and he could rightly say that his "analysis of witchcraft is rather brilliant, and so far as I know--new" (Acts, p. 355).

In making the myth of Arthur more to the taste of modern readers, Steinbeck not only draws on the interests of the decade in which he writes but also uses his experience as a novelist to
create startlingly brief but rich characterizations out of mere hints in Malory. Feeling perhaps that his reader had a right to a more complete picture of life than Malory provided (!), Steinbeck broadened Malory's outlines and filled in detail. When, for example, Marhalt and his damsel reach the house of a serf in "The Tale of King Arthur," Malory gives no more than the barest narration. Entering the forest at nightfall, Marhalt seeks lodging at the first house he sees, but is refused by "the man of the courtlage." He "wolde nat logge them for no tretysse that they coulde trete, but this much the good man seyde: 'And ye woll take the adventure of youre herbourage, I shall brynge you there ye may be herboured'" (I, 176). Except for his obstinate refusal to offer strangers hospitality, the man behaves in no way strangely, and his conversation is far from hostile. By contrast, the same peasant in Steinbeck's version of the scene attains a color and dimension possible only in the modern realistic novel:

... they saw a black bulk against the inhospitable darkness and a clink of light shining around the door cracks. And the dogs rushed out barking around the weary horseman. The door flung open and a black figure holding a boar spear peered out, calling, "who is there?"

"A venturing knight and a lady," Marhalt said. "Call your dogs, sir. We wish to shelter from the dark."

"You can't stay here."

"That is not courteous," Marhalt said.

"Courtesy and darkness are not friends."

"You do not speak like a gentleman."

"What I am not is not as pertinent as that my two feet are planted in my own doorway and my spear will keep them so... A knight venturing." The dark man laughed. "I know your
kind, a childish dream world resting on the shoulders of less fortunate men. Yes, I can direct you if you will trade adventure for a night’s lodging. . . . Ride on toward the red star until you see a bridge, if you don’t miss it in the dark and drown yourself.”

"Look, my ugly friend, I am weary and my lady is weary and my horse is weary. I will pay you to guide us."

"Pay first."

"I will, but if you do not lead us truly I will return and burn your treasured house."

"I know you would. Gentlemen always do. . . ." (Acts, pp. 155-6.)

Steinbeck’s contribution to Malory—and it is a large and good contribution—is this expansion of dialogue and character, this picking up hints from Malory and extrapolating for the modern sensibility. One wonders what Steinbeck might have done with King Mark and Sir Breuse Sans Pité. The point, however, is that in the soul of the surly and dark cottager hides the twentieth-century democrat who has inherited his right to stand in his own doorway and dare to defend it against the whims of the powerful governing class. But what a poverty of spirit is there. The greedy demand for payment in advance, the rude turning away of strangers, the crass assertion of one’s own rights at the expense of courtesy and human fellowship—all of this reflects the xenophobia and grasping commerce of a young nation that has just flexed its muscles and discovered its immense destructive power. Power here means anything but strength in a moral sense, though. It is a power that leads to complacency, weakening of the will, and self-destruction.

48
Steinbeck uses the novelist's technique to lay his theme of failure on the shoulders of giants also. With a long tradition of pillaging, kidnapping, and making general mayhem throughout all the folk literature of the world, giants ought to expect no sympathy from anyone—especially when they challenge the fortunes of a knight of King Arthur's Round Table. Poor Taulurd must face not only Marhalt in Malory but also the despisal of generations of readers of the _Morte_. With Steinbeck, however, even the most surly brute can get an even break, for the giant wreaking havoc around the Earl Fergus's castle on the River Cam is not, for Steinbeck, a devil in monstrous incarnation but a "rebellious child" in need of firm correction. Throughout the account of Marhalt's fight with Taulurd the sympathy of both writer and knight clearly lies with the giant, and one feels, with Marhalt, pity at the big baby's doom. Standing on the river bank watching blood spurt from the giant's wound, Marhalt cannot bear to see the giant bursting into tears and crying "like a hurt and frighten child... "Poor thing," he said. 'I have killed many things and many men and none so sadly as now'" (Acts, p. 168). After delivering a _coup de grâce_, Marhalt frees knights and ladies from the giant's shabby "castle" and finds Taulurd's hoard of precious stones and gold mixed with worthless pottery shards and broken glass. Taulurd has become not a romantic, towering figure of evil but the over-grown, simple-minded, confused Lenny in _Of Mice and Men_, a frightened "monster child" who has to
be killed because he is dangerous and does not know it.

