Sir Launcelot: "The Floure of Knyghthode"? 

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

Sir Launcelot:
"The Floure of Knyghthode"?

[In all tournameentes, jousts, and deeds of arms, both of lyff and deth, he passed all other knights, and at no tyme was he overcome but by treason or enchantment. So the Sir Launcelot increased so marvelously in worship and honour; therefore he is the fyrste knyght that the Frey[n]sh booke mayth me[n]cion of aftir kyngs Arthur com frome Rome.]


In this paragraph, apparently original to Malory, the reader is first made aware of Launcelot's significance in the Morte (Wilson 21). Most readers accept as a matter of fact that Launcelot is the
greatest knight of the Round Table. After all, he is often referred to as the “curteyest knyght... that now liyth” [most courteous knight now alive] (270), “pareles of courtesy and of knygthode” [peerless of courtesy and knighthood] (410), and the “robynd of the worlde of knyghtes” [noblest in the world of knights] (400). However, is it correct to accept Leuncelot’s reputation as “the floure of knygthode” (791) as absolute truth? Is it possible that Leuncelot’s chivalry is a façade which, when examined closely, will collapse and reveal a persona other than that of “the perfect knight”?

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

never to do outrage nothir mourthir, and allwayes to free tressen, give mercy unto hym that sith mercy, upon payse of forfutur [of their] worship and lordship of kyng Arthur for evirmore; and allwayes to do ladys, dam- sels, and jantilwomen and wydowes [succour:] strenth him in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them upon payse of debe. Also that no man take no batayl in awrongful quarrel for no love ns for no worldis goodis. So unto thys were all knygthis sworne of the Table Rounde both side and yonge. And every yere so were the[s] sworne at the hygh feste of Pentecoste.

[never to commit excess or murder, always flee treason, give mercy unto him that asks for mercy, upon risk of damaging their and Arthur’s reputations; always help ladies, damsels, gentlewomen, and widows; to strengthens them in their correct observances, and never to force them—upon pain of death. Also that no knight take battle in a wrongful quarrel—neither for love or worldly goods. So unto this were all the knights of the Round Table sworns —both old and young. And every year at the high feast of Pentecost they renewed this oath.] (119-120)

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

The chivalric code clearly states that knights are “never to do... morthis” (never to commit murder). However, Leuncelot does — not once, but twice. Leuncelot commits these ignoble acts in part IV of “The Boke of Sir Leuncelot and Queen Guinevere,” “The Knight of the Cart.” After receiving word that Melyagance has abducted Guenevere, Leuncelot immediately arms himself and goes in pursuit. Ex- pecting to be followed, Melyagance sets an amb-ush for Leuncelot. The result of this ambush is that Leuncelot’s horse is “shote... with many arowys,” [shot with many arrows] forcing him to proceed on foot. Afte: walking for a while, Leuncelot becomes encumbered of his armor but does not remove it because he fears the treachery of Melyagance. Serendipitously, he comes upon a peasant gathering wood. Leuncelot requests that the carter give him a ride to Melyagance’s castle, but the carter replies: “Thou shalt not go with me!” [You will not go with me!]. Therefore, in a
fit of anger Launcelot “leps to hym and gaff hym backwarde with hys gauntlet a recemayne, that he fele to the earth stark deafe...” [Launcelot “leaped on him and gave him such a blow with his gauntlet that he fell to the earth stark dead”] (1126). After killing the peasant, Launcelot commandeers the cart and continues his pursuit of Mellyngaunce. Obviously, what is good fortune for Launcelot is not necessarily good fortune for others. In his haste to save Queen Guenever, Launcelot ignores his code of chivalry and murders this innocent, unarmed, serf. Because serfs were considered lower class citizens and even property of the nobility, their death was not a great concern except perhaps as a loss of labor. However, Launcelot’s murder of this serf violates not only his knightly code, but also a moral (or religious) code. As David Harrington mentions, “Malory’s heroes show little compunction about violating the doctrines of the church, unless such teachings just happen to coincide with the principles of chivalry.” For instance, although “hand-to-hand combat [and] the killing of others in quarrels were opposed to church doctrine,” “killing a man is permissible within the rules of fair play” (67). Although this places Launcelot’s conduct in a religious gray area, it is obvious that even if the carter had been armed, he would have had little chance against a knight of Launcelot’s caliber. Therefore, it is obvious that Launcelot’s actions were definitely not within the boundaries of “fair play.”

