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Revolt Against Reality: The Lineage of Chivalric Romance

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REVOLT AGAINST REALITY:

The Lineage of Chivalric Romance, 1300-1958

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by

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I would like to express my gratitude for the great patience and wisdom of my advisor, Karen Sullivan, and all the support of my friends and family on this long adventure. May we all find a little more courage and nobility in this life.

Chivalric Romance: An Overview

No genre in English literature has received as much critical savagery and cultural acclaim as chivalric romance. Heroic knights, holy quests, dragons, distressed maidens, enchanters, and saintly kings prowl the hallowed halls of the Western canon despite centuries of well-intentioned efforts to root out those deluded, ahistorical fantasies from the collective unconscious. Even in this disillusioned century, we swing foam swords at each other, ceaselessly quote Graham Chapman's rendition of King Arthur, and spend hours questing in virtual kingdoms for pixelated dragons. The persistence of chivalric romance through the ages reveals an underlying appeal to the appetite of human imagination in a complex and consistent form.

In its narrowest form, chivalric romance refers to the popular episodic narratives of medieval Europe that dealt with heroic knight-errants on fantastic adventures. Stories incorporated elements of earlier epics, folklore, and contemporary notions of nobility to entertain and inspire. The worlds of romance are filled with fairy-tale elements such as giants, magic forests, and enchanters that the central character, the knight-errant, is tested by. Between his perilous encounters with these mysterious, otherworldly forces, the knight takes shelter in realistic, vibrantly depicted, medieval courts. His interactions with lords, kings, and other knights often reinforce the social worth of his adventures, while his relationship to his chosen lady motivates him to fight in the name of love. The heroic knight-errant is always guided by a sophisticated, gentlemanly ethos of honor, mercy, courtesy, and service to women, an ethos that came to be known as chivalry. Chivalry is a fascinating and appealing theme because it is an absolute ideal, "in reference to ideal realization and in reference to the absence of any earthly and practical purpose." (Auerbach 134) Everything the knight does is in relation to the chivalric

ethos, but the ideal exists detached from his immediate reality. Narratively, the world of inner value supersedes the opaque external world. He seeks to realize the refined code of conduct of chivalry through constant adventure, the constant proving and testing his chivalric worth, but it is not apparent how the conditions of his world have led to the ethos itself. Furthermore, compared to the conditions of historical reality, the worlds and ideals of chivalric romance seem all the more distant and irrelevant. Yet it is these worlds that have survived in our cultural memory, largely supplanting the facts.

The general feeling of romance in literature is rooted in a strong appeal to the imagination; a presentation of the world as it might be, rather than as it is. Most criticism of chivalric romance is directed against this restricted vision of reality. As a self-portrayal of feudal knighthood, the relatively narrow social scope of romance becomes problematic. While courtly scenes show vibrant, familiar spaces and customs, "the geographical, economic, and social conditions on which they depend are never explained," lacking any sense of historical reality. (133) For one, the working class, the majority of real medieval society, is virtually absent from the genre. The subjects of chivalric romances were restricted to upper-class heroes and villains in and between courts, the elite few who lived off the hard labor of the many. The hard life of a medieval serf was not a desirable subject for the primary audience, often the sponsors, of romance. Historical courts were "decidedly unfavorable to [an art] which should apprehend reality in its full breadth and depth," if such a movement is even possible in art. (142)

The knight himself is similarly deprived of his historical significance. In particular, the 12th and 13th centuries were high points of historical orders of knighthood as well as chivalric romance literature, but the knights of romance exist in a radically different social role than historical knights. Unlike the politically defined knights of *chansons de geste*, who exist in

relation to real battles and historical movements, the knights-errant of romance exist exclusively in service of an absolute ideal. They have no real function or office, and it almost goes without saying that the conditions underlying the position and prestige of romance knights are "impossible to fit" into any "practically conceivable political system" whatsoever. (135) The central conceit of questing and knight-errantry totally lacks any historical basis. Despite the familiar trappings of courtly scenes in romance, their worlds fundamentally lack reality. Reality is supplanted by a world existing entirely in relation to the central knight-errant, "a world specifically created and designed to give the knight opportunity to prove himself." (Auerbach 136) Everything is imbued with meaning in connection to the figure of the great man who shapes and decodes his world. This sense of order in romance contrasts with the realist genre, which purports to show the world as it is, lacking inherent meaning. The confinement of chivalric conduct to an insulated and mysterious upper class creates the impression that "nobility, greatness, and intrinsic values have nothing in common with everyday reality." (139) The overwhelming emphasis on a secluded realm of inner value in medieval chivalric romance did not bring chivalric ideals closer to earthly reality. Reality as it was became excess to the knight's personal struggle, and so had no place in the linear, fairy-tale progression of his adventures. However, as the genre evolved, stories of romance began to show self-awareness of the narrow scope of dogged chivalric idealism. The way in which the genre relates to itself has ensured the survival of chivalric symbols and ideals into modernity.

Chivalric romance knows it has this problem, the problem of the remoteness of absolute ideals from literary and historical reality. The divide between ideals and reality is a consistent point of tension throughout chivalric romance, and knights are expected to always moderate the two by overcoming reality through the principles of chivalry. They carry on and overlook the

contradiction, even as their willful blindness often gets them in a bind. It is by no means a practical way to live, and narratives of chivalric romance know this. Chivalric self-critique manifests itself in particular tones of comedy and tragedy. Knights are shown to be ridiculous and detached from reality especially in comic scenes of madness: in which they cannot deal with contradiction between their ethos and a real situation. And when they neglect reality in pursuit of their ideal, the collateral damage can be devastating.The tragic ending of the Matter of Britain in particular represents how the knightly ideal is fragile, and many knights fail to live up to the full expectations of chivalric conduct. Despite this, the pursuit of chivalric worth- the constant testing knights subject themselves to- persists as a fact of their nature.

Most importantly, despite the problematic nature of chivalric ideals, romances always present the possibility of resolving the contradictions between ideals and reality. The inner value of chivalry and external reality are not independent, and it is possible in romances to unite the gap between what we want from the world and what it presents us with. At worst, the narrow view of traditional romances can create the impression that chivalric ideals belong to the distant world of the upper classes, or to fantasy alone. But if that was the case, romances should not be as popular as they are. The evolution of the genre gradually brings these ideals into more and more immediate relevance to ordinary life. The progression between these 3 books shows this process. The ideals of chivalric conduct remain relatively intact in time, while shifting portrayals of reality gradually expose these ideals to relevance.

The *Lancelot-Grail,* or the Vulgate Cycle is in many ways the archetypal chivalric romance. Appearing in the early 13th century, and written in Old French, the prose episodes of the Vulgate synthesized many threads of the Matter of Britain, or the Legend of King Arthur, into a coherent narrative centered on Arthur's greatest knight, Lancelot. A product of its time, the

Lancelot-Grail plays every trope of the romance genre straight, and so is a useful model in understanding how the elements of romance interlock, and how they would be challenged in future literature. The setting is fantastic and idealized, and Lancelot's ideological stance is remarkably pure to match. At the same time, the story ventures into realism and psychological drama in its depiction of interpersonal relationships and questions of identity. In particular, Lancelot's internal struggle between the worldly, violent necessities of knighthood, and the noble desires of his heart represents the chivalric battle between reality and idealism. Even in the fantastic world of romance, Lancelot's journey reveals the imperfection underlying these narrative spaces. While Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* is a more directly influential work in the English tradition of chivalric romance, Malory's text is largely a reworking of the foundations laid down by the Vulgate Cycle. As an early source text, the Vulgate is broad and unrefined, but the rawness of its material reveals more acutely the secret ore of chivalry.

Despite the end of feudalism and its romances, *Don Quixote* ensured the modern survival of chivalric ideals in its address of reality. By sweeping away the fantastic, illusory world from under its hero, the importance of the chivalric code is reestablished in a more real, relevant sense. However, while the novel is often read as an attack on chivalric romance, an effective critique that brings the shortcomings of the genre to the forefront, it can also be read as a great romance itself. The book is structured as a romance, episodes of perilous encounters scattered across a landscape not drawn from folklore, but nonetheless becomes mythical through its hero's idealism. Don Quixote himself is a satirical manifestation of the knight-errant character, but the nuances of his characterization also make him a model knight.

Finally, T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* is the most modern text of this paper, its first complete edition published in 1958. Its plot is a translation of Malory's *Morte* into a modern

novel, reworked for a postwar English audience. Unlike the preceding works, White's novel is not structurally a romance, but it retains the chivalric themes of a focus on contradiction and the pursuit of idealism. It presents a disordered, anachronistic world lacking any concept of chivalry, and through the unfolding of its narrative shows how ideals can positively influence reality to create meaning. The progression of the plot constructs, deconstructs, and finally offers the possibility of reconstructing the ideals of chivalry as Arthur's kingdom rises and falls. It contains the tragedy of *Lancelot*, the comedic parody of *Don Quixote*, and a sincere chivalric heart that seeks to bring peace to humanity in the wake of a truly dark age.

The overall trend of these works is towards the resolution of the contradictions of chivalric romance in reality. Narratives become more complex while the basic ideas of honor, courtesy, courage, and love are retained. The symbols of chivalric romance persist because the genre speaks to a fundamental tragedy of human existence: the gap between the world as we encounter it, and the world as we would like it to be. It would be a better world if we were all able to live up to our personal ideals, but it never feels that simple. The potency of this thread running through all chivalric romance is best proved by addressing the broadest possible range of romances. This project will touch upon three great works of chivalric romance, spaced in time across almost eight centuries, and in cultural space across three nations. The lineage of the genre forms a ponderous family tree, but each text has been carefully chosen as significant touchstones forming a rough beginning, middle, and ending in the history of the genre as it stands today.

The Diamond and the Wax: Dialectics of the Prose *Lancelot*

In the kingdoms of twelfth century Europe, the tales of King Arthur and his knights began their evolution from accounts of semi-mythical English history towards a more complex, personal narrative of the rise and fall of Arthur's kingdom. The central figure and emotional heart of the romances of the Matter of Britain is Sir Lancelot du Lac, Arthur' greatest knight. As depicted during the height of chivalric romance, Lancelot embodies the highest ideals of the chivalric ethos as well as the stark reality of the warrior class. He is a gentle, courteous spirit locked in a shell of blood and steel, loyal to his lord Arthur but traitorous in his legendary love for Guinevere. For the one who would become the archetypal knight of romance, Lancelot's psychological struggle reveals how the absolute ideals of chivalry always find contradictory reality, even in a narrative constructed around them. The tension between his firm inner values and great capacity for violence is tested and strained again and again throughout his adventures, prefiguring the fall of the chivalric Arthurian social order at his hands.

Lancelot's characterization is not so remote from historical knighthood as one might expect. Chivalric romances flourished in an age of historical chivalry, and it is important to properly place Lancelot in relation to this age to understand the realist elements of his tale. William the Marshal, 1st Earl of Pembroke, was knighted in 1166 in Normandy, the son of minor nobility without land or inheritance. From humble origins, he became a tournament champion, served five kings, perhaps loved his lord's wife, and died a Templar. As recorded in his 13th century biography, in times of crisis and need, "the Marshal…was entirely trusted simply on account of his character, known to all." (*Marshal* 81) Through his deeds of arms, loyalty, and counsel, the Marshal became a beacon of chivalric excellence in his time. For his strength,

bravery, leadership, and piety, he was living proof that chivalry was a real, influential code of conduct in 12th century France and England, where he was raised and served. Although the character of Lancelot seems fanciful and naive, the ideals he strives for were not merely imagined by those of the era, they were lived by figures like the Marshal. While the specific tenets of historical chivalry and literary chivalry vary from case to case, the general idea of expecting knights to conduct themselves honorably on and off the battlefield is a cultural standard. Lancelot is a model knight, a model historical knights would have understood. Later, in the 14th century, Geoffroi de Charny laid out the qualities and ethos of chivalry in his *Livre de chevalerie*, a treatise designed to defend and reform the behavior of knights as the Hundred Years' War altered the fabric of medieval society. A renowned knight himself, Geoffroi's ideals can be useful in attaining a deeper understanding of the less visible themes of chivalric romance. In his view, the highest degrees of chivalry are attained through the dogged pursuit of honor. Those who want to, and will become, great knights, must "look around, inquire, and find out where the greatest honor is to be found," wherever they are, and go forth to attain it. (Charny 103) To be in constant pursuit of honor requires single-minded devotion to something greater and more abstract than day-to-day survival or maintaining a social order, a trajectory clearly maintained by Lancelot. Though real knights did not face enchanted castles or dragons, they had principles that they constantly tested against real situations.

Lancelot, as first imagined by Chrétien de Troyes, did not emerge from a vacuum, but was a merger of the best ideals of medieval French courts and the fantastic legends of England. Chrétien de Troyes's *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart*, written in Old French verse near the end of the 12th century, is the first romance to feature Lancelot. He is entirely original to Chrétien de Troyes, the author's personal vision of the greatest knight. It tells the story of Guinevere's

abduction by the malevolent knight Meleagant, and Lancelot's adventure to rescue her. Working from the foundation laid out in this relatively short romance, an unknown author or group of authors constructed the Vulgate Cycle in the 13th century, a series of chivalric romances in prose that gave a sprawling, influential vision of the Arthur legend with an emphasis on Lancelot and Guinevere's relationship. The stories within the Vulgate Cycle focusing on the youth and adventures of Lancelot form the prose *Lancelot*. Because the narrative lineage from *The Knight of the Cart* to the prose *Lancelot* is so close and well-established, they can effectively be treated as a single text for our purposes. De Troyes's verse constructs dense, vivid stories, while the prose *Lancelot* expands on these stories through its length, incorporating more explicit morals and analysis of the original verse.