Time and again this figure of failure, the spectre of pitiable weakness, moves through the pages of Steinbeck's work, but nowhere else does this realist of realists achieve such a terrible, fantastic nightmare of depravity as in his retelling of the incident of the Chapel Perilous. Malory's narration of the story admits of fantasy enough; the description of the seemingly natural knights dressed in black who "grended and gnasted at Sir Launcelot" is haunting in its simplicity; the sorceress's pronouncement of Lancelot's near death has a chill in its casualness; and the death of Hallewes because of her unrequited love for Lancelot gives her a place beside the Maid of Astolat in the pantheon of love's mysterious ghosts.

With a sureness of narration, however, Steinbeck reduces the power and the threat of the sorceress at the Chapel Perilous, and by making her less, makes her a more significant creation of the imagination. Once again the theme of the incident is weakness. The damsel is weak not only in her magic but also in her humanity. Or perhaps her magic is weak because her humanity is weak; for in Steinbeck the persons who resort to Magic--Morgan, Morgause, Nimue, even Lancelot the child--do so out of some flaw, some crack in the armor.

Whatever threat Lancelot feels when the damsel approaches through the twilight soon disappears when he looks into her eyes to discover the crabbed and twisted soul within: "She leaned
close—so close that her dark eyes were large and he saw the night sky and the stars reflected in them. Then the surfaces trembled with the tears of her effort and the stars lost their sharpness and he saw the shapes of little monsters moving in the double sky he looked into" (Acts, p. 282). Here, as in the Taulurd episode, a strong knight pities a confused and misguided creature of thwarted aspirations. Just as Marhalt had heaved stones at the dying giant out of compassion for him, so now Lancelot, feeling sorry yet right, destroys the damsel's illusions, dreams, and hopes.

Seldom in The Acts of King Arthur does Steinbeck play so loose with a single episode from Malory's story as in the incident at the Chapel Perilous. In Malory Lancelot goes to the chapel at the request of the sister of Meliot de Logres in order to find a sword and a piece of bloody cloth that have the power to heal Meliot's wounds. Having twice braved the black knights guarding the chapel, Lancelot passes beyond the chapel yard with sword and cloth in hand and meets Hallewes, who asks him to leave the sword or die for it. When Lancelot refuses to leave it, she tells him that if he had obeyed her, he would not have seen Guinevere again. Hallewes then begs a kiss of Lancelot, and after he refuses this request (obviously having caught on to the game) she tells him that if he had granted the kiss his "lyffe dayes had be done." After listening to her say she loves him, Lancelot departs with his magical treasures, returns to Meliot and his sister, and
heals the wounded knight.

In *The Acts of King Arthur* the frame of this incident disappears; no Meliot de Logres lies near death, and therefore his sister never appears to command Lancelot's aid. Instead, the sorceress herself sends Lancelot to the chapel where "a dead knight lies wrapped in a shroud and beside him a sword." She gives no reason for asking him to bring the sword (and only the sword) to her. Here, for once, Lancelot obeys the sorceress, and as he stumbles toward the chapel in the darkness "he was sad for her." Again one hears the notes of miserable frailty building in a crescendo of pathos:

Inside, there was a figure covered with white cloth, while on the whitened walls grotesque faces were painted by a childish hand. Beside the shrouded figure lay a wooden sword. Sir Lancelot stooped to pick it up and raised the shroud enough to see that it was a rag dummy dressed in a man's clothing. And his heart was heavy when he went back to the damsel. *(Acts, pp. 284-5.)*

Taulurd looked in death like a great, broken child, and now the sorceress is "childish," contemptible in the extreme and pitiable; as the great knight easily defeats her attempt at murder, she wails, "I am lost."