Closely following his disreputable slaying of the carter, Launcelot commits a second murder. This murder breaks almost every point of the chivalric code. Not only does it violate Launcelot’s chivalric oath to “give mercy unto hym that asketh mercy” [give mercy to he who asks for mercy], it also breaks his vow that he will not “take no batayles ir a wrongfull quarrell for no love ne for no worldis goodis” [will not fight in any wrongfull quarrels neither for love nor for worldly possessions]. To make matters worse, the reason Launcelot commits this murder is to side an act of treason—sleeping with the queen. We see that after the matter of the kidnapping has been settled and the queen is safe, Launcelot schedules a rendezvous with Guenever. Launcelot goes to her window that night and, after a brief conversation with Guenever through her bedroom window, forces his way through the iron bars and into the queen’s chamber. In the process of removing the barriers between himself and his love, Launcelot “kutte the brawne of hys hondys thorowoue to the bone” [cut the palm of his hand to the bone]. However, Launcelot is not one to let a minor wound deter him. Therefore, he “wente to bedde with the quene and toke no force of hys hurt honde, but toke hys pleaunsae and hys lykynge until hit was the dawnyng of the day; for wyte you well he slept nat...” [went to bed with the queen and took no notice of his hurt hand, but took his pleasure and joy until it was morning, for understand well that he slept not] (1130-1131). Besides being the first incident in which Malory reveals that Launcelot and Guenevere are having an affair, this scene also brings about the first accusation that the lovers are treasonous to King Arthur.

The next morning, after discovering blood from Launcelot’s wounded hand on Guenevere’s sheets, Mellyngaunce “demde in her that she was false to the kyngye and that some of the wounded knyghtes had lyene by her all that nyght” [charge that she was false to the king and that some of the wounded knights had lain with her all the night] (1132). Mellyngaunce accuses the queen of treason and challenges Launcelot to defend her honor. By accepting Mellyngaunce’s challenge, Launcelot is fighting against right. It is ironic that even a false knight such as Mellyngaunce can give Launcelot advice in this area. He remonstrates “I rede yow bewawe whate ye do; for though ye ar never so good a knyght, as I wote wel ye ar renowned the besse knyght of the worlde, yst shulde ye be avysed to do batayle in a wronge quarrell, for God wol have a stroke in every batayle’” [I warn you to beware what you do, for although you are a great knight, as I know well you are known as the best knight of the world, yet you should be advised to avoid battle
in a wrongful quarrel, for God will have a stroke in
every battle) (1133). As if to protect himself from
God’s vengeance, Launcelot places himself technically
in the right: by bending the truth and swearing that
“thys nyght there lay none of thys ten knyghtes
wounded with my lady, quene Gwennyver” [this
night there lay none of these ten wounded knights
with my lady, Queen Guenevere] (1133). Launcelot
knows that this statement is true since he was the
knight that slept with the queen that night. After
making this statement, Launcelot is eager to fight
Mellygaunce. It is in the course of this battle that
Launcelot breaks yet another point in the code of
chivalry. Early in the battle, Mellygaunce realizes
that he is overmatched. Fearful of losing his life,
Mellygaunce cries to Launcelot “Moste noble
knyght, Sir Launcelot, save my lyff For I yelde me
unto you, and I require you, as ye be a knyght and
fellow of the Table Rounde, sel me nat, for I yelde
me as overcomyn...” [most noble knyght, Sir Lu-
anceolot, save my lyff For I yelde me unto you, and I
require you, as a true knight of the Round Table, slay
me not, for I yield and am overcome...] (1138).
However, Launcelot knows that he and Guenevere
are guilty of treason and wants to remove the
threat that Mellygaunce represents to their safety.
Therefore, after looking to Guenevere and receiving
“sygnyes that she wolde have [Mellygaunce] dede”,
signs that she would have Mellygaunce dead],
Launcelot forces the battle onward and slays Sir
Mellygaunce (1138). In this scene, we see that not
only does Launcelot fight in a wrongful quarrel,
but, as Irene Joynt points out, he also fights for
pursely selfish reasons. We are told that Launcelot
“had lever than all the good in the world that he
myght be revenged upon hym [Mellygaunce]”
[rather than all good in the world, Launcelot
wished to be revenged upon him Mellygaunce]
(1138. italics mine). Therefore it is plain to see that
Launcelot is fighting in the spirit of personal ven-
geance and hatred.

It is through one of a knight’s primary occupa-
tions, seeking adventure, that we discover more of
Launcelot’s failings. As Beverly Kennedy mentions
in her essay, “Notions of Adventure in Malory’s
Morte d’Arthur,” Middle-English use of the term
“adventure” includes an extraordinary range of pos-
sibilities. The Middle English dictionary lists many
definitions, including such diverse meanings as: fate,
fault, fortune, accident, danger, a daring feat, or a mir-
acle (Kennedy 36). However, no matter how the term
is defined, one fact remains clear: Launcelot is ex-
ceptually adept at seeking out adventure. It is
through adventure, or avoidance of adventure, that
we discover another of Launcelot’s failings—pride.