In the fantastic sanctuary of the Lady of the Lake, where the infant Lancelot was spirited away, his predestination for knighthood is obvious. At eighteen, at the threshold between childhood and adulthood, his hunt of a great stag symbolizes his necessary ascent to become a great knight. Small symbolic details like this construct a sense of otherworldliness in the Lady of the Lake's domain. Lancelot's roots are not placed in a mundane court, but a fantasy space where the boundaries of ordinary reality do not apply. He is a mortal man transplanted into an idealized realm under the guardianship of his literal fairy godmother, and this surreal space of physical and immaterial experience is all he knows. The Lady of the Lake knows that this hunt has significance because everything in her world has significance, and she knows how to proceed because she is a part of the idealized space. Likewise, Lancelot's expression of his personal desire to become a worthy knight in King Arthur's court reflects his attunement to the ideal order. His natural inclination towards knighthood is a significant underlying character trait that guides his adventures, and his natural understanding of the meaning of knighthood is what makes

him great. The need to pursue adventure and chivalry is the fundamental motivation of all romance knights, therefore as the figure around whom this world is constructed, Lancelot's possession of this desire is not a reaction or anticipation of the needs of his world, but a fact of his character in harmony with it. Partially to ensure his readiness and partially to inform the audience's expectations, the Lady of the Lake delivers one of the most important and detailed descriptions of the meaning of knighthood in medieval literature:

> A knight must have two hearts, one hard and solid as a diamond and the other soft and yielding as hot wax. The one which is hard as a diamond must be set against the disloyal and ruthless…and just as soft, hot wax can be moulded and shaped as one likes, people who are good and compassionate should be able to bring out all the knight's graciousness and kindness. (*Lancelot I*, 114)

This lesson, which Lancelot seems to have already internalized, is centered on a rather unsettling image. He must have two hearts, compartmentalize himself, be two people at the same time while also knowing which one to follow. The divide between two fundamentally different aspects, between the hardness of the warrior and the softness of the gentleman, is the axis over which a knight's actions are balanced. Sometimes compassion and generosity are necessitated, other times total brutality and mercilessness are, and a great knight must be able to judiciously apply one or the other. Although he has been raised in the world of fantasy, his perception of reality and of others must always be precise. The Lady of the Lake's portrayal of the world is binary; there are those who are bad and there are those who are good, and this immaterial factor will somehow always be clear in Lancelot's day-to-day reality. The pragmatic warrior and the sophisticated nobleman are cast in separate hearts and express themselves under distinct conditions, and the two can never be mixed up. The figurative heart of chivalric conduct, the

foundation over which Lancelot builds his identity, is already broken. Yet he is of the ideal realm, and these problems which manifest in reality are not seen. Reality is subservient to the absolute worlds of inner value. It is through this lens of diamond and wax that Lancelot's adventures can be viewed, as there will come times in his adventures when the heart of wax and the heart of diamond will demand totally disparate things of him, and the ways in which Lancelot reconciles the two can either heal or deepen the divide. Above all, he must keep his integrity.

In spite of this problem, the Lady of the Lake tells Lancelot that there have, in fact, been historical knights that have successfully embodied the two poles of chivalric virtue. From Judas Maccabeus to King David to Joseph of Arimathea, the Lady of the Lake cites a number of real and legendary figures from history who are considered worthy knights. The invocation of these names is particularly interesting considering the huge historical divide between pre-Christian Hebrew and medieval French warrior culture. Real history and culture is not a concern in romance, these references serve to anchor Lancelot to the world of social value insofar as we can understand these references as to something in the material past of the narrative world. What makes these men knights is not their membership in a specific order, the armaments they carry, or the circumstances of their birth, but the consistent set of values these different figures lived by. These values as a whole form the structure of chivalry, even as the word itself scarcely appears in the prose *Lancelot*. Chivalry is not recognized in romances by name, as an institutionalized social law, but as a recurrent pattern of behavior that great knights are drawn to. It is an absolute ideal in what it asks and in its distance from reality, but also a visible and accessible one that various individuals find or seek under disparate circumstances. In other words, it is true.

And so, after hearing of all the highs and lows of the order of knighthood from the Lady of the Lake, the young Lancelot responds with the eager declaration:

> If I one day find someone willing to make me a knight, I won't let the chance slip by for fear that knighthood might be misplaced in me!...However things turn out, I won't let fear of any kind stop me from receiving the high order of knighthood. (*Lancelot I* 115)

Lancelot feels the need to pursue knighthood, because he is in the world of fantasy and ideals. In the pursuit and attainment of knighthood, Lancelot expresses the precise drive Geoffroi de Charny emphasizes in his *Livre*. He sees that the highest order and greatest honor he can attain is in knighthood, and he is resolved to pursue it at any cost, even against himself. The visceral feeling of fear is a knight's shame because it is a reaction of the flesh against the world. But a knight must compartmentalize, and only follow his spiritual calling towards the honor of chivalry, transcending reality to follow those ideals. The often maligned chivalric obsession with honor is an obsession with a measure of inner value that exists nowhere in reality. At the same time, honor is social currency. The attainment of honor leads to better social standing, and therefore better material conditions in highly stratified medieval courts. So the influence of abstract ideals over the real world in Lancelot's world should be taken quite seriously as a point in his favor. And it is from this relation that the general sense of purity in chivalric romances comes from. Lancelot's striving to be a great knight is entirely genuine, respected by his society, and treated with the utmost sincerity by the narrative. He must go to the court of King Arthur, where the worthiest men are, and prove himself because he must do so. But though his ambitions as a warrior have been fired up, the meaning of his personal knighthood has yet to reveal herself.

Lancelot's first meeting with Guinevere marks his entry into the real world. He arrives at Camelot with the Lady of the Lake, young and unaccustomed to the court, and is welcomed by King Arthur and his knights, his prowess and inner potential visible to them as mutual participants in chivalric ideology. All the attention towards Lancelot entices the queen to see

him, but he has nothing at the moment to win her personal favor. He admires her great physical beauty, but is not yet able to perceive her inner worthiness. As a member of the court, she begins to inquire into this new knight's personal details. She asks Yvain his name, his ancestry, his place of birth, but none of these worldly signs are known to anyone. So she asks the young Lancelot directly:

> "Thereupon the queen took the boy's hand and asked him where he was from. At her touch, he started as if suddenly awakened…She noticed how flustered he was, and asked him a second time" (*Lancelot I* 124)

It is with this awakening touch that Lancelot is set upon the path of self-realization. His life up to this point has been spent in the dreamlike realm of childhood, but this first contact with the romantic and sexual figure of Guinevere suddenly connects him with the unfamiliar allure of physical reality. She wants to know his position in the social reality of the court, and he cannot help but answer. And so long as he can keep his distance, this is precisely what his chivalry leads him to do. To become a worthy champion of the queen, he must be able to answer this question of self. He must learn to exist in the world as an individual. Lancelot's years in the Lady of the Lake's guardianship have allowed his physical and ideological growth, but his pursuit of worldly understanding begins here. To be able to love Guinevere- as a gentlemanly knight, of course- Lancelot must know who he is, and to attain the social value that comes with this knowledge. His adventures thereafter not only increase his renown, they also lead him to the answer of who he is. Lancelot's motivation as a character is his desire for Guinevere, and the great deeds he does are in her name. In Chrétien de Troyes's original romance, the focusing power of this love is made explicit. Lancelot withstands his trials because his heart "was kept fixed on a single object by Love," and so he can never be led astray, though many will try. (Chrétien 222) Love maintains

the stability of his identity because it leads him to fully strive for something external and internal, and both sides of his heart are oriented in parallel. Courtly love is yet another trope of chivalric romance that remains in modern consciousness, but has been stripped of its original meaning. It is primarily an exchange of honor, where the deeds of a knight raise his lady's honor, and the lady's guidance and reciprocation spurs the knight to greater deeds for his own honor. In Geoffroi de Charny's words, "ladies will and should be more greatly honored when they have made a good knight or man-at-arms," through their devoted love for a particular knight. (Charny 121) A knight dedicates some victory to his lady, and both gain honor in a continuous cycle of inspiration and dedication. And yet, these relationships are expected to be kept totally secret and private, to preserve the sanctity of the love. Guinevere is made into something like a totem, an attractive object representing Lancelot's great honor. This is somewhat sustainable so long as they remain distanced, but the seductive physical potential contained in this inciting touch is an intrusion into the supposedly superior ideal world. His gallant wax heart demands he carry on in her service, but the shell of his childhood ideals now has one tiny crack.

At the start of his journey as a knight, Lancelot is only beginning to understand his identity as a great knight. He has not yet gained the honor and recognition which constitute worth in medieval society, nor does he quite understand the true social meaning of these things, so the use of his true name by others is delayed for some time. And before his name is used, he must discover it. Lancelot's first major adventure in the prose *Lancelot* is of the Dolorous Guard. The stakes and challenge are high: the castle possesses a great test of arms that all knights who enter fail. And so Lancelot, known now only as the White Knight or the New Knight, is obliged to meet this test. Though there is danger of death, the need to win honor is a greater motivator than anything else for a knight. He passes the Guard's challenges rather easily, with some

assistance from one of the castle's ladies. It is all the sort of testing and proving typical of chivalric romance, existing exclusively in relation to Lancelot, a narrative construction without historical or physical realism. However, the fights do not end in a climactic final battle, but with the Guard's lord fleeing the scene. Both Lancelot and the reader are led to anticipate a confrontation, but it does not come. Lancelot's enemy, the material force inhibiting his pursuit, literally slips out the backdoor as Lancelot is led to a great graveyard between the walls, the slabs engraved with the names of various great knights of Camelot and beyond. He is now firmly in the space of fairy-tale and legend. And at the center is a large, ornate slab that no one can lift, except for the castle's captor. The White Knight easily lifts it, and the inscription reads: "Here will lie Lancelot of the Lake, son of King Ban of Benoic." (*Lancelot I* 153) In the center of this illogical space akin to the Lady of the Lake's domain in its contact with the immaterial world, Lancelot finds his connection to reality. Every force that has guided him here has worked through the idealized order of a romance narrative, only to throw him back to material reality. He is the son of King Ban, and therefore exists in relation to other members of the courtly world. The purity of his isolated childhood in dreams and ideals has been tarnished in a way Lancelot finds deeply uncomfortable. Only Lancelot and the damsel sent by the Lady of the Lake read this, and as soon as they do, he sets the slab down again and implores the damsel to never speak of it again. But like that awakening touch from Guinevere, he finds himself compromised.

Although Lancelot learns his name and heritage at the Dolorous Guard, it takes some time before this is revealed to any members of Arthur's court as he continues to adventure in anonymity. He compartmentalizes his connection to the world and presses on. Gawain, a good knight and a very worldly one, has to pursue Lancelot to get the truth out. When Lancelot frees Gawain and his companions from their capture, he only tells them to go to the Dolorous Guard:

"you will find the king and my lady…thank them for being freed from prison, for you may be sure that it was their doing." (*Lancelot I*, 173) He does not know how to live amongst other knights as one of them, so he simply redirects the problem back towards the courtly world he imagines Gawain only cares for. Gawain continues begging to know his name, but Lancelot will not reveal anything; he will only be recognized as the White Knight. Lancelot's reticence to tell Gawain his newly acquired name seems strange in a world where a knight's personal honor is the most important part of one's identity. His recent achievements here would certainly bring him a lot of renown, but the glory is passed on to Arthur and Guinevere. Lancelot erases his own agency and identity because he comes from a world where personal ideals are subservient to the absolute ideal. All he knows comes from his sense of right and wrong and the Lady of the Lake's teachings. By dedicating this great achievement as a nameless knight to Guinevere, Lancelot is trying to fulfill the secrecy and the honor of courtly love, improving her honor while detaching himself from his. The only appropriate word for Lancelot's feeling for Lancelot the human being is shame. Lancelot is ashamed of his desire for Guinevere, which unquestionably motivates him, and he is ashamed of the honor he has won saving Gawain because he does not know how to exist in reality among others. This is a pincer attack on both of his hearts. It is one thing to be told that he must be a good gentleman to ladies and a fierce warrior among men as a child, but Lancelot is not prepared for what it means to live this. All he can do is retreat.

When Lancelot and Gawain encounter each other again, it is again moderated by a disguise. Lancelot has been injured in his adventures, and has to be carried around in a litter. This impediment to Lancelot's knight-errantry allows Gawain to catch up, who is seeking to honor his savior. And as Gawain gets close to Lancelot's entourage, asking questions and fraternizing with other knights, something surprising happens. In Gawain's presence, "[Lancelot] was suddenly

afraid of being recognized, and he covered himself," behind a sheet. (*Lancelot I* 180) Fear is the antithesis of knightly virtue. As Charny declares, "one should dread vile cowardice worse than death," which is not something Lancelot struggles with in battle. (Charny 129) Contrast this with the agonizing crossing of the Sword Bridge, where his idealized love for Guinevere "guided him, comforted and healed him," just as it does in all his adventures, and it becomes clear that Lancelot excels in the fantastic world of knightly encounters because of their unreality, while he fails in interpersonal and political encounters because of their reality. (Chretien 246) Places like the Dolorous Guard and the Sword Bridge are fantastic in their content and are highly ordered narrative events, where the high ideals of chivalry are easily executed. It is easy for Lancelot to be a great knight in these moments because everything is constructed to prove him so. Gawain's agency in his pursuit of Lancelot breaks the centralized, flowing, and isolated progression of Lancelot's adventures with personal interest.