One should not come away from *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* feeling that Steinbeck's interest lay only in failure. He saw the many failings of his time and wrote about them, and he felt, throughout his career, a special sympathy for
the weak and ignorant, and he wrote about them too. He saw also
the lust, cruelty, and murder in Malory's tale, but he refused, as
Malory refused, to "let it put out the sun. Side by side with them
are generosity and courage and greatness and the huge sadness of
tragedy rather than the little meanness of frustration" (Acts,
p. 337). If the frail and defeated humanity of Morgan and Hallewes
and Taulurd and others in the Morte gains emphasis in Steinbeck's
work, it is as a foil to Steinbeck's other great theme, the
nobility and near-perfection of the good knight.

Nowhere else in The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights
does the play of these two themes side by side find so charming a
treatment as in the chapter on "Gawain, Ewain, and Marhalt." Here
Steinbeck begins fully to engage his imagination, and here he
begins to aim at something that has been only in the background
until now. In writing the intimate scenes of dalliance between
Gawain and Lady Ettarde and between Marhalt and his damsel,
Steinbeck has brought his realistic eye to bear on what Malory
simply took for granted, namely the "understandings" between a
knight-errant and his lady. And in having Ewain submit to the
rigorous training of that female drill instructor, Lady Lyne,
Steinbeck not only asserts the independence of his imagination from
Malory's but also describes in more realistic detail than Malory
the martial science of the fifteenth century. But character
interests Steinbeck more than details of fighting and loving; and
the characters of Gawain, Marhalt, and Ewain approach, each to a
different degree, the character of the perfect knight introduced by Steinbeck in the next chapter. From the lowness of Morgan and Taulurd the tale of the triple quest takes the reader through progressively higher levels of nobility in preparation for the most noble tale of Sir Lancelot.

Few knights of the Round Table stand in a position of prominence similar to Gawain’s through all of Arthurian literature; in at least two English tales, the alliterative Morte Arthure and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, he stands pre-eminent even before Lancelot. One has a hard time resisting the appeal of this impetuous Scotsman whose rashness leads him to noble gestures at the same time it gets him into hot water. Proving that blood is thicker at least than the good mead in Arthur’s court, he chooses to join his cousin Ewain in banishment from Camelot. Later, when he and his cousin have parted on their separate quests, Gawain offers his friendship to Sir Pelleas by trying to win Lady Ettarde’s interest in the forlorn knight. Despite these gestures, however, Gawain never achieves a fully self-less act, as his first sight of Lady Ettarde turns his noble diplomacy into panting infatuation, and his gesture of loyalty to Ewain becomes the way to fun and profit: He fights Marhalt against the advice of Ewain, who would “let it go” because Marhalt “is a good man”; and at the three-forked crossroads he wins the young damsel he “would have chosen at the risk of offending.” He does indeed risk offensiveness, though one can hardly feel offended in the end by someone who
knows so little about himself and acts so naively; who says not once but twice that he is "glad she is gone" when he loses both the young damsel and the lady. If he is harmless in his foppery, he is also dangerous to himself in his ignorance.

Marhalt and Ewain, on the other hand, combine between them the finest qualities of chivalry, though neither inspires one's fullest admiration. Marhalt stands out as a lover. His tender concern for the comfort of his damsel, his gentle courtesy and soft-spoken praise of her beauty and worth serve to establish his own worth as a man. His skill at arms as well as his refusal to take lightly the prowess of his opponents ("There are many knights whom I could name," he says, "who, if I saw them ride at me over my leveled spear, would turn my blood to water.") mark him as a good fighting man. And of course Ewain excels not only as a fighter but also as a man of reason, mercy, and common sense. His long tutelage under the Lady Lyne has inured him to pain; he fights with a cool head; he grants Sir Hugh of the Red Castle amnesty; he avenges the knight with the rusty armor; and he turns his back, as Marhalt finally does, on the dissipation of a secure and comfortable life.