Although it is permissible for knights to seek
worldly fame—except on the Sankgreal quest—, it is
apparent that Launcelot is excessive in his pursuit
of prestige. In fact, Launcelot carries his quest for
fame to such an extreme that it becomes a matter of
pride and vainglory. This appears in the fact that
Launcelot commands all of his prisoners to yield
not to King Arthur as do the other Round Table
knight, but “unto quene Gwennyver” (274). This
action is supposedly based on Launcelot’s undying
love for the queen and Launcelot himself admits
that “all my grete dedes of arms that I have done
for the moste party was for the quens sake...” [all
my great deeds of arms, I have done mostly for the
Queen’s sake] (889). However, due to the great
number of prisoners he sends to the queen and the
odity of this action, Launcelot brings inordinate
attention to himself, thus underlining his reputation
as number one knight. As Marian MacCurdy points
out, Launcelot “represents one who is so under the
power of the feminine that he is consumed by it and
loses his identity as a knight” (12). Perhaps
Launcelot’s actions are not based solely on his love
for Guenevere, but also or his love of himself and
his pride.

Throughout the Morte we see occasions where
Launcelot is guilty of pride. Launcelot is justifiably
proud of his reputation as the number one knight in
King Arthur’s court. However, on two occasions
we see that Launcelot is so fearful of defeat and a
subsequent loss of standing that he avoids conflict if
he is unsure of victory. The first instance in which we see this cowardly action is when Launcelot is almost defeated by Gareth. As Gareth departs for his first quest, he jousts with, and defeats, Sir Kay. After his first victory, Gareth challenges Launcelot. After both knights are unhorsed in the joust, they proceed to fight with swords. However, after fighting for a while, Launcelot

felte hym (Gareth) so bygg he that he merveyled of his strength, for he fought more lyker a gyaunte than a knyght, and his fghtyng was so passyng durbale and passyng perilous. For Sir Launcelot had so much ado with hym that he drey hymsel to be shamed, and seyde, ‘Beawymaynes, fght no more! Your quarel and myne is nat grete but we may sone leve of.’

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

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

A second occasion where Launcelot refuses to fight in order to save his reputation is found in “The Castle of Maidens.” During a tournament, Launcelot observes that a certain knight bearing a black shield Sir Trystram, is outfighting all the other knights. Launcelot is curious about this knight and determines to search him out and challenge him. So Launcelot draws his sword and goes in search of Sir Trystram. However, upon finding Trystram and observing how spectaculantly he is fighting, Launcelot says to himself:

‘A! mercy Jesu!... syth the firste tyme that ever I bare armys saw I never one knyght do so mervaulous dedys of armys. And if I shoule... sette upon thyk knyght now, I ded shame to myself.’

[‘Mercy of Jesus!... This is the first time since I first bore arms that I ever saw one knight do so many marvelous deeds of arms. And if I set upon this knight now, I might be shamed.’ (536)]

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

Launcelot’s pride is a primary reason that he is unsuccessful in the quest for the Sankgral—the greatest adventure of King Arthur’s knights. In his first adventure during the Grail quest, Launcelot finds himself outside a richly decorated chapel but is unable to enter. He lies down to rest and, during a period of half-waking/half-sleeping, he sees a knight healed by the Grail. Launcelot attempts to approach the Grail, but he is “overtaken with sryne” [overtaken with sin] and cannot move (384). When he awakens, Launcelot realizes that it is because of his sin that he has been dishonored. He acknowledges that “when [he] sought worldly adventures for worldly desyres [he] ever enchevred them and had the bettir ir every place, and never was [he] discomfite in no quarel, were hit ryght
were hit wrongly” (when I sought worldly adventures for worldly desires, I always achieved them and was the best in every situation, and was never defeated in any quarrel, were it right or wrong) (986, brackets mine). Robert Kelly points out that although this might sound as if Malory is distinguishing between “secular” and “celestial” chivalry, he is not. Kelly says that “Worldly adventures for worldly desyres is not ‘secular’ knighthood, but false knighthood, equatable with a condition of pride” (181). Launcelot then confesses his long-concealed adultery, but his chief sin is vainglory, not adultery (Kelly 182).