Later, as the Red Knight, Lancelot participates in his first tournament. Interestingly, he actually fails to win here. The reason given in the text is because Lancelot has gone into the tournament with the disabling wound from earlier still half-healed. Gawain does not recognize Lancelot at first during the tournament, although his skill is acknowledged. It is only by the wound, the compromise of Lancelot's body, that he identifies the Red Knight as the White Knight. Again, Lancelot "can't risk being recognized," choosing to slip away in secret, even though Gawain has already put the two together. (*Lancelot I* 186) The failure of Lancelot's body to preserve his desire, in this case to remain anonymous, is yet another way in which, despite his ideological perfection, Lancelot is not quite at home in the world. Yet he still has to go compete in the tournament. Contradictions and balancing acts build and heighten in intensity as the

narrative progresses, and Lancelot can do nothing to stop himself from pushing on because his chivalric desire overwhelms all other emotions and reason.

An illustrative example of the difficulty these tensions create comes in the middle of *The Knight of the Cart*. Having disarmed an enemy knight, Lancelot offers a condition of mercy- he will spare this knight if he agrees to endure the humiliation of the cart, a device of social shame in the era.On one hand, the proud knight would rather die than ride the cart, which is Lancelot's ideal term for sparing him. On the other, Lancelot is compassionate, and would rather not kill. Out of nowhere, a girl comes along and tells Lancelot of the dishonor of this knight, and that she would like to see him dead. Chrétien de Troyes constructs this scene as an opposition between generosity and compassion, Lancelot "wishes to content them both…he is both generous and merciful." (Chrétien 242) To grant the girl's request would be generous of him, but not compassionate. To spare the knight would be compassionate but not generous to the girl. Only one of these great knightly traits can seemingly win out. But as the greatest knight, Lancelot cannot afford to compromise the ideals of chivalry. Instead, he defers the problem of the other knight's survival to the other knight's prowess by fighting him again, moving the conflict out of the world of thoughts and ideas and into reality. He does not introspect, he acts. As he gains experience in the world, he learns to manage chivalric contradiction, but never quite faces it.

In contrast to Lancelot, the great knight who is able to balance the social and savage necessities of knighthood, Meleagant is one of the story's great bad knights. His counter to Lancelot's heroism illustrates, in its opposition, the most important traits that differentiate Lancelot from the rest. Meleagant delivers a deceptive challenge to Arthur's court, applying cunning to undermine their sense of honor. He has no intention of fulfilling his end of the bargain, only seeing his own profit. Lying is a grievous sin in knightly culture because a knight's

word, his honor, is everything. All good knights are immersed in the pursuit of immaterial value and the possibility that Meleagant is lying genuinely does not seem to occur to them.

> "If at your court there is even one knight in whom you have faith enough to dare entrust the queen…I give my oath that I will await him there and will deliver all the prisoners who are captive in my land" (Chretién 208)

By toying with the senses of honor of Arthur and his knights, he is able to trick Arthur into letting Guinevere out of Camelot where she can be abducted. One could say that he only offers his oath, but in this court where the immaterial takes the lead over the material, he is offering everything. Kay is particularly affected, threatening to quit the court for good if he is not allowed to protect the queen. And although Meleagant quickly shows himself to be false, Lancelot sets out on this quest regardless, not stopping to consider any further deceptions, knowing that his love will guide him through. His trusting nature does occasionally land him in difficult situations throughout this adventure, but these never lead him to real harm. Lancelot's simplicity of heart lays a more straightforward path to his goals, while Meleagant's traitorousness leads to his undoing. The abuse of intelligence towards evil ends comes at the cost of "true and natural good sense," the transcendent spiritual knowledge more necessary in the physical business of adventuring. (Charny 149)

Few serious knights are lacking in strength, and Meleagant is no exception. Like Lancelot, Meleagant has no fear of combat; when he is shown fighting, or participating in other physical acts, he is undoubtedly one of the strongest. All else being equal, they are almost even. Physical weakness does not make a bad knight, because a weak knight cannot stay both for long. What does undermine him is his bad character: "Had he not been treasonous and disloyal, one could not have found a finer knight; but his wooden heart was utterly void of kindness and

compassion." (Chrétien 246) All of his deeds are selfish and violent, never pausing to consider the inner thoughts of others, which leaves him friendless. Lancelot's actions win him allies, who intervene at key moments to aid his quest. For example, the girl for whom Lancelot slays the knight before the Sword Bridge was actually Meleagant's sister, and Lancelot's generosity towards her is returned as she later helps him escape to finish Meleagant off. Although Lancelot succeeds in the quest Meleagant laid down, Meleagant will not fulfill his oath and return his prisoners. Naturally, the two must fight, and though their physical strength is evenly matched, only one has a selfless reason to win- "Love and mortal Hatred…made him so fierce and courageous" that Meleagant begins to fear Lancelot in combat. (Chrétien 253) The fervent desires of Lancelot's heart overcome his physical situation, and only the intervention of Guinevere and King Bademagu save Meleagant from being killed in this moment. Here, both sides of Lancelot's heart are working in unison, his love for Guinevere and his hate for his enemy together bringing his prowess to greater heights. But while Meleagant's selfishness, his diamond heart, is his weakness, Lancelot's compassionate, sensitive side becomes the point from which he can be brought low.

While encounters like the story of Meleagant test Lancelot's diamond heart, his ability to moderate his violence, Lancelot's encounters with ladies test his wax heart. Beyond Guinevere, Lancelot's encounters with ladies reveal further layers in matters of loyalty and honor. Since the chivalric code forbids violence against ladies, even antagonistic ones, Lancelot engages with them from his compassionate side. In one such instance during his adventures, Lancelot comes across a lodging hosted by a beautiful woman. Without Guinevere's boon of the magic ring, he is unable to discern the place's enchantments. It is filled with a great number of sexually charged scenes intended to tempt him, and the woman herself seems intent on seducing him, forcing him

to promise to sleep in the same bed as her. He resists every offer. Fortunately, this was only a test of his fortitude, but it also reveals his identity to this lady: "if any knight could accomplish what he had undertaken, then it would be Lancelot," as he remains the greatest. (*Lancelot IV* 201) This brief adventure is quite typical of Lancelot's experiences with ladies. He is taken, tempted, and resists the advances of his female host. The emphasis in these scenes is placed on the question of his identity as it is uncovered or interrogated.

When Lancelot wrongly slays a vengeful knight, he is confronted by a company of knights, led by the lady of Malehaut, who tells him that he has slain the son of the city's seneschal, and for this crime he must be punished. His surrendering words express remorse against the necessity of the slaying: "I am sorry, but I had to do it," which is true as far as the rules of knighthood are concerned, but the lady of Malehaut enforces another regime of behavior: "'Surrender!' she said. 'I want you to, and I advise you to.'" (*Lancelot I* 221) And so, because she asks him to, he follows her willingly to prison. Against the expected order of knights fighting and killing for honor, Lancelot's obligation to fight for honor and greatness is instantly canceled by the decree of this lady.

After some time in her cell, Lancelot hears that there is going to be a battle, and he wants to go, because it would increase his honor. The lady of Malehaut agrees, but adds: "on condition that you tell me your name," to which Lancelot must reply: "That I cannot do." (*Lancelot II* 229) Not even an offer of freedom and a sincere request from a lady can convince him to acquiesce. His stay in prison is not necessarily a challenge between his two sides, but a test of conviction. Here, he is in his usual state in relation to Guinevere- a knight-errant seeking to increase her honor through his deeds, and so he is able to use his rational mind to maintain his balance. The lady of Malehaut's holding of him illuminates the depths of his personal integrity against the

honor and freedom offered through this condition. This is how she knows that she can allow him to go out to battle, and he will return willingly to captivity. Finally, after many months holding him, the lady of Malehaut asks three questions of Lancelot, and he only needs to answer one to be freed. He needs to reveal either his name, the name of his love, or if he is a great knight. Answering any one of these, he thinks, will bring him some degree of shame. If he revealed his name, the wall between the warrior self and inner self would be threatened, and if he revealed Guinevere's name, she would be exposed to the threat of dishonor. So he opts to answer that which will preserve anonymity: "better I reveal my own shame than that of another…so be assured that I expect to fight even better than I ever did, if I'm ordered to do so." (*Lancelot II* 247) This statement is perhaps as close as Lancelot ever comes to bragging, carefully managed as it is. He knows the extent of his prowess, but the simplicity of his soul must remain intact through humility. For a modern reader, this entire episode can be extremely frustrating to read. Lancelot could easily lie about his name, or simply not have returned to captivity when he was released to fight. But such deceptions are unthinkable to a chivalrous knight, as understood through Meleagant. And because his captor is a woman, there is little he can do against her, as it is later said that "of all the knights in the world he was the one most unwilling to hurt a lady," no matter what that lady is doing to him. (*Lancelot III* 138) Constant service to women is an essential tenet of the chivalric code. This total adherence to this obligation even extends to Morgan, the main antagonist of the latter half of the Vulgate Cycle. Taken as a whole, Lancelot's conduct throughout this adventure shows a total, willing disregard for his material conditions in favor of his principles. The situations constructed by the lady of Malehaut all give him opportunities to compromise his ideals for immediate material gain, but this never crosses his

mind. Lancelot has gotten much better at handling himself in reality compared to his early adventures, but his underlying ideals are relatively unchanged.

Morgan has a strong interest in the nature of Lancelot's love, herself being devoid of it. Compared to the lady of Malehaut, or Lancelot's early encounters with Gawain and Galehaut, Morgan knows who Lancelot is from their first meeting, and her interest in him is a personal one. Morgan is all physical and direct, driven not by any high absolute ideals, but by petty things in the world around her. Shallow as she is, she instantly falls in love with him on account of his great beauty, and steals him away to try to wear him down and make him love her. While the lady of Malehaut tries to uncover his name to understand him, Morgan only wants to find out her rival: "You must tell me with whom you are in love," presumably so that she could bring harm to this woman. (*Lancelot III* 147) Furthermore, it is established that Morgan has a long-standing personal hatred of Guinevere, so when she discovers the truth through her own cunning, she becomes a serious threat. Though her lust and envy- the worldly emotions knights should never experience- lead to catastrophic consequences, Lancelot obeys her as faithfully as he does the lady of Malehaut in captivity, even following through with the same sort of brief, conditional freedom he is allowed. Morgan is probably the most potent antagonist in the larger Vulgate Cycle, and there is not a thing Lancelot can do about her.

Later, as a captive in Morgan's tower, we find Lancelot in a different state of altered consciousness. While thoughts of Guinevere sometimes lead him to dissociation and savagery, they can also take him to new heights of prowess outside of combat. His single-minded focus on her inspires him to start painting his cell with images recounting his adventures and affair with Guinevere, "and the paintings were as skillfully and well done as if he had practiced this trade all the days of his life." Even Morgan is forced to admit the depth of Guinevere's influence, that

Lancelot "never in his life would have been able to paint so well" had he not truly loved her. (*Lancelot V* 207) But she cannot attain any greater understanding in this scene. The force that animates Lancelot's skill is all idealistic, transcending his reasonable limits through powerful desire. Further in the Vulgate Cycle, Morgan will bring Arthur to this room, twisting Lancelot's love into evidence of a crime rather than a sincere expression, at last presenting Arthur with the concrete proof of the affair needed to indict the queen. The physical manifestation of his love, which had been distant and idealized up to this point becomes a serious problem because it brings two orders of being into confusion. This force that should remain, in the chivalric order, purely imaginary, or at least never visible, is now tied up in an object for the whole world to perceive. The intersections of reality and ideal become increasingly difficult for Lancelot himself to handle, best seen in his episodes of altered consciousness. When some great exterior force overwhelms the walls of his compartmentalized mind, he snaps out of the meek, moderate persona he always presents.

Throughout the prose *Lancelot*, the presence of or thoughts of Guinevere affect Lancelot on a deep emotional level more so than anything else he encounters. In one such instance, the effect is so strong that he enters a state of dissociation akin to a form of madness. The events that result demonstrate the varying forms of separation between the two sides of his divided heart.. Simply catching a glimpse of her, veiled, from afar, Lancelot "began to gaze at [Guinevere] so intensely that he utterly forgot everything else" (*Lancelot 1* 211). She is the heart of his worldly attachment and becomes the only thing he is aware of, an absolute existence made physical reality through his perception. He forgets all other things because the pursuit of an absolute ideal drives a knight through reality, and the identification of his ideal within the real physical presence of Guinevere forms an overwhelming, beautiful union of desire and perception. Reality

does not need to be overcome in Guinevere, she is already absolutely desirable. He is challenged by another knight, who is on his way to Camelot, to follow him, to see if he is bold enough to see the queen under his obvious state of infatuation. As Lancelot travels with this unnamed knight, he utterly loses his self-awareness, until he rides his horse all the way into a river. He is saved from drowning by Yvain, who does not recognize him, "believing that he was a man of no standing," as Lancelot has no signifiers of identity on his person. (*Lancelot I* 215) Not perceived as the great knight he is, he makes no attempt to resist capture by Daguenet the Fool, a witless and cowardly excuse for a knight. Lancelot's generous heart, the wax, is totally taken with Guinevere, and so situations of self-preservation and conduct among other knights are totally lost on him. Overpowered by love, the warrior Lancelot is unrecognizable to those of that world. However, when that warrior persona is directly challenged, he is able to defend himself. The nameless knight who drew him out to Camelot attacks him, demanding his horse and arms, and Lancelot handily defeats him. Adventuring further, he fights a pair of giants, who are allied against Arthur. They ask where Lancelot's loyalties lie in relation to the king, queen, and Camelot, and he replies: "By God, I love them!" (*Lancelot I* 218) This declaration marks the end of Lancelot's trance. He is not restored by pure chivalric ideals, but through his interpersonal relations. The reclamation of Guinevere as his lady for whom deeds of arms are done in this moment returns to Lancelot the meaning of his adventures, and so off again he goes with this stabilizing force. Clearly, something in him has changed since his first arrival to Arthur's court. His vision of Guinevere as the embodiment of all he is pursuing has rooted him in reality, though it also overwhelmed his senses. The completion affected in that moment was too great for his reason to balance, and a state of religious trance takes over. However, the scales of his soul are also tipped towards his violent, worldly diamond heart.