But neither of these men is really tempted the way human beings are tempted. Marhalt grows accustomed to living under the Earl Fergus's roof, but soon begins to chafe under the straps of domesticity; Ewain finds the offer of the Lady of the Rock sweetly tempting, but ultimately rejects it as the debilitating thing it is.
Yet one never feels any struggle behind these rejections of the comfortable life, and the reason is quite simply that Marhalt and Ewain are the stereotypical paladins whom everyone has seen in a hundred westerns. They are the sheriffs who cannot marry the school-marms because of the hazards of chasing outlaws; they are the magnificent horse-borne wanderers who perform a good turn here and save a damsel there, then ride over the hill never to be seen again. They are inhuman, plastic, and unappealing except in the most elemental sense. While they engage our fantasy, they do nothing for our hearts. But they provide a fascinating preview of the humanly heroic figure of Lancelot, on whom Steinbeck now turns his attention.
Chapter Four

"... Our story-dressers do as much; he that comes last is commonly best."
—The Anatomy of Melancholy

A few years ago people discovered the 1950's, or at least thought they had. "Happy Days" hit the air-waves, Grease hit Broadway, Sha-Na-Na hit the Top 40, Buffalo Bob and Howdy Doody hit the campus circuit, and saddle-shoes hit the pavement—all of which proved to the satisfaction of persons under 20 (and a few over 20) that the decade after "The War" was indeed the brightest, most placid, most optimistic, most fun-loving, best and most glorious period in our nation's history.

It goes without saying, of course, that memories gild and polish our excavated experience. What became tarnished and black from use now shines on its pedestal untouched and admired. The golden fibula that closed a thousand times to clasp a lady's gown in Pompeii now rests behind the safety glass of a museum showcase. Things never appear the same after the resurrection.

To some of the people who lived during the fifties, who were born and raised during the Eisenhower years, not all of the memories glitter. The world may have been at peace, but Holden Caulfield kept shouting what an awful, crummy place it was. For John Barth, life was either The Floating Opera or The End of the Road, a concatenation of non-events and brutal abortions; and John
Updike wrote *Rabbit Run* not only to satirize the "Mickey Mouse Club Show" but also to strip the sheen off the dull suburban life. While "I Love Lucy" entertained television viewers with stories about a scatter-brained redhead who cooked a kitchen full of rice one week and broke her husband's bongo drums the next, "The Julius and Ethel Show" entertained a nation with the frying of two Red-blooded Americans, and "The Checkers and Richard Show" ran second only to "Lassie" in the category of "Tales of the Doggie-Dog World."

At any rate, sometime after the American voters had decided they liked Ike enough to re-elect him, a great, doubting question arose in the minds of many people and continued to grow until it burst into flame and death and anger ten years later. In 1963, after the assassination of President Kennedy, and the withering of Camelot, John Steinbeck wrote to the president's widow:

> The 15th century and our own have so much in common—loss of authority, loss of gods, loss of heroes, and loss of lovely pride. When such a hopeless muddled need occurs, it does seem to me that the hungry hearts of men distill their best and truest essence, and that essence becomes a man, and that man a hero so that all men can be reassured that such things are possible. . . . There was and is an Arthur as surely as there was and is a need for him. And meanwhile, all the legends say, he sleeps—waiting for the call. . . . [And] in our time of meager souls, of mole-like burrowing into a status quo which never existed, the banner of the Legend is the great vocation. ([*Letters*, p. 793.])

This need for heroes found some satisfaction in the daily life of the time, as it always does: The country had elected its great war
hero to lead it in peace, and Gable and Hemingway swashbuckled through fantasy and life. Carl Furillo, Duke Snider, and a slugger named Campanella swung the Dodgers into another World Series, and Hopalong Cassidy shot it out with bandits while Roy Rodgers refused to fire his gun in anger.

Still, even the best of the Boys of Summer fall short of the achievements of heroes with names like Beowulf, Hector, Boone, Crockett, and Odysseus. One gets an idea of what Steinbeck meant by the word "hero" in a letter to Elizabeth Otis dated May 14, 1959, when he and his wife were in England researching the Morte:

Gods and Heroes—Maybe their day is over, but I can’t believe it. . . . In this country I am surrounded by the works of heroes right back to man's first entrance. I don't know how the monoliths were set up in the circles without tools but there was something more involved than petty thievery and schoolboy laziness and the anguish of overfed ladies on the psycho couch. Someone moved a whole lot of earth around for something beyond "making a buck." And if all of this is gone, I've missed the boat somewhere. And that could easily be. (Acts, p. 345.)