Later in the Grail quest, when Launcelot sides with the black knights, we see that because he believes he can lead the losing knights to victory, he is once more guilty of pride (931). Malory’s hermit makes it clear that Launcelot was unable to defeat the white knights because of his pride. He says that it is because of “boastance and pryde of the worlde... that thou sholde know God frome vainglory of the worlde; hit ye nat worth a pear.”

As for grete pryde thou madest grete scrow that thou hadset nat overcome all the whght knightes” (boasting and pride of the world... that you should know God from vainglory of the world; it is not worth anything. And for great pride, you made great sorrow, and you were unable to overcome the white knights) (934-936). As a result of this lecture from the hermit, Launcelot vows to change his ways and live in accordance with God’s will.

Although Launcelot has supposedly reformed himself during the Grail quest, in “The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere,” it is soon obvious that he has reverted to his pre-Grail actions. In the beginning of the first episode, that of “The Poisoned Apple,” we see that Launcelot has “forgate the promysse and the perfection that he made in the queste” and he and the queen now “loved togidrins more hotter than they dide toforennde” [forgot the promise and the perfection that he made in the Grail quest, and he and the queen now loved together hotter than they did before] (1045). We also see that while Launcelot defends many “adyes and damesels... for the pleasure of oure Lorde Jesu Crist,” [ladies and damselis for the pleasure of our Lord Jesus Christ] he distances himself from Gwenyvere not for God’s sake, but “to eschewe the schawnder and noysse” [to avoid slander and noise at the court] (1046). It is obvious that “Launcelot has reserved this one area of his life apart from his obligations to God and knighthood” (Kelly 184).

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

‘when I remembe o’ hir beaute and of hir ro-blesse, that was bothe wyth yyr kyng and wyth byr, so whas i sawe his corps and hir corps so lye togyders, truly myn herte wold not serve to susteyne my careful body. Also when I re-member me how by my defaute and myn orgule and my pryde that they were bothe layed ful lowe, that were peelles that ever was lyyng of Cristen peole, wyt you wel... this remembred, of their kyrdenes and myn unkyrdenes, sanke so to myn herte that I myght not susteyne myself.’

[When I remembe their beauty and their nobleness, that was both with her king and with her, so when | saw his corpse and her corpse lying together, truly, my heart would not serve to sustain my sorrowful body. Also, when I remember how by my lack and my pride and my arrogance that they were beth...
Sir Launcelot: “The Flore of Knynthode”?

After closely examining Launcelot’s character, we discover that this supposed paragon of knighthood has many flaws. No: only does he fail to maintain King Arthur’s code of chivalry, but he is also vain and cowardly. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that it is not correct to accept Launcelot’s reputation as absolute. It is now obvious that not only is much of Launcelot’s chivalry a facade, the facade is fragile and disintegrates to reveal a character who is definitely not “the floure of knyghthode.”

Works Cited


騎士道の花

Greg Stinnett

Arthur王の伝説の歴史を通じて、「騎士道の花」である Launcelot は常にロマン主義的英雄、騎士道精神の手本として描かれてきた。Sir Thomas Malory による Morte d’Arthur においても、Malory もこの伝統に従って Launcelot の人物造形を行なっているように見える。Malory は Morte の冒頭において、「生死を賭けたあらゆる決闘、馬上試合、武闘において彼（Launcelot）は他のすべての騎士たちを凌いでいた」。そしていつの時代においても彼を負かすことのできる者はいなかった」と述べている。おおかたの読者は Launcelot が円卓の騎士たちの中で最も偉大なる騎士であることを目指のこととして受けとめており、確かに作品全体を通じて彼はしばしば「現存の騎士の中で最も礼儀正しい騎士」、「礼儀正しい騎士道において並ぶ者がない」、「騎士の世界でもっとも優秀な」騎士として言及されている。しかしながら、「騎士道の花」そして的 Launcelot の名声を絶対的な真実として受け入れることは正しいことなのであろうか。Launcelot の騎士道精神は実は見せかけに過ぎず、注意深く見てみると、その見せかけは嘘、「完璧な騎士」ではない別のペルソナが露呈されるということはありえないだろうか。本論では Launcelot の性格造形を詳細に検討することによって、この騎士道の魅力ということになっている人物に実はいろいろな欠点があることを示す。彼は Arthur 王の騎士道の規範
に背いているだけではなく、虚栄心が強く、臆病でもある。よって筆者は Launcelot の名声を絶対的なものとして受け入れることは正しくないと結論づける。Launcelot の騎士道精神はその大部分が見透かされ、しかもその見透かたは薄々とすでに気付け、その下から決して「騎士道の花」とはいえない人物が顔を出すのである。