The first episode of madness as such in the Vulgate Cycle comes at the tail end of Part II. Unlike the dissociative yet focused lover's trance, this scene is one of total mania. It comes very shortly after Lancelot consummates his relationship with Guinevere.

> "His head was empty of thought, and a rage and a madness arose so violently in his head that no one could withstand him, and he had inflicted two or three wounds on every one of his companions." (*Lancelot II* 444-445)

Physical and emotional union is followed by physical separation leading to emotional distress. Just as his state of trance was centered on a singular vision and the ecstasy of the completion it brings, his madness is rooted in the trauma of separation. In his state of madness, we have seen Lancelot break most of the basic rules of chivalry. He has been violent towards his allies and to women in a state of wild savagery. The torturous isolation in the Saxon's prison has broken him down to a state below any of the other knights we've seen so far. Like the episode of the lover's trance, Lancelot has forgotten himself, but here he seems to have even forgotten his humanity. And even when he is freed, back among the company of his allies, his physical restoration is not enough to bring about his spiritual restoration. Without that which he has championed, Lancelot's spirit cannot reorient itself. So the first step towards his cure is the presence of Guinevere. Just as his first meeting with her was akin to a "sudden awakening", her return again shows her entrancing power over him. While no knight or medicine has been able to shake Lancelot out of his madness, Guinevere's words have an almost magical control over his emotional state. Even as he throws stones at the lady of Malehaut, an absolute violation of his gentle heart, "as soon as [Guinevere] ordered him to be calm, he no longer moved," reaching across the thorns of savagery, knowing the softness of the heart beneath. (*Lancelot II* 445) It is only through Guinevere, the nexus of ideal and real in Lancelot's mind, that his inner balance can

begin to be restored. Her presence and voice calms Lancelot, but he is still very much in the animal mode. His behavior around her is like a tamed dog, clearly loyal and obedient, coming to rest at the foot of her bed. Still, while Guinevere is his central motivator in deeds of arms, Lancelot needs to understand how his madness brings her grief for him to return.

> "When he heard her lamenting his feats of arms…he leapt up and saw…the shield that the maiden from the Lake had brought to the queen. …then turned to a round stone pillar and struck it so violently with the lance that the head was completely shattered" (*Lancelot II* 446)

Lancelot's full return to sanity only comes when he hears Guinevere lamenting the loss of his prowess. As we saw earlier, in the episode of the litter, Lancelot is totally unwilling to be perceived by others without his prowess. The social capital of a knight's skill is so great, and so important to him, that its loss is his shame. He cannot be Lancelot, the greatest knight, if he cannot fight as a knight, especially when it brings shame and sorrow to his lady. The act of smashing the lance is a physical assertion of the prowess and the honor he has dedicated to Guinevere, that he remains capable of these things, and that the meaning of love they carry remains.

Lancelot's final madness in the prose *Lancelot* comes after he is deceived into going to bed with King Pelles's daughter, the mother of Galahad. He is discovered by Guinevere, and subsequently banished from Camelot. Without the presence of Guinevere, and unable to bring her honor, he loses his sanity.

> "He wandered through the forest for three days, neither eating nor drinking, in the wildest places he knew, for he had no wish to be recognized by any man who might look for

him…He attacked everyone he met, man or woman, and harmed many people during this time." (*Lancelot VI*, 403)

Ripped from his embodied ideal, cast to the darkness of the world, Lancelot loses both his drive to pursue chivalry as well as his willingness to be recognized. The identity he has tentatively built through his questing again becomes a repulsive, shameful thing because it has lost its worldly anchor. He continues in this manner for several years, thought dead by the world. This savage state is even worse than the episode in the Saxon's prison, in deep spiritual isolation and a total loss of humanity, bringing low this greatest of knights. It is King Pelles's daughter who eventually finds him and brings him to be cured by the Holy Grail. Guinevere, the stabilizing force towards whom all Lancelot's knightly activities are dedicated, is shown to be a foundational component of chivalric behavior. There is no question of him finding another king to serve and lady to honor, because he has already found the highest of each. Great knights always seek out the highest and most powerful positions, and it is the pursuit of ever-increasing honor that stabilizes and guides their questing. Expulsion from any order is devastating on its own, and this moment is made that much worse because he sees nowhere else to go. It takes an act of God- through the Holy Grail, and one of the few moments of Christian-coded supernatural intervention in *Lancelot*- to restore him. Only the imposition of a highly external divine force can cure Lancelot because both his inner world and outer reality have failed him. The appearance of the Grail feels like a contrived plot maneuver to restore narrative order because without God's absolute will restoring Lancelot's mental order, there is no other position from which he can be made whole again, and his story would truly end there.

In the beginning of Part III, Queen Guinevere is accused of imposture, that she stole her name and rank from the "real" Guinevere, who has come to Arthur's court to challenge her.

Although Lancelot knows the deception of this impostor, he still has a choice. He can stand with his lord Arthur, who eventually proclaims the false Guinevere his queen, or with Guinevere, and be cast out of Arthur's court. This question of loyalty becomes, in time, Lancelot's final breaking point. His diamond heart, the ruthless warrior, owes its loyalty to King Arthur. Medieval kings were military commanders, and the strength of a kingdom comes in large part from the loyalty and unity of its fighting men. But Lancelot's wax heart, his love and his softness, belongs entirely to Guinevere. The split in his heart he always struggles to balance finally undoes him because it manifests itself as a physical split. The four-way strain between reality, ideal, gentleman, and warrior rips open the entirety of chivalry from the heart of Arthur's kingdom in the story of the death of Arthur. But the fall of chivalry must be explored in its own terms. To understand the profound tragedy of the death of Arthur, everything must be turned on its head.

The Impossible Dream: Don Quixote as Romance Hero

I can hear the philosophers protesting that it can only be misery to live in folly, illusion, deception and ignorance, but it isn't -it's human.

- Desiderius Erasmus

In 1605, an obscure, mediocre poet and playwright named Miguel de Cervantes published the first part of one of the greatest works of world literature: *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*, or *Don Quixote* for short. While the volume was an immediate success, it was not until a decade later that Cervantes concluded the adventures of the titular gentleman with *Don Quixote, Part Two*. He died shortly after. Between the two volumes, almost always published together, Cervantes builds up and tears down a hero as iconic as he is pathetic. Told in loosely connected episodes across a rustic Spanish landscape, *Don Quixote* set a new standard for storytelling, away from the idealistic romances it parodies towards modern realist fiction. Don Quixote finds himself caught between these two genres, striving in his madness for the purity of chivalry, but always hindered by the world's cruel emptiness.

> In a village of La Mancha, the name of which I have no desire to call to mind, there lived not long since one of those gentlemen that keep a lance in the lance-rack, an old buckler, a lean hack[1], and a greyhound for coursing[2]. (53)

The novel's opening line sets the stage with the ordinary nature of La Mancha. The village's namelessness emphasizes the dullness and smallness of this world. The particular area of La Mancha is one of the most desertlike, barren regions of Spain, the absolute inverse of Camelot's green glades and enchanted springs. There are no great castles, enchanted lakes, or wicked towers to note here, it is just a village like any other. What is of interest to us is this gentleman,

[1] Plain riding horse
[2] Hunting

but he is no more or less than any "one of those" gentlemen in any other village. He has totally conformed to his social station, but it is a deprived station. But between these most common elements, the shadow of medieval romance remains. The lance, the shield, and the horse, are all archetypal objects of knighthood, each once emblemizing an aspect of chivalric nobility. Only, in the passing of time, their meaning has been lost. The lance has been hung up, the shield rusted, the horse worn out. All the elements that would have been living, significant parts of the world in a medieval romance have dried up, leaving only empty husks. The ordinary village with its ordinary gentleman possesses remnants of something extraordinary, but it has been hollowed out, put away, forgotten. This is one of the novel's key underlying tensions, the mundane reality the text presents us with, and hints of the chivalric age seeming to poke through that layer. However, Don Quixote himself seems to be entirely belonging to that other realm.

Alonso Quexana, a lowly nobleman somewhere in southern Spain, lives a simple life. He is middle aged, frugal, and has nothing but time on his hands, which he spends reading chivalric romance novels. He has totally retreated from outer reality in favor of an idealized order that only exists in memory and imagination. In another time, a man of his standing would have been a respected knight, going to tournaments and on Crusade, dying valiantly in battle or giving counsel to other knights in his old age. But the curtain has closed on the Middle Ages. The order of knight-errantry is not in the cards for Quexana. The socioeconomic order of Europe has changed with the rise of the middle class, and warfare has shifted away from heavy cavalry. What remains, at least in Quexana's household, are nothing but forgotten fragments "for ages lying forgotten in a corner eaten with rust and covered with mildew," of no use and a far cry from Lancelot's shining silver armor. (54) Whoever might have the inclination to become a knight in Spain, 1605, to do good by the chivalric code, has nothing in the world to grab ahold

of. Alonso Quexana comes to us with no less knightly inclination than any knight of the Round Table, but his story is not to be in that genre.

With what money he has, he buys hundreds of chivalric romances, deeply in love with their stories and prose, and is shown "[lying] awake striving to understand them and worm the meaning out of them," trying to extract the deeper truths and messages of these books. (53) The excerpts of romance in the text and the discussions Quexana has with others about the meanings of these stories are rather shallow. He argues about which knight could best another, who was braver or more accomplished, agonizing over such passages as:

> The reason of the unreason with which my reason is afflicted so weakens my reason that with reason I murmur at your beauty… (53)

To the lay reader, Cervantes is using this excerpt to demonstrate the vacuity of chivalric romances. The overwrought prose of this excerpt can be read as emphasizing the detachment from reality typical of romances, wrapped up in its conception of love and beauty, casting common sense by the wayside. There seems to be little in these texts that could be applicable to real life, any insight offered or wisdom gained through them. If this is what inspires our hero, then he must be a ridiculous one. But Alonso Quexana takes these passages seriously, and if we pause to try to understand his sincere perspective, this excerpt becomes harder to mock. Cut down to plain English, the narrator of this passage is simply stating that he is behaving irrationally as a direct result of his love for some lady as a reasonable response to her beauty. Its construction is used to emphasize the speaker's rational irrationality, a nice sentiment if only the reader is willing to stay with it on its terms rather than dismissing it. That uncommon, old-fashioned gravitas Quexana places on the ideals and language of romance pulls him away from the narrative's real world of disillusion and emptiness into a place where that old lance and

shield on the wall have not lost their shine. He has lost himself in a place where right makes might, where there are monsters to be defeated and damsels to be rescued, and the code of ethical behavior is clear-cut. The bland, base world he lives in is so insulting to this ideal that a sane person cannot live in both. Quexana is so wrapped up in chivalric ideals that he departs the real world for what he sees as a better one, and so becomes Don Quixote. "Quixote" is Spanish for cuisse, thigh armor. In English, this name would sound something like "Sir Greaves" or "Lord Breastplate". It is important to differentiate the two in writing because they occupy two different roles in their world. Alonso Quexana is the person expected by the world, the common, aged country gentleman with all the modern habits and manners of his class, reliably known by his friends and family. But when he becomes Don Quixote, he becomes an unknowable madman from another time and space, a knight in a place where there are no knights any more, his thoughts and deeds in a language barely comprehensible to those around him. Though the two are in the same person, their ideological roots and social reception are so different that they must be referred to with their respective names.

> It so possessed his mind that the whole fabric of invention and fancy he read was true, that to him no history in the world had more reality in it. (54)

Lost in the stories of chivalric romance, he becomes convinced that they possess a truth beyond that which anything else can offer. Or, it might be better to say that he is taken by the spirit of these stories, as his turn is not a logical one but a spiritual one. Something in those passages offers something so compelling that they whisk away an ordinary gentleman from an ordinary town and endow him with this extraordinary perspective. Chivalric romance offers structure and beauty, things clearly absent from his modern world, and in that offer is a powerful ethos of being, one of meaning. The real histories of the real world lack rhetorical power, they offer less

to someone who yearns for meaning than romances. They are all somewhat dilapidated, worn-out things like the nag in his stable and the rusty lance on the wall. Quexana, who does possess that ardent yearning beyond what the world can offer, has something to attach himself to in the world of chivalric romance, so he rushes headlong into it.

Don Quixote is a character derived from the same cloth as Lancelot, rooted in the fanciful realm of high adventure and great love, transplanted into the real world. Though Quexana's commitment to living out this alternate history is absolute, his understanding of the more fundamental meaning of chivalric romance is imperfect. Whereas Lancelot was born into the chivalric code, into a world he has power over, Don Quixote has to reconstruct the chivalric code through imitation: "he went on stringing together these and other absurdities, imitating their language as well as he could," not speaking from an original place but regurgitating what he has read. (57) This places him in an uneasy position between the romantic and real world, wholly unoriginal in the former, but an incomprehensible genius in the latter. He takes all the elements of chivalric romance and incorporates them into his consciousness in a haphazard assemblage with virtue and adventure at the forefront of his thought, and all the facts of the world in the background, because the facts never kept Amadis or Orlando from their quests. Then again, Don Quixote is possessed by the idea that these romances are truthful. Learning from, and trying to replicate the deeds of great historical figures is not an uncommon notion at all. We quote Aristotle and Camus because their words ring true, Don Quixote is only different because his models seem absurd. He himself is a literary character, but his story is no less impactful to us.