Clearly, John Steinbeck believed that the age required a call to higher ideals. Appalled at the public immorality he saw—what he called "the failure of man toward men"—he set about writing that call to manhood. For him the missing vital truth lay in the myth of Arthur, and in making the myth accessible to his contemporaries he would reveal to them the possibilities of the call to a new kind of chivalry—one that would do battle not with giants and dragons and pillaging knights but with greed and complacency and self-
seeking. "Arthur must awaken," he wrote, "not by any means only
to repel the enemy from without, but particularly the enemy inside"
(Letters, p. 649).

Interestingly, however, Arthur does not really awaken in The
Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights. Because Steinbeck
translated only two of the first three tales of the Winchester man-
uscript, skipping the war between Arthur and Lucius, Arthur figures
prominently only in Steinbeck's "Merlin" and "The Wedding of King
Arthur." Furthermore, since at this early point in his work
Steinbeck changes very little of Malory, retaining whole passages
and much of Malory's detail, the portrait of Arthur has nothing
much unique to it. Steinbeck does entertain his notion of the
sleeping king when, after the wedding and feast (the narration of
which is much better paced than in Malory), he describes the king
and his knights sitting "motionless in their places as though
frozen. . . . They might have been asleep as they have been and
will be many times over, sleeping but listening for the need, the
fear, the distress, or the pure and golden venture that can call
them awake" (Acts, p. 82). Arthur and his knights sit in a noble
frieze of silence through the centuries, waiting to be called
awake into this one. But Arthur is, for the most part, no more
than a figurehead in Steinbeck's work; the truly noble role of the
hero goes—as it usually does, does it not?—to Lancelot.

The opening paragraphs of "The Noble Tale of Sir Lancelot of
the Lake" might almost serve to describe the time in which they
were written: the "best knights and the hardiest fighting men in
the world" have defeated the enemies of peace, and tranquillity
now blankets the land. But the ruler of the realm cannot forget
that he lives in "a world where violence slept uneasily," and he
throws his knights into wargames to keep them strong and ready.
Still, "peace, not war, is the destroyer of men; tranquillity
rather than danger is the mother of cowardice, and not need but
plenty brings apprehension and unease." Confusion and bitterness
and self-pity wipe out the former glory of the old values as a new
generation grows up soft and dissolute, sick with fear of the
future as well as the now.

Even the "best knight in the world" falls victim to the
general malaise, having nothing to test his strength, no means of
fulfilling his ambitions. Like the housewife who has had all
seeming desires satisfied in suburbia--home, husband, children--he
aches from an illness in his soul: "He was a hound without a deer,
a land-bound fish, a stringless bow, and, like all unused men,
Lancelot grew restless and then irritable, and then angry. He found
pains in his body and flaws in his disposition which were not
there before" (Acts, p. 208).

All around him the best knight discovers the ravages of ease.
Poor Sir Kay suffers perhaps the worst, as Steinbeck adds a few of
his most original touches to Malory. Having found Kay beset by
three knights and rescued him from them, Lancelot falls into frank
conversation with the Seneschal, who worries about the droves of
captive knights Lancelot has been sending to Guinevere; for Kay has the unfortunate duty to feed them as they "arrive in swarms like locusts and strip the king's larders bare." Keeping account of the slaughtered beeves and jars of honey and kegs of mead has given Kay an incipient twentieth-century ulcer, but that is not all of it. He has lost the glory of his young manhood.

With a perception of the human heart more accurate than most career soldiers are credited with, Lancelot questions Arthur's foster brother about his fall from greatness, about what has happened to the man who single-handedly killed two of the five kings of the north, but now numbers the casks in the king's wine cellar. And Kay's answer grows out of the twentieth century; it is the distillation of absurdity, the cry of existential man:

"Granite so hard that it will smash a hammer can be worn away by little grains of moving sand. And a heart that will not break under the great blows of fate can be eroded by the nibbling of numbers, the creeping of days, the numbing treachery of littleness, of important littleness. I could fight men but I was defeated by marching numbers on a page... I am afraid. We call it caution, intelligence, farsightedness, having a level head, good conservative business sense--but it is only fear organized and undefeatable. Starting with little things, I have become afraid of everything... There is no hope for me --ever. (Acts, pp. 269-70.)

The complaint of the Seneschal echoes the complaint of the novelist about "the closing down of time" and the "frustration of not being able to work because of a kind of creeping clutter" (Acts, p. 324).

The despair of Kay's situation gnaws at his guts as he seeks the
"nothing" of sleep—and men escape the burden of daily dread by slipping into a waking sleep of unimportant activity. The generation in whose winter of discontent Steinbeck writes has fallen from its pedestal and now busily dusts the base of it.

But Steinbeck has the breadth of vision to include more than his own generation of men and women in his tale. For if Kay represents the generation forced by mundane concerns to shrink from its former greatness, Lyonel represents the new generation smug in the self-assurance of youth. He rides a-questing with his uncle less because Lancelot asks him to than because his giggling friends with their school-girl malice tell him that he can "pretend to go along with it, ... ask him old-fashioned questions and get his opinion about everything"—and of course return to entertain the whole despicable group with his mocking stories.

Lyonel's statements drip with irony, and his questions subtly bait his uncle. After listening to Lancelot chide him for loving a lady who would make him dishonor his knighthood, Lyonel replies, "I thank you for your courtesy, my lord. You are famed throughout the world as perfect knight and perfect lover. Many young knights, such as I am, wish to pattern themselves on you. Must perfect knight, by which is understood perfect lover, never sigh, yearn, suffer, burn, desire, to touch his love?" From Lancelot's reply, one must understand that knighthood requires, for Steinbeck as well as for many of his medieval predecessors, control, moderation, mésure. To sigh for the favor and presence of one's love is the
permissible pastime of the young romantic, perhaps even for the knight; but to "burn" is to forget one's chivalric code. The knight must never give rein to passion.

Fortunately for Lyonel, Lancelot is the perfect knight—or as nearly so as humanly possible—and has his passion in check. Lancelot suffers question after question, tinged with insult and mockery, to break over his head. No one can believe after Lyonel's conversation with his friends, that his questions at this point are in earnest. But not until Lyonel's final question does his nephew's irony become clear to Lancelot. Setting the uncle up as the perfect knight, renowned throughout the world, sought after, envied, adored, Lyonel spits on this image by asking, "Is it enough? . . . Are you content with it?"

A black rage shook Sir Lancelot, drew his lips snarling from his teeth. His right hand struck like a snake at his sword hilt and half the silver blade slipped from the scabbard. Lyonel felt the wind of his death blow on his cheek.

Then, in one man he saw a combat more savage than ever he had seen between two, saw wounds given and received and a heart riven to bursting. And he saw victory, too, the death of rage and the sick triumph of Sir Lancelot, the sweat-ringed, fevered eyes hooded like a hawk's, the right arm leashed and muzzled while the blade crept back to its kennel. (Acts, p. 221.)

The conversion of Lyonel begins here. He has seen the greatness of his uncle's character, just as Steinbeck means for his contemporaries to see in Lancelot a kind of imitable greatness.

Always it is the lot of the hero to focus the dreams of
lesser men in himself. By doing so he pulls the weak and crippled up to a higher level of manhood, attainable only through the vicarious triumphs of the hero who exemplifies perfectible humanity. The hero must ride out disguised as us, to do battle with our enemies and to make our name worthy among men. Dressed in our armor, he proves the value of our existence and shows us—and the world—how we may triumph. So Lancelot rides out for Kay; so he exalts Lyonel; so he inspires us.

The nephew watching the sleeping uncle knows that he has seen greatness beyond the attainment of his silly friends. Having seen it, he takes his stand with it:

Watching over the sleeping knight, Sir Lyonel thought of the endless talking of young knights gathered to celebrate death without having lived, critics of combat by those whose hands had never held a sword, losers who had laid no wager. He remembered how they said this sleeping knight was too stupid to know he was ridiculous, too innocent to see the life around him, convinced of perfectibility in a heap of evil, an anachronism before the earth was born. And in his ears he could hear the words of smug failure, weakness, and poverty sneering that strength and richness are illusions, cowardice in the armor of wisdom. (*Acts*, p. 222.)