As he travels the Spanish countryside, the low character of his surroundings do not go totally unacknowledged by Don Quixote. For all the inn-castles and windmill-giants he finds, his illusions are not impenetrable when he finds himself seriously confronted. Much of the novel's

first part is taken up by comedic scenes of Don Quixote inadvertently insulting random country folk and often getting thrashed for it. When interrogated by Sancho on the road for what he really means to do as a knight in light of all their misfortunes, Don Quixote replies with what is effectively his mission statement: “I was born in this our iron age to revive in it the golden,” the golden age being the imagined past of chivalric romance. (146) But how could he, the mad knight-wannabe, be able to sanely identify his age as the “iron” if we think he is entirely lost in the romantic world? The “Iron Age” represents the dull state of modernity, lacking that layer of significance found in romances through the fantastic past such stories always construct. Against this age, Don Quixote seeks a revival of the “Golden Age”, the high point of society depicted in literature where things in the world have intrinsic meaning through their roles in great stories. He tells stories of giants and enchanters that are not there, but perhaps these stories are to a degree for the benefit of those around him rather than genuine perception. His goal is to convince others of the reality of romance in the world, but he must be aware of that reality to want to improve it. We don’t really know what he perceives, only what he says he does. So when he shows this awareness of the world around him, we must acknowledge that he is not so far gone as we might think. Knight-errants only exist in the golden age, as the conditions of modernity are antithetical to their ideals. Don Quixote is definitely aware of the fact that he stands in opposition to the entire world, although the specific way in which he is apart is not clear to him. He is consciously a countercultural rebel, well aware that the order of knight-errantry is dead and out of fashion, and seeks to restore that lost honor through great deeds. The way in which this is carried out is of course mad, self-aggrandizing, deluded, and so on, but his end goal is actually quite noble. What he wants to restore is all the good and ideal terms of the worlds of chivalric romance: order, honor, a sense of purpose, and love. When prodded by his neighbor Pedro Alonso to

acknowledge that the country people around him are not princesses and dukes, that they do not belong to that elevated realm of myth and legend, and that he himself is one among them, Don Quixote's answer is surprising in its frankness.

> "I am not Don Rodrigo de Narvaez nor the Marquis of Mantua, but Pedro Alonso your neighbor, and that your worship is neither Baldwin nor Abindarraez, but the worthy gentleman Senor Quixada?" [3]
>
> "I know who I am," replied Don Quixote (70)

Pedro Alonso is convinced of his own ignobility, being a reasonable person. The suggestion that his life might have that certain level of significance Don Quixote sees is alien to him, and so he naturally rebuffs it. He is not speaking to a "Don", a Sir, but an ordinary "Senor". But Don Quixote's reply here is not so much a direct answer to the question, an admission at this fresh point in his madness that he is only "Senor Quixada", but a rejection of the position from which Pedro Alonso is addressing him. However his neighbor might regard himself, Don Quixote is absolutely assured of his own identity. The question totally flies over Don Quixote's head, and his affirmation that he knows who he is is more of a statement to the world. While those around him see this certainty as a condition of madness, within his mind he is in that rare state of being aligned with himself. This conviction represents a special degree of self-realization few characters, indeed few people, ever reach. The question is intended to disturb Don Quixote's imposition of romance values and meaning on his world, but he is set in his reality. The worldly truth would remove him from this confident, actualized state, but his mad truth is empowering and ennobling. He does not have to address Pedro Alonso's protest with a direct rebuttal because that would open his position to argument, and rhetorical games are not chivalric at all. In this

[3] Alonso Quexana's surname is spelled a number of different ways throughout, contributing to the unreliability of the narrator character "Cide Hamete Benengeli"

way, Don Quixote is in charge of his own narrative. At the same time, the space between these two lines does admit a possible degree of self-awareness to be read in Don Quixote. It may be that he has some notion of his former life, and his affirmative answer is an acceptance of this past that does not conflict with his present condition.

Before Don Quixote's madness, Sancho Panza was Alonso Quexana's servant. He is a simple peasant, with a wife and daughter who he stays in contact with throughout the novel. Short, round, and practical, Sancho is the realist, Cervantes's foil to his idealistic hero. Where Don Quixote sees castles and giants, Sancho is always there to call out the knight's absurdities with plain reality. From a comedic standpoint, Sancho is the "straight man", a down-to-earth commoner who plays off his master with a gullibility and gentle curiosity that allows Don Quixote to carry on his adventures at least somewhat grounded in reality. He offers witty, ironic commentary throughout their adventures, but is notably illiterate, persuaded to be the madman's squire by the promise that "an adventure might occur that might win him an island…and leave him governor of it." (80) His interest is therefore practical, economic, only enlivened by a sufficient degree of ignorance that lets him believe he might actually win an island. But this does not make him an idealist like Don Quixote. Though lacking his master's intellectual sophistication, he sees the world as it is- a steadfast realist. He has an open mind, an inclination to see what might happen on these adventures, but not so open that his brain has fallen out.

Or, when they are on adventures, Sancho shows himself inclined to believe Don Quixote's long harangues up until they clash with his immediate knowledge. For example, in the story of the shepherdess Marcela, in which Don Quixote goes to investigate the lover Chrysostom's death, as any knight would, he carries on dispensing speeches of knightly ethics and the virtues of Dulcinea to a passing traveler, as he does to everyone. To the traveler, Vivaldo,

and all those around, it is obvious how "exceedingly out of his wits" he is within a few minutes of meeting him. The juxtaposition makes for a genuinely funny scene for the external reader. But Sancho, who has been traveling with him, and knew him before his madness, "all that he felt any difficulty in believing was that about the fair Dulcinea del Toboso, because neither any such name nor any such princess had ever come to his knowledge though he lived so close to El Toboso." (107) His knowledge extends to what he directly knows through his senses and experience. Don Quixote wears armor and talks like a knight, therefore he is one in Sancho's perspective. A country inn is not a castle because it does not look like one. He is concerned with what is spatially near and logically simple. He lives near El Toboso, but has not heard of Dulcinea as he would have in Don Quixote's world, but Sancho's thought does not get so critical as to start connecting even these dots yet. Sancho does expect to win some kind of honor, convinced by Don Quixote's lofty pronouncements outside of the foolish situations he puts himself in. All told, the prospects excite him, they are "what [he is] waiting for; for all this, word for word, is in store for [Don Quixote]." (153) His knowledge about the world is obviously limited, but he has a great deal of hope in what might be beyond those limits. He is able to share in Don Quixote's expectations to some degree, only he is not so far gone as to see them quite fulfilled. The seeds of the same idealism that drove Don Quixote mad are definitely in Sancho, but he lacks the terms, learning, and depth of thought to awaken them. Although the gentleman's words and deeds are clearly unhinged, they awaken something in Sancho that he does not fully understand, and so he is easily swept up in the excitement of adventure, even in his myopia.

At the end of the first part, the pair returned to La Mancha, Sancho remarks to his wife that out of a hundred adventures, "ninety-nine will turn out cross and contrary," as his experience has shown, but that one which goes well makes those failures worth the expense: "it is a fine

thing to be on the lookout for what may happen." (345) While Don Quixote would see all of these adventures as worthy, Sancho's belief in that one-percent is enough to elevate him above anyone else he comes across. In that little bit of openness, Sancho and Don Quixote are united by a resilient optimism along their adventures in spite of their failures. The knight is guided by his mad vision, which Sancho adopts only insofar as he can see it in the world. They are both aware that reality and the future is unknowable, and adopt different ways of thinking about positive possibilities. For Don Quixote, the knight of romance, positive outcomes are absolute inevitabilities so long as he follows a logical narrative order. Sancho knows this order is illusory from his worldly point of view, but he is also ignorant to the full scope of the world, and so can always fill it with the best possibilities.

Don Quixote's most famous adventure is that of the windmill-giants. Externally, this scene is a comedic peak of the knight's madness being crushed by reality. Early in their adventures across the plains of La Mancha, the knight and his squire pass a row of the windmills, probably the imposing twelve windmills of Cerro Calderico. They seem as giants to Don Quixote, their sails as powerful arms threatening the peace. Perhaps this misidentification comes from the lack of such common things as windmills in romances, and so Don Quixote lacks the language to identify them as such. He is a great knight in a romance, and no knight ever came across a group of ordinary windmills. Therefore, something else must be afoot. Not a thing in any romance is ever ordinary, every detail leads to another adventure, every object is possessed of secret significance the hero must discover. The only thing a great, animated group of beings on a hill in a romance is an army of giants. And a knight is obligated to fight giants. From Don Quixote's perspective, this is a perfectly logical progression of thought; it could easily be

featured in any one of his novels, for he has nothing else to guide him. Sancho cries out again and again with the plain truth:

> Warning him that most certainly they were windmills…He, however, was so positive that they were giants that he neither heard the cries of Sancho, nor perceived, near as he was, what they were… (83)

The self-effacing reality of his senses is completely shut out. The things and people around him become imperceptible from within the ideal world of his delusion. Sancho can scream the obvious reality as loud as he likes, but the allure of imagined honor is too much for Don Quixote to resist. What *is*, an ordinary feature of the landscape, is mundane, common, devoid of inherent meaning. What *might be*, the great adventure of high romance, possesses the possibility of honor and worth, and is therefore incomparably more desirable to a knightly soul. Sense-perception in this scene is subordinate to Don Quixote's belief in his own terms and ideals. The worldly truth the senses are traditionally thought to access is distanced, as his firm conviction in the reality of the giants overrides that truth. Fantasy proves so much more compelling than reality, as in his ideological possession by romances rather than "true histories", that it does not waver even at the moment of physical conflict.

Though he commends himself "with all his heart to his lady Dulcinea," as all knights of romance do, a slight breeze stirs the sail of the first windmill and Don Quixote is thrown unceremoniously from his mount. (83) If love for a lady, which empowers so many great knights, is insufficient to grant our hero the strength to overcome an inanimate object, we are left to wonder what he might ever accomplish. However, within his mind, this is a moment of unparalleled courage and resilience. This is the novel's most famous comic moment because it represents Don Quixote at his furthest from reality. There are dozens of windmills across the

landscape, which he really seems to see as a threat, and he throws himself at them regardless of his personal safety. And although he is plainly defeated, he refuses to admit any loss or even acknowledge his injury.

> "And if I make no complaint of the pain it is because knights-errant are not permitted to complain of any wound, even though their bowels be coming out through it." (84)

In spite of this humiliation, Don Quixote sticks to the code of chivalry as he understands it from his novels. Again, despite his physical limitations and mundane surroundings, we see that his heart is in the right place. While no great enemy has been vanquished in this scene, his steadfast belief in his mission ultimately enables him to pick himself up and move on. For all he lacks in prowess, Don Quixote's chivalrous heart is shown to empower him against the world's hostilities. He suffers grievous bodily harm, often to the point where he is thought dead, but always shows remarkable resilience in service of his quest. Many of the blows he takes in his advanced age logically ought to cripple him, but they never really do. After all, since he believes that knights-errant are forbidden from succumbing to their wounds ingloriously, he cannot allow himself to come to such a fate.

In the first part of *Don Quixote*, the Don is completely unknown within his world, aside from those that knew Alonso Quexana. As he carries on his adventures, those that he encounters on the road are not always quick to understand his state of mind. Those that do sometimes toy with him, but there are a few that see the wisdom in his madness. While the narrator admits that the content of most of his long, rambling speeches to country folk "might very well have been spared" from the narrative, a humorous dig at romance monologue, the fundamental substance of his words and deeds shows complex, delicate navigation between the facts of reality and idealistic fiction. (97)

When Don Quixote encounters the mundanity of the world head on in a way he cannot deny, the difference between his expectations and reality is often chalked up to the work of the magician "Friston". For example, having left an inn (thought to be a castle) and roaming the plains, Don Quixote populates the barren landscape with imaginary scenes of great adventures from his novels. As he illustrates squadrons of Scythians and Numidians, Sancho looks around from time to time just in case there is something of interest anywhere. Between them occurs the following exchange:

> "Senor, devil take it if there's a sign of any man you talk of, knight or giant, in the whole thing; maybe it's all enchantment [...]"
>
> "How canst thou say that [...] dost thou not hear the neighing of the steeds, the braying of the trumpets, the roll of the drums?...The fear thou art in, Sancho…prevents thee from seeing or hearing correctly" (133)

To Sancho, if there is any perception-distorting enchantment, it is of course upon Don Quixote. Illiterate and pastoral as he is, he probably has some room for supernatural belief in his worldview, but he is rooted enough in reality to know he couldn't be so mistaken. He is certain in the evidence of his senses, knowing that if he saw giants and armies on the plain, he would be mad or enchanted through his common sense. But for Don Quixote, Sancho's inability to see as he does is a mark of fear, a quite natural reaction for anyone but a knight in a romance. Such side characters are often so one-dimensional that perhaps Don Quixote can not imagine Sancho feeling any other way before the vast, terrifying scenes he envisions. As in the windmill scene, there are no ordinary flocks of sheep in romances, so as a romance hero, what seems to be one common thing is in fact something exciting and worthy. And so, thinking a flock of sheep is a group of enemy knights, he charges into another slapstick scene. The common world for Don

Quixote is the illusion, while the romantic world is the true world, obscured by an enchantment only he can see through. When the world fails to live up to his expectation, when the enchantment proves to be ironclad, he has no choice but to accept that the object of the enchantment is forever changed into something mundane. Each time he comes into physical contact with the absence of his ideals, he defers this disappointment onto the character of Friston, the agent of this tarnishing. This pattern allows him to continue on his adventures, constructing a villain to chase who will necessarily confront him at every turn.