The need of all ages for gallantry finds expression here. Steinbeck understands that the young knights of his own age, the generation coming into cynical maturity in a decade of affluence, would find in its aging heroes weakness by which to excuse their own weaknesses. The sons of the sons of the Depression would look at the unparalleled material wealth their fathers had accumulated.
in digging out of the mire and, unthankful for the comfort they enjoyed, rain abuse on the acquisitive society. Children of peace would forget the epic, world-wide struggle out of which a bright new hope was forged and say, "You gave us the means by which to destroy the world." A generation turned on and tuned in would forget that after destroying its enemies a nation had rebuilt them into economic powers, and would accuse, "Your greed has made our world unhealthy for human habitation." Always the weak find ways to excuse their weakness.

Instead of letting these young guardians of the Order founder, however, Steinbeck gives them an example of wisdom and power that seems beyond reach, but one that will give them, in their emulating it, the same measure of strength. Lancelot has both the martial prowess and the personal qualities of the perfect knight, but his skill in tournaments and battles does not demand the same degree of emulation as his understanding, patience, and self-awareness. Steinbeck calls the "Noble Tale of Sir Lancelot" "the childhood of a knight": Confronted at every step by wonders of magic and the human soul, the physically perfect fighting instrument, loved "for his bravery, for his courtesy, for his fame, and for his lack of cleverness," becomes a man aware of the urgings within him.

In the beginning of the tale, Lancelot speaks with all the perception of a punch-drunk prize-fighter, and Guinevere has no trouble making him see the need for a quest and getting him to believe that the whole thing was his idea. His love for her at
this point is pure. He lives by the old code of values. Old-fash-
ioned, simple in a pleasing way, somewhat comical in his enthusi-
astic optimism, he grows in the course of the story into a man of
more complete experience. He has thought about himself in Morgan’s
dungeon, he has seen the frightened weakness of the damsel at the
Chapel Perilous, he has understood that mean and treacherous men
like Phelot and Perys de Foreste Savage prey on the good and beauti-
ful. And he has come to understand that deep within himself,
secret faults lie waiting to slip and bring the world crashing
down.

As a hero of the Round Table, Lancelot in Malory has many of
the same qualities as Lancelot in Steinbeck. Sir Ector’s eulogy
remains the best description of the noble character that both
Malory and Steinbeck would have their readers emulate: Moved by
justice in dealing with Sir Phelot, by mercy in dealing with Sir
Pedyvere, by loyalty in aiding Sir Meliot and Sir Lyonel, and Sir
Kay, and by courtesy in defending the damsel from Sir Perys—moved,
in other words, by all that is humanly good, Lancelot proves him-
self worthy of Ector’s praise. Despite his goodness, however, he
cannot forget that he is “synful man,” and one hears repentance in
his voice as he tells Guinevere, “. . . in the queste of the
Sankgreall I had that time forsakyn the vanytees of the worlde, had
not youre love bene” (III, 1253).

All of this Steinbeck includes, though he finished only one-
fourth of the total work; for Steinbeck’s novel achieves a fineness
of psychological perception, following as it does after Austen and Hardy and James and Woolf, that Malory could not possibly have attempted, given the state of the novel in the fifteenth century. The picture of Lancelot sitting in court on Whitsunday listening to knights and damsels and dwarfs celebrate his prowess comes out of Steinbeck's imagination, and one sees a deepness in Lancelot that did not exist at the beginning of the Tale, and that is hard to find in Malory (though, of course, Malory puts it there too, disguised from our modern reading habits). Lost in thought and memory, half-sleeping, contemplating his hands, watching the festive movement in the great hall, Lancelot feels troubled and ill-at-ease. Later, in Arthur's tower room, Lancelot's uneasiness grows in the nearness of Guinevere, and washes over him in a confusion of emotion:

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 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 was dog-weary, tired almost to weeping. (Acts, p. 291.)

Overwhelmed by the memory of his experience, the days of weariness, and this new confused emotion, the best knight, the best man of patience and wisdom and control, loses his grip in his most human moment; stumbling from Arthur's room into the arms of
Guinevere, Lancelot betrays his friend and king, then blunders down the stairs "weeping bitterly." After developing Lancelot's admirable nobility, Steinbeck has stripped it away to reveal the frail humanity beneath. Perhaps in trying to give his contemporaries a hero to emulate he has also tried to show that heroism does not always demand unwavering strength and incorruptible principles. To ask anyone to emulate the sanctity of a Galahad would be to deny his humanity and defeat him at the very start. But heroism does require that the hero stand within the realm of life, not apart from or above it, and struggle to develop all that is noble in him. The way to overcome the jealousy, pettiness, and self-centered immaturity of the Morgans and the Taulurds in the world is to try to stand where the hero stands. After the chronicle of weakness, Lancelot's triumphant return to Camelot—despite the subsequent failure that in its tragic beauty begs forgiveness—points the way for Steinbeck's time to transcend its discontent, and that way lies in the individual's embracing the possibility of perfection.

Reading the collected letters of Steinbeck, one cannot help feeling that for him, Lancelot's characterization is a portrait of the artist as a knight. At the very least, Lancelot is "Malory's self-character": "All of the perfection he knew went into this character, all of the things of which he thought himself capable" (Acts, p. 304). By implication, Lancelot is also Steinbeck's self-
character, having "my dream wish of wisdom and acceptance." But at most Lancelot—like the artist—is one of those men of vision and imagination to whom a society frustrated by the malaise of success must turn for cure. When the age of geographic exploration and adventure has passed, and the challenge of social reform has become stale, the mind of man lies open and waiting for discovery. The hero as adventurer becomes the hero as artist. The artist maps the wilds of the imagination so that other men will not lose their way.

John Steinbeck speaks for everyone as well as for himself in a letter to Eugène Vinaver dated August 27, 1959:

... a writer—like a knight—must aim at perfection, and failing, not fall back on the cushion that there is no perfection. He must believe himself capable of perfection even when he fails. ... I come toward the ending of my life with the same ache for perfection I had as a child. That doesn't change nor does the soul grow calloused to pain—it only perceives more channels of suffering—as when Launcelot [sic] perceived that his courtly love for Guinevere was not that at all and still could not help himself. (Letters, p. 649.)

Only by striving for perfection—as Lancelot strives, in the face of prophesied failure—can the writer or anyone rise above the dissatisfactions and pains of a petty world and find some measure of nobility.
Conclusion

This essay has attempted to show two things: first, that Thomas Malory wrote a book for and of his time; and, second, that John Steinbeck emulated Malory by trying to put the spirit of his own time into Malory's work and thus make the Morte d'Arthur accessible to his contemporaries. On the first point probably there will never be a consensus. A non-specialist can only take the word of those who say, seemingly with authority, that Malory's language was archaic even when he wrote it. Yet by adapting his French sources to a style of narration palatable to his audience, by giving his readers the kind of romantic adventure they wanted in literature, and by describing "batayles" and tournaments as though he had plagiarized the morning newspaper's chivalry page, Malory created an Arthurian work of his time, even full of his time. Furthermore, by selecting incidents from his sources carefully and arranging them to suit his own purpose, Malory addressed his work to his age, exhorting his contemporaries to live up to at least the spirit of the chivalric code he presented in the Morte, and perhaps stirring them to a more nationalistic conception of themselves as they identified their England with the England of Arthur and the Round Table.

On the second point--Steinbeck's writing a novel for and of his time--there can be little doubt. Few American novelists of this century have been so concerned with "current events" as Steinbeck,
and fewer still have felt as he did that the quality of his writing hinged on his ability to capture the spirit of his time. That that spirit found its way into a timeless legend, and that Steinbeck held the "banner of the Legend" aloft before his contemporaries to encourage them to greater accomplishments is also clear. Perhaps this is only to state the obvious—that all writers grow out of their environments, and all works of art are influenced, to some extent, by the milieu of their shaping. Malory's remarkable achievement was his creating a timeless masterpiece that bears so clearly the stamp of his age. One can believe that Steinbeck's work, had he completed it, would have appealed as timelessly.
Bibliography of Works Cited


Vita

Gary S. Hauk, born June 3, 1952, is the son of the Rev. and Mrs. Paul K. Hauk. He has lived all his life in Pennsylvania, graduating from William Allen High School, Allentown, in 1970, and with honors from Lehigh University, Bethlehem, in 1974. After receiving his B.A. in English, he studied comparative literature for one year as a Fulbright student at the University of Bucharest, Romania. From September 1975 until May 1977, he was a graduate teaching assistant in the English Department at Lehigh.