Later, in the Sierra Morena, a mountainous region more befitting a romance, when Sancho admits that he is beginning to suspect (just now!) that Don Quixote's tales of chivalry and promises of glory might be lies, the knight angrily replies thus:

> "Thou hast never found out that all things belonging to knights-errant seem to be illusions and nonsense and ravings, and to always go by contraries? And not because it really is so, but because there is always a swarm of enchanters in attendance upon us that change and alter everything with us." (177-178)

All things of knight-errantry seem to be nonsense? This might be the truest thing, at least according to the novel's world, that Don Quixote has said so far. He is aware that he is perceived as a raving madman, that everything he says and does gives the impression of nonsense. And if his advice to Sancho is to go by the contrary of what he perceives, it follows that at least some of the time, Don Quixote is putting his own perception through this process of inversion. This moment is extremely significant in understanding Don Quixote's madness because it reveals the logic by which he operates, and it is such logical processes that we readers generally associate with higher-level thinking instead of irrational madness. It seems obvious that some degree of Don Quixote's mental state has been consciously constructed at some point. Ascribing this

tension to all knights only further complicates his position. If he is suggesting that all chivalric adventures have to deal with illusions and problems of perception, this is obviously untrue, as he would have known as an avid reader of romance. Rather, it may be that this line refers to the fantastical nature of romances themselves, as he does not read them as fiction, but as real history. To the unsophisticated reader, he suggests, these stories seem absurd, but their truth is evident to a true knight. He is not discussing the content of texts, but their reception. And it is true that the root of the romance genre is in medieval histories like the *Historia regum Britanniae* which purported to tell real events. To Don Quixote, who believes all these stories to be true, places other people's lack of belief in these stories on the evil "enchanters", who act like medieval demons, clouding one's perception of the ideal romantic world he sees with a mundane facade. Sancho must take a leap of faith, to take these banal illusions and invert them with their "contraries" from the ideal world to see as Don Quixote does. But he is not equipped to make that leap, in large part because he is illiterate and so cannot first learn the truths of chivalric romances.

Later, Don Quixote deals with his reception in the world when he faces down a circus lion face-to face, hoping to prove his valor and bravery. While the lion itself is shown to be uninterested in the old knight's challenge, bravery and foolhardiness are never such distinct traits. As Don Diego de Miranda, another country gentleman who has been following and observing Don Quixote for some time at this point in the story, contemplates the nature of this madness, Don Quixote preempts any comment Don Diego might make:

> "No doubt, [Don Diego], you set me down in your mind as a fool and a madman, and it would be no wonder if you did, for my deeds do not argue anything else." (433)

Don Quixote's awareness that he is often perceived as a madman stands out because as readers, we are trained to think that anyone who calls himself mad cannot possibly be so. If he was completely lost in the romantic world, he would imagine himself always received with the same warmth and awe as any Lancelot. But here he illustrates that he knows his deeds in the "Iron Age" appear, more than anything else, to be foolish and mad. He does not wait for Don Diego to make this comment, rather anticipating it with a prepared counter, twisting the seemingly mad deed as a result of preferring to be too "rash and daring" than "timid and cowardly," turning the terms of the adventure into a question of knightly virtue rather than sanity. (434) Don Quixote performs the balancing act of reality and idealism through quick-witted rhetoric that draws those around him into the chivalric dream, making them contend with ideals unfamiliar in the common world. The shock of this phrasing is enough to convince Don Diego that if nothing else, chivalry is indeed alive in Don Quixote's heart. The extent of Don Quixote's madness is essentially dependent on the idea Cervantes wants to communicate in the narrative. When he needs to be a fool, he sees the windmill giants, when he needs to be foiled and move on, the enchanter Friston renders his accomplishment moot, and when he needs to make an ideological point, he is able to discuss the roots of his madness as though he were his own psychologist.

Any way his adventures go, he is able to emotionally rebound by remaining in his romantic dream world. This is made a point of ironic humor in the adventure of the Knight of the Grove. Samson Carrasco, Alonso Quexana's neighbor, attempts to challenge Don Quixote on his own terms by masquerading as a knight himself, and Tom Cecial his squire. By taking on the appearance of an enemy knight, he challenges Don Quixote to a duel, an irresistible romance trope, on the condition that if Carrasco wins, Don Quixote must put his arms down and be a peasant shepherd for a year. However, Carrasco cannot win from the outset, as he is attempting

to trade in a language he does not truly understand. He has entered Don Quixote's world, wherein Don Quixote is the story's indefatigable hero. So when the duel occurs, he struggles to arm himself while Don Quixote charges recklessly at him, with "unparalleled fury…where [Carrasco] stood digging his horse up to buttons," the one knowing the importance and energy of the knightly duel, the other a pale imitator. (418) Though he is a strong, able young man, he is only acting the part of knight towards a different end, whereas the battered old gentleman is fully immersed in the immediate path of chivalry. Tom Cecial highlights this contrast with his later comment to the dazed Carrasco: "Don Quixote a madman, and we sane; he goes off laughing, safe and sound, and you are left sore and sorry!" (421) The ideals of romance form a mental suit of armor that Carrasco's half-hearted wits can hardly penetrate. His attempt to engage a madman in the realm of madness is itself ridiculous, and it is specifically his ulterior motives that undermine him. Don Quixote has no such desires, he is entirely sincere and open. Even when Carrasco's identity as the Knight of Mirrors is revealed, Don Quixote simply shrugs and says that this brave knight has been transformed into Carrasco through Friston's enchantments. Their intent to bring him back to reality ends in their defeat, while Don Quixote goes merrily on in his continued madness, having had a real adventure. There is something to be said for the absolute mental resilience of Don Quixote's madness, the thoroughness of his noble desires.

The second part of *Don Quixote* was published after an imitation sequel, a notoriously crude replica of the first part's comedic scenes by a never-identified writer under the name Avellanada. Published in 1615, Cervantes's second part was not planned from the start, but provided a necessary conclusion to the knight's adventures. The shift in tone towards the second half, and especially towards the end, comes from Cervantes's frustration with his imitator Avellanada. Don Quixote gradually falls out of his chivalric ideals, while Sancho begins to

assume them. Where the imitator left his work open-ended, allowing another to pick up the story for the adventures to continue forever, Cervantes needed to firmly cut off that possibility. Within the novel's world, the first part of the novel is published and disseminated across Spain, as it was in real life. Don Quixote now possesses a degree of honor and fame sought by real knights, and he becomes a more significant figure in his world. People know who he is, they are more willing to entertain his stories, and he gains access to the upper classes as a sort of jester. The landscape he traverses becomes a broader one, and the adventures he finds along the way become actually more extraordinary. However, this fame allows the real world to assert itself before Don Quixote in a way his madness struggles to brush aside.

Don Quixote decides to stand in the middle of a country road and challenge anyone who would deny the beauty of a group of shepherdesses, who seem as ladies in disguise to him. Excited, Sancho makes a careless comment as to whether anyone can call his master a madman for this. But in response, Don Quixote becomes enraged, and in his anger those around him begin to "feel doubtful whether they ought to regard him as a madman or a rational being," as his reaction to Sancho's words is as though he were a sane man being insulted. (617-618) This indignance seems to reveal a hint of budding insecurity in the knight; the roots of his reality are beginning to crumble. When he goes out into the road, he offers his challenge twice, but goes unheard. Instead, he is nearly trampled by a herd of fierce bulls, left "scared" by this response the world throws at him. He is described as being stopped from pursuing this adventure by weariness, and leaves the scene "more in humiliation than contentment." (618) Don Quixote is clearly losing steam. The will to carry on seen in his first adventures is gone, replaced with surprising bitterness and anger at the world. There are no enchantments or monsters invoked here, only a rather pathetic old man shouting out a challenge no one cares to answer. For all his

adventures and renown, the novel's world does not revolve around him. Although his chivalric pursuit feels worthy, Don Quixote does not realize that no matter how well-intentioned he is, he is ultimately powerless to force the world to react to his intent. His flaw is in expectation, not in intention or action. The order and reward promised by his books of chivalry fail to manifest, and as he slows down, this reality becomes harder and harder to ignore.

In another instance, he overhears two men, Don Jeronimo and Don Juan, reading out loud Avellanada's spurious sequel (621). The scene itself is obviously intended to be another dig against that book on Cervantes's part, but the way in which Don Quixote sees his and Sancho's name abused has a rather chilling undertone if taken entirely in the novel's world. There are particularly stinging remarks against Dulcinea, as he is represented "cured of his love for [her]," and if "she married, had been brought to bed, or was she with child," all rather coarse and vulgar details that probably never occur to Don Quixote. Meanwhile, Sancho is distorted into a simple glutton and drunkard (622-623). For all his noble strivings, he sees himself received by the world in a text that only shows him as an utter madman. While the two readers acknowledge the worthiness of his character in the first part, the second part is plainly false and insulting. To think that all the strivings represented so far could have been dashed into the worst sort of lie, the lie that tarnishes rather than the lie that ennobles, is an upsetting possible fate.

The story's ending is abrupt, and rather disappointing to readers who side with Don Quixote in his quest against the world's corruption. His final renunciation of all books of chivalry is an emotional blow as Sancho implores him to take up his arms once again and sally forth on a never-ending quest. Pleading, Sancho invokes the same ideas of value Don Quixote tried to deliver to La Mancha:

> "The foolishest thing a man can do in this life is to let himself die without rhyme or reason…let us take to the fields in shepherd's trim as we agreed. Perhaps behind some bush we shall find the lady Dulcinea disenchanted, as fine as fine can be." (p.680)

He has moved beyond simple, immediate thinking into an idealistic system of values that allows him to see beyond the ordinary. The terms of meaning within life and death do not belong to realist La Mancha, but to Don Quixote's golden age. Sancho expresses the chivalric belief it is foolish to die without cause, in bed of old age instead of on an adventure in the world, that an individual's actions have value in their ability to shape the world, even when those actions are as Sisyphean as trying to be a knight-errant. Sancho's desire to sally forth again with the suggestion of the possibility of Dulcinea's return reflects his long-standing general belief in the possibilities of living fully as Don Quixote does, amplified to full idealism with his reference to Dulcinea. She will not be found "enchanted", as Sancho previously referred to Don Quixote's mad visions, but "disenchanted", brought back from her false state of ordinariness into her true state of nobility. This marks his ultimate quixotization, a belief in the primacy of the ideal realm from which impressions of reality are derived, in contrast to his initial superficial gaze. Sancho further demonstrates his assumption of the idealist mantle as he continues: "you must have seen in your books of chivalry that it is a common thing for knights to upset one another, and for him who is conquered to-day to be conqueror to-morrow." (p.680) Despite his persistent illiteracy, Sancho defers to the old wisdom of the books of chivalry in his last attempt to stir Don Quixote from disillusion. If he has not heard this somewhere along their adventures, this line suggests that Sancho is now tapped into the same ideal world, the source of Don Quixote and his giants, as his master. This is not one of his pieces of country wit, but a fitting, proverb-like reference to literature, one such as Don Quixote might have applied picking himself up after an adventure. In

this respect, in spite of his final renunciation of books of chivalry, Don Quixote has successfully brought about a revival of chivalry in the modern world within Sancho. More broadly, the passing of these ideals from a nobleman to a peasant represents the possibility for this new form of chivalry to be more equitable in the bridging of the class divide. While chivalric romance only concerned itself with the deeds of noble knights and princesses, the ending of *Don Quixote* presents in Sancho a reformed notion of this code of conduct, one that can merge high ideals with knowledge of reality. But something in Sancho's invocation of this proverbial language falls flat. Like Don Quixote and all the other knights, it is beginning to wear itself out. Something new must begin, and to this end Cervantes must deal a death blow to chivalry.

The story's most popular modern retelling, *The Man of La Mancha*, ends with a rousing reprise of "The Impossible Dream" as the dying Alonso Quixana is grotesquely lifted up and encouraged to resort to Don Quixote again by Sancho and the reformed Aldonza. But to ask for the madness to be carried on forever would perhaps be the cruelest delusion. The cold sanity of the world always exists in the novel, and to put it away forever would be disingenuous. Old men die, stories end. This ending does not detract from any of Don Quixote's achievements, but reinforces the fact that he accomplished them in a realistic world. While some of the finer details of Don Quixote's death are "regretted by most of Cervantes' readers" in their "commonplace cynicism," it is firm in its finality. (682n5) As "Cide Hamete" warns us:

> If perchance thou shouldst come to know him, thou shalt warn to leave at rest where they lie the weary mouldering bones of Don Quixote, and not to attempt to carry him off…making him rise from the grave where in reality and truth he lies stretched at full length… (682)

While this is a direct attack on Avellanada, this also shows how Cervantes wants his hero to be remembered. Those of us who have come to know Don Quixote are warned not to disturb his "weary" bones, to try to make them rise and dance again in fantasy, because he has at last found truth in death. The adventures have been fulfilled, run through, exhausted, and they have been granted a peaceful conclusion. We may still know Don Quixote by his famous adventures, but there can be no more. The nobility and humor remain, but the conclusion is in reality. Don Quixote's afterlife is therefore one of both worlds, his legend is written, and in them his dreams of gallantry may still touch us, while his origin and end in sanity preserves the gentleman's dignity in a truthful relationship to his world.

The only question that remains is whether or not Don Quixote was ever *quite* mad. Certainly a sane man would not charge headlong to a windmill or make an enemy of the Holy Brotherhood during the Inquisition. But underlying these ridiculous acts is a reasonable ideal. It would be a better, more just world if everything was endowed with a basic level of purpose, if the line between good and evil was obvious, if every man carried within himself a nobility of spirit and sense of worth. And throughout his story, Don Quixote directly addresses the social realities around him, even if only to deny their power over him. He is aware of the world in his dealings with others, but their realities cannot tarnish his. There is an unmistakable dignity in everything Don Quixote does, as he knows his acts will live on in their stories. To deride his pursuit of meaning makes us feel somewhat ridiculous in comparison. Like Samson Carrasco, we might find the madman goes off quite content and laughing, and we remain sore and sorry in our sanity.

Might and Right: Idealist Politics in *The Once and Future King*

The massive, industrialized atrocities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries dealt a death blow to the order of the old world. In a few short decades, modernity, like a poison gas, crushed the ancient European monarchies; the social orders and traditions that seemed to keep the world spinning since the Renaissance collapsed. And in the ideological vacuum following the Great War, the war to end all wars, a new and terrifying political system reared its head: fascism. Born in British India in 1906, Terence Hanbury White, a gentle, eccentric teacher and writer lived through the advent and fall of these worst extremes of humanity. Synthesizing his education at Cambridge, where he was introduced to Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, his love of the natural world, and his fears for humanity, he produced in four parts over twenty years his magnum opus, *The Once and Future King*. Taking all the elements of traditional Arthuriana, updating and complicating them for a modern audience, White's great novel breathes new life into the chivalric tradition with a wit and sincere pathos that highlights the need for humanist idealism in a moral Dark Age.

The first part of White's novel, *The Sword in the Stone*, was completed in 1938 as an independent book. While it is the most light-hearted and humorous book of the quartet, the overarching philosophical tenets of the final novel are present. Dealing with Arthur's youth under the tutelage of Merlyn, this book envisions an "enlightened system of education" that might lead its students toward the moral wisdom identified with the Golden Age of Camelot, which White terms Arthur's "Gramarye", an ancient word that can mean enchantment or learning. (Warner 99) Although the Second World War had not yet broken out, the scars of the First lingered over the European continent, and the tension of the coming conflict was felt

everywhere. Being the child of a colonized land and of a broken household, White's intimate experience with violence led him to think seriously about the nature and origins of warfare. The intended audience of this book was the child survivors of the coming conflict, that they might never let themselves be "bossed into war by their governments." (Warner 100)

White's Arthur is introduced to us as the "Wart", an unfortunate, simple-minded squire at the bottom of his local social hierarchy. Special attention is paid to the unfair way he is treated in contrast to his brother, Kay, to emphasize the unenlightened state of man in this era. Though the two are equally unruly, Kay is never punished, "because when Kay grew older he would be Sir Kay, the master of the estate," and all his punishments are taken out on the Wart. (3) This is a clearly unfair world, where a few hold all the power and privilege, while the rest answer for their sins. Worse still, those in power are shown to be incapable of putting their power towards productive ends. There are kings in castles and knights on quests like we might see in any chivalric romance, but their deeds ring hollow. Even the boys' governess, expected to be in charge of their education "had been in a lunatic asylum for three years," filling a social role but without the expected spiritual completion to justify her position in that role. (3) The world we come into with the Wart is not governed by sense and order, but by the blind following of authority, like children at play. Like Kay, his father, Sir Ector is never held to account for his actions, and often ends up getting in the way of serious work. For example, whenever the haymaking season rolls around, then an important group task for the survival of the peasantry, Sir Ector is shown to intrude on their work, "getting in the way of his assistants, who did the real work." (6) Although he is the most important person on the estate, he conducts himself like any schoolyard bully, with no greater aspirations than preserving his power for his son to inherit. These social facts are communicated in a light-hearted way, but White's tone in this first chapter

is very effective in emphasizing the ridiculousness of running a society this way. Neither Kay nor Sir Ector, nor any of the other characters floating around the castle of Arthur's youth are shown to be bad, cruel people, they just don't know any better. Without the means to think critically or an ideological goal to aim for, they languish in this unrefined state, and the Wart seems to be growing up no different. He has knightly aspirations in his heart, but the knights around him are not quite role models.

Having gotten lost in the woods, he encounters King Pellinore, on his famous hunt for the Questing Beast. Obviously intrigued by the King's "moonlit, all silver, too beautiful to describe" armor, and the nature of his quest, he timidly tries to learn something about questing with a few simple questions. But when King Pellinore opens his mouth, he is clearly no more sophisticated than anyone else in his time.

> "What does the Questing Beast look like?"
>
> "Ah, we call it the Beast Glatisant, you know,' replied the monarch, assuming a learned air and beginning to speak quite volubly. 'Now the Beast Glatisant, or, as we say in English, the Questing Beast…A dreadful monster,' repeated the King. 'It is the Beast Glatisant." (17)

And so on he rambles. King Pellinore clearly has no real idea of the significance of his pursuit of this monster, if there is any. He is only in search of it because he knows that only a Pellinore can catch it. There does not seem to be any honor or stakes associated with the Questing Beast, but King Pellinore does not know anything else but to pursue it. This hunt for the dreadful Beast Glatisant represents an abundance of energy within knights to go out and accomplish great deeds, but this energy is misdirected. Where we expect a great, noble knight pursuing this monster for the benefit of some lady or to avenge some fallen comrade, we find confusion. In this unrefined

society, there is no sense of higher purpose, of ends to which great energies should be directed. Men like Sir Ector and King Pellinore, and Sir Grummore Grummursum later, have various forms of power over others and the world, collectively referred to as "Might", but their power is unorganized, so it is either wasted entirely or used to put down others. These characters are all quite simple-minded, and easily harm those of lower standing like the Wart out of sheer shortsightedness, but it bears repeating that they are not shown to be inherently sadistic, they do not necessarily want to cause harm. Everything is cast in a sharply comedic light, like children at play, because the folly of these knights would otherwise be too tragic for this moment in the story's maturation. The young Wart has some conception of the wrongness of this society, but he lacks any other framework of thought. That is, until Merlyn enters the story.

White's Merlyn is really the version of Merlin all modern readers associate with the name. While older versions of the character look more like a sidelined, generic Wise Man figure, this Merlyn is a philosophical eccentric in a starry robe with fantastic powers, cursed to live backwards in time. As the Wart's tutor, with access to past and future, and knowledge of the natural world outside the narrow views of the age, he is able to grant the Wart a broader perspective of the world, which allows the Wart to escape his limited frame of being. Merlyn represents the introduction of "Right", an ethical code of action and critical thinking, into the unrefined world of Might, best summed up in his iconic line: "The best thing for being sad…is to learn something." (176) Faced with the meaninglessness and tragedy of the world, Merlyn guides the Wart neither to passively accept the world as it is, nor to despair, but to understand it, and through understanding reform it. With Merlyn's conception of "Right" guiding him, Arthur's next encounter with King Pellinore further reveals the flaws of the society of unguided Might.

While his first meeting with Pellinore showed the aimlessness of Might in the world, this next meeting reveals the futility and harm done when Might is directed against itself in human conflict. As any chivalric knights ought to, King Pellinore and Sir Grummore decide to have a joust, although, as in the first encounter, the act is completely hollow. Though the Wart still anticipates the glory and excitement of the joust, wanting to be a knight himself, he regrets his "bloodthirstiness" as soon as the fight actually begins, ashamed of his romantic expectations. (58) The reality of armed combat, even a friendly joust, and the possibility of death appears for the first time. Although this is a scene glorified time and again in the culture of Might, there is something brutal and distasteful at the bottom of it, appealing to our worst animal instincts, instincts Arthur himself must later overcome in his ascent.

The ultimate absurdity of Might's self-annihilation in this scene is brought to the forefront through White's comic narrative tone, as the great champion knight and the questing monarch are written like a Monty Python sketch; when Sir Grummore's helmet comes loose, and he is exposed to real danger, "they stood up and fumbled together with the helm, hissing 'No, I'm not'-'Yes, you are,' until it was safely on," continuing to whack away at each other until they butt heads and pass out. (63) Again, where knightly nobility is expected, bumbling fools in armor are found. No problem has been solved by this display, these characters are not even enemies, and in the end an enormous amount of energy is expended. The two combatants only do this for mutual self-satisfaction, despite the real threat of injury or death. Only when the Wart learns to think can he make sense of the disparity between that high expectation and the absurd reality. At the same time, his fate is to be a political leader, not a great thinker. Although Merlyn takes him to this joust to try to dissuade his inclination towards the ideals of raw Might, insulted by the conflation of prowess with education, this ultimately fails.

"If I were to be made a knight….I should pray to God to let me encounter all the evil in the world…"

"...Suppose they did not let you stand against all the evil in the world?"

"I could ask." (174-175)

Despite Merlyn's best efforts, the Wart is not a sophisticated thinker. Though it is his simplicity of thought that allows him to overlook the rampant contradictions of the world in service of Right, he is still a child of the culture of Might, wrapped up in the glorious images of its empty chivalry. Despite what he has seen between Pellinore and Sir Grummore, his belief in the ability of a knight to challenge evil remains strong. His naivete is touching, it would be nice if all we had to do to stand up against evil was to ask permission, but the world hardly seems that simple. Yet this is precisely what King Arthur accomplishes during his reign, creating a straightforward way of challenging evil for all. He cannot throw off the necessity of Might in the medieval age, he must instead work out a compromise between Right and Might. As the story progresses, the Wart comes to understand that as King, he will be in the unique position of being able to shape culture by granting his people the ideals of his chivalry, an order that synthesizes both. His assumption of social power, the climactic drawing of the sword from the stone, is marked by a reconciliation of opposites, demonstrating Arthur's ability to unite the world in service of his ideal, though he remains blind to this power.

Ignorant of the sword's prophecy, the Wart assumes it to be "some sort of war memorial," one which no one will begrudge him ruining in service of Kay's need for a sword. (196) Although the sword is a symbol of conflict, the Wart sees in this sword something signifying the end of conflict. His initial reaction to this object which will be a great symbol of his reign is to associate it with peace, a weapon with no point to pierce flesh merging into a symbol of creation,

the anvil. For all his established familiarity with chivalric omens and signs, nothing about the sword reads as such, his only intent is to help Kay. Even as supernatural lights and music swarm the air, and the animal friends of his lessons emerge to encourage him, in his mind, this moment is about helping someone else, the sword only useful insofar as it can accomplish that end. The Wart's transformation to Arthur is the "climactic moment that all of Merlyn's transformations of the Wart were leading up to, and in this moment the opposites are reconciled," the beginning of his kingship is not a selfish act of Might, of the imposition of his will against the world, but of Right in service to others. (Smith 42) Though Arthur will be a conqueror who uses Might for a personal ideal, this first act symbolically intertwines his fate with the possibility of peace and just action. The sword is an instrument of Might, but in Arthur's hands, it can also become an instrument of Right. Even as his conscious mind is blind to the importance of this moment, his pleas to the sword prophesize the end contained in this beginning: "I must cry your mercy and take you for a better cause." (197) Though he is only aware of Kay's need, his words resonate with the sword's true significance. The "better cause" that will guide Arthur's order of chivalry is already within him, an urge to do Right that he does not yet understand but is an integral part of his character. In this gesture, the whole of Arthur's struggle throughout the novel is contained, a profound desire contained within the simplest and kindest of hearts. The response effected in the natural world by his struggle to pull the sword adds further depth to this initial moment of reconciliation. As one bird says, "Come along, Homo sapiens, for all we humble friends of yours are waiting here to cheer." (198) The child Arthur is a representative of all humanity, his unification of Might and Right in the sword representing a significant step in human moral evolution. The guiding force of the natural world in this novel is not a background narrative effect as in medieval romance, but is given voice especially in this first book. The humanity

embodied by Arthur in this moment is not in conflict with reality or ignoring it for a convenient ideal, but an equal participant in shaping it.

It has often been remarked that *The Once and Future King* is a novel that matures with its protagonist. The genre of each of its constituent books shifts "from a children's story to a *bildungsroman*, to a romance, to a tragedy, to a philosophical treatise," as Arthur grows older and T.H. White himself experiences the advent and end of the Second World War. (Lupack 111) The tonal shift of the four books allows White to progressively construct, deconstruct, and ultimately lead readers to seek the reconstruction of Arthurian political idealism. The overall effect of this structure grants the novel a sense of philosophical completion as it deals with every stage of Arthur's life. *The Sword in the Stone* was written in anticipation of the coming conflict, for its eventual end. Though White's youth was colored by the effects of WWI, he had not yet lived through global conflict, and so like his hero, had not yet come to terms with the full absurdity of war through mature eyes. The next two books of the novel, *The Queen of Air and Darkness* and *The Ill-Made Knight* were written during the war from the Irish countryside, in 1939 and 1940, respectively, where White could safely think through the problems of war and Might in relation to the natural world he surrounded himself with, much like his own Merlyn. White's experience of the war lends these two books a mounting sense of urgency and tragedy as the familiar arc of the Camelot cycle emerges, and Arthur is forced to come to terms with these same political problems.

Although Arthur begins his reign with the same short-sighted view of combat as King Pellinore, talking about the fun and glory of battle as he conquers England, Merlyn remains to bring the young monarch down to Earth. He still sees warfare in terms of the entertaining, but useless joust between King Pellinore and Sir Grummursum, even though he is fighting real wars

with real casualties, because he is still in many ways a child. These early days of his reign are pivotal in determining what sort of ruler he will be, because as a king and a young man, Arthur must decide how he will think about and interact with the world; he must form his own, independent philosophy. Moral traps and ethical problems abound in this transitory period, both in Arthur and in the subjects he is supposed to lead. Coming back triumphant from a battle, wrapped up in the personal glory he has won and the rush of conquest, enthralled by Might, Merlyn interrupts his pride with a simple question:

> "It was a jolly battle, and I won it myself, and it was fun."...
>
> "How many of your kerns were killed?"...
>
> "I don't remember." (217)

Just as Arthur is beginning to think of himself as a singular Great Man, Merlyn's question reminds him of the pain his reign has already caused. He still thinks that his possession of Might alone makes him Right. His kerns, the peasant foot soldiers who died in his name, seem from his position simply weak, and thus their death is hardly a matter of consideration, much less a tragedy. There can be no critical moral thought in a society that always privileges individual power over collective interest. Arthur has to be guided to realize that his Might does not make him Right, but even Merlyn knows that Might is a fact of the world. In his establishment of the Round Table, chivalry, all the good things we remember him for, White is always sure to point out that he is "up to the elbows in blood" as a conqueror. (361) Arthur is explicitly said to commit atrocities, yet there is something about his ideals that makes them seem permissible.

The problem he now faces, the same problem underlying all Arthurian romances, is "to think out a new political philosophy which will reconcile the opposites of Might and Right," a problem only Arthur is positioned to solve as the living emblem of chivalry, a code always

defined by its reconciliatory power. (Smith 44) Although Arthur came into a world with the trappings of chivalric literature, all the knights and quests he encountered were devoid of any ideology outside Might. The code of chivalry as we remember it was not yet developed to guide the age. Arthur has to invent it.

However, although Arthur has come to this realization, as a ruler, he must find a way to guide others towards a new kind of thinking. One of the knights closest to him, Sir Kay, understands Arthur's ideal in terms of the means of Might, rather than the ends of Right.

> "Well, if the human beings were too wicked or too stupid to accept his way, he might have to force it on them, in their own interests, by the sword."...
>
> "There was just such a man when I was young- an Austrian who invented a new way of life and convinced himself that he was the chap to make it work." (261)

Merlyn, as a teacher, is interested in making ideas available for people to freely accept or reject, not imposing them on others. But the unfortunate truth is that knights are not in the business of education. Kay believes in Arthur's ideals insofar as he thinks they are good, and Arthur is the right person to enforce them, and it seems sensible to him to force them upon people without regard for the cost. Merlyn's allusion to the ongoing atrocities of the Third Reich is perhaps his most startling anachronism, especially considering the publication year, but he is right to say that the forceful imposition of any ideal is undesirable. Tragic as it is, Kay is just the kind of person who could get swept up in a fascist movement, as are many of the knights introduced in this second book. The futility and plain wrongness of attempting to force any sense of Right on people through Might is clear to us, but Kay does not yet have the system of critical thought to understand this. Critical thinking, the gift of Merlyn, proves to be the vital bridge from the old way of life to the new.

Once Merlyn gets Arthur thinking along this path, questioning the tradition of Might as Right, Arthur is able to start constructing his chivalric ideal on his own. In spite of his basically simple-minded nature and the traditional, ridgid power structures around him, with a great expenditure of mental energy Arthur arrives "at the idea of Might for Right; and Merlin says 'the first few words of the Nunc Dimittis' (248) because his pupil has begun to think for himself and what he thinks is noble." (Lupack 106) Merlyn's reference to this particular canticle marks the end of his duty as Arthur's tutor, having seen that the boy has internalized his teachings. The reversal of terms in Arthur's words, Might for Right rather than Might as Right, is a simple yet profound revelation that brings the two opposing forces of his world together towards a better end. If he must use Might, it is better applied towards goodness and justice than in its own self-interest. Furthermore, he knows how to make this new order a socially compelling one, so that it will not have to be imposed on people, they will choose to live under it of their own free will.

> "I will institute a sort of order of chivalry….We shall have to make it a great honour, you see, and make it fashionable and all that. Everybody must want to be in. And then I shall make the oath of the order that Might is only to be used for Right." (241)

Arthur's line of reasoning and diction are in very simple terms, but the simplicity of his character is used to reinforce the obviousness and clarity of his solution. The central idea of his order of chivalry- "Might for Right" is such a basic and compelling idea that it becomes obvious why so many people begin to follow him. If he can make it fashionable to do good and treat people well, then the inequalities he suffered in his childhood and the wastefulness of war might be somewhat ameliorated. Convincing people to do good is really not a radical idea at all, the people just need some motivation, in this case it takes the form of knightly honor. The vainglorious aspiration

towards knighthood present in the first book is, under this system, inflated with meaning through a code of ethics. Unlike the fascist ethics of White's age that impose their ends on others, the Hitlerian drive of totalitarian conquest that frightens Merlyn, Arthur grants his subjects something to aspire to, a general humanitarian ideal rather than a nationalist fantasy. He does not want to rule through fear and unrefined violence, but by creating a hopeful ideal for the betterment of the human species, not putting people down but raising them up to a higher standard. Though the symbols of knighthood- swords, lances, armor, shields- are instruments of force, Arthur's political ideal of Might for Right offers a way through which force can be applied against itself, creating a distinction between good and evil. Merlyn has taught him that Might is basically wrong, but Arthur feels himself positioned to use it wisely, "using the Might instead of fighting against it, and turning a bad thing into a good." (241) This part of human nature exists, one side of a duality between savage instincts and civilized aspirations, and Arthur believes he can tame it through justice, law, and honor. His code of chivalry, that oath he references, becomes an organized system for this transformation, using an appeal to our moral nature to bring violence to order. The profound effect on his subjects the unification of these opposing forces has is first embodied by the change in King Pellinore.

As the overarching plot progresses, King Pellinore finally finds himself in a position to accomplish his quest and kill the Beast Glatisant. Though Arthur himself does not directly intervene in this subplot, the effects of his new way of thinking are felt throughout. Pellinore's friends, Sir Grummore and Sir Palomides, seek to dispel his melancholy by dressing themselves as the Questing Beast and reawakening his desire for questing. Their actions mirror Merlyn's teachings to Arthur as they go through the process of learning to imitate the beast, a pseudo-animal transformation animated by their desire to help their friend. Just as Arthur learned

the nature of Right by exploring the world outside of himself, the project of these two knights unconsciously mirrors his education because Arthur is king, his experiences and deeds reflected in his subjects for better or for worse. However, despite these important efforts, Pellinore himself can no longer pursue the quest- he has fallen in love.

> "I mean, what is the good of this animal to me? I have not married it, have I? So why am I chasing it all the time? It doesn't seem logical." (272)

This is the first appearance of serious, romantic love in the novel. Where our earlier encounters with Pellinore show him possessed by futile Might for Might, his love has disillusioned him of Might entirely. When his thoughts are directed towards Piggy of Flanders, rather than the Questing Beast, his thinking about Might becomes startlingly clear and rational. His questioning of the logic of the quest, and his ultimate decision to let the Beast live in the book of Arthur's ascent represents a startling shift from his behavior in the first book of the novel. Under the rising system of Might for Right, Pellinore can no longer continue his quest because it is not Right or sensible, leaving him to fall in love, and eventually come to happiness. His willing rejection of Might after nearly two decades of pursuing the beast in favor of a constructive relationship with Piggy is a microcosm of Merlyn's hope for humanity, that we will make peace with the world and come to reason, eventually following the logic of Right for Right. Pellinore's marriage shows the possibility of this end, but the story of Arthur is ultimately a tragic one.

The process of Arthur's establishment of his kingdom and order "effects a union of the opposites in the last chapters of the book...the elaborately wrought marriage of King Pellinore and Piggy of Flanders" representing the ideal's end in this new beginning, but it is synchronized with "the seduction of Arthur by Morgause," the profane mirror to the former. (Smith 43) Arthur seeks to reconcile the oppositions of the world through his order of chivalry, but this

unanticipated element forms a part of his undoing because some elements simply cannot be unified. The union of Pellinore and Piggy is a classic comic ending, marking a high point of the success of Arthur's ideals, but at the same time two other unions are forming- the one between Arthur and Morgause, and also between Merlyn and Nimue. From the moment of Arthur and Morgause's union, at the novel's midpoint, "the rhythm of comedy modulates towards tragedy," marking the end of the strain of youthful innocence pervading the first two books and the beginning of tragedy in Mordred's conception. (Smith 45) In the vein of Aristotelian tragedy, Mordred's arrival at Camelot is "sin coming home to roost." (308) For White, this union is the core of the Arthurian tragedy, and inextricable from it. Arthur's innocence of his relation to Mordred is not enough to stop the force of Morgause's cunning, indeed it is as necessary to his rise as to his fall. His innocence and simplicity allow him to keep his high ideals in sight, as they blot out all the ways he is deceived by those around him, particularly by Lancelot.

The third book of the novel, *The Ill-Made Knight*, introduces the peak and downfall of chivalry, Sir Lancelot. But in contrast to the dreamy diamond-and-wax hero of the Vulgate tradition, White's Lancelot struggles with a schism between his chivalric principles and his savage nature. He is a deeply flawed character whose greatness is derived from the overcoming of his flaws through self-discipline. From his introduction as a child in King Ban of Benwick's court, we are shown the internal strife and emptiness this schism creates in Lancelot.

> "The boy thought there was something wrong with him. All through his life-even when he was a great man with the world at his feet-he was to feel this gap: something at the bottom of his heart of which he was aware, and ashamed, but which he did not understand." (311)

While the medieval version of Lancelot is always defined by his internal and external completeness, save for his fatal flaw in his love for Guinevere, White's "Lance" comes to us full of doubt, self-loathing, and insecurity. The space of the gap between ideals and reality becomes the locus of pain for Lancelot, rather than one dominating the other at any given point. Where Arthur is the great joiner of opposites as the "patron saint of chivalry", Lancelot becomes his foil as the one who suffers at the acute point of contradiction. (539) Far as he may go in moderating his two sides, they are ultimately inescapable facts. The existential lack that dominates the first chapter of the book of Lancelot reveals a perfectly human character, neither all one thing nor another, and terrified of the resulting sense of incompleteness. This is principally represented in his appearance, said to be "as ugly as a [monster] in the King's menagerie." (313) Lancelot is humanized by his interior fear of himself, then dehumanized by increasingly striking details. A mounting abyss is created between Lancelot and the high summit of Right put forth by Merlyn's teachings. His inner self is shrouded in feelings of shame and isolation, and his outer self is a violent, ugly beast. All he really excels at, as far as the world is concerned, is Might.

To restrain his Might, his great ability to do harm, Lancelot forces himself to abide by certain principles. Through the order he imposes on himself, guided by the chivalric ideals of Arthur, he is able to become the greatest of knights.

> His Word was valuable to him not only because he was good, but also because he was bad. It is the bad people who need to have principles to restrain them. For one thing, he liked to hurt people. (335)

Unlike the bumbling kings and knights-errant of Arthur's youth, Lancelot is dangerous; explicitly sadistic. This combined with his legendary prowess and his feelings about himself could make him a great conqueror in the age of Might, but all these marks against Lancelot are

upended simply by his desire to do good. He is said to be "in love" with Arthur because Arthur's chivalry offers a way out of despair. (312) His Word allows him to follow the path of Might for Right; he tames his savage side through a moral code. He is the greatest knight not because he is born that way, as in the medieval romances, but because he has the moral fortitude to overcome his weaknesses through the potency of his Word. On a conceptual level, the justice, mercy, and love of peace crystalized in Arthur's reign are not mere talking points or impotent and unpopular ideas, but blazing beacons for which Lancelot, who has every reason and ability to do bad, pursues and achieves goodness- at least for a moment.

Having gone through all the quests and great deeds he is famous for, in love with Guinevere and a part of Arthur's court, Lancelot still feels incomplete near the end of his book, twenty years later. Because he was deceived into sleeping with Elaine, he feels corrupted. Without his virginity, he cannot work a miracle, which would have given him a sense of divine redemption. The problem is that everyone expects him to do so. Sir Urre of Hungary arrives at Arthur's court with seven cursed wounds, open and bleeding until "the best knight in the world had tended them." (517) For all he has done, Lancelot feels himself a fraud, anticipating his inability to cure these wounds and thus being exposed for the beast he is.

> The people outside are waiting for you to do this miracle because you have traded on their belief that your heart was pure- and now, with treachery and adultery and murder wringing the heart like a cloth, you are to go out into the sunlight for the test of honor. (518)

Lancelot's dialogue with himself in this scene is striking because all these accusations he levels against himself are true. His deeds alone are those of a traitor, an adulterer, and a murderer. From a purely objective standpoint, Lancelot is guilty; his hands are stained with blood and sin. Yet

like the expectant crowd, it is impossible to believe in his guilt. In spite of everything that has occurred and will occur, we know he will be able to perform the healing miracle. By all the traditional logic of Christian miracles, Lancelot's deeds ought to place his soul firmly outside of the chosen few. He is a sadist, a monster, a traitor to his lord with full knowledge of all the wickedness inside him. The truth of being the greatest knight encompasses the high principles of chivalry as well as the grim facts of medieval warfare, guided by a basic inclination towards violence, an inclination that Right can only hope to keep in check. White never shies away from the most gruesome details of Lancelot's quests, but somehow here, after all those things are done, only Lancelot doubts himself. But it is from within his doubt and guilt that the kernel of redemption lies.

> "I don't want glory, but please can you save our honesty? And if you will heal this knight for the knight's sake, please do." (519)

For all the bad things about him, in his mind and in his deeds, Lancelot's deep desire to do good for the sake of others, to channel his Might for Right, allows him to perform the miracle. While all worldly signs show him the way to evil, Lancelot is in a constant internal struggle to do Right. In the granting of the miracle, he is shown, with all the certainty of the divine, that he is pure of heart. The gap in his heart is mended as "the generosity of God brings him back momentarily to the ethic of his childhood," to that time of innocence when all he knew was a desire to do good represented in his love for Arthur. (Lupack 107) Even as the greater tragedy of the Arthur story mounts in the background, and explodes into full-on collapse in the next and final book, the struggle for Right fought by all the central characters is proven to be a worthy one as Lancelot is at last unified with his ideal self, the self he alone has been blind to in Arthur's court. Perhaps it is at this moment that the dream of chivalry is fully realized. While Arthur and his subjects are

aware of Lancelot's two sides, they always celebrate his virtues and forgive his sins. Only Lancelot has to live with the acute pain of being between the two in his position as the paragon and destroyer of chivalry. But in this one miraculous moment, the burdens of worldly expectation are lifted, and he is returned to a state of innocence in which nothing matters except his desire to do Right, just as Arthur was able to pull the sword from the stone in innocence and selflessness.

Although the schemes of Mordred and the Orkney brothers gradually tear down the fragile peace Arthur has built in the final book, *The Candle in the Wind*, our last glimpses of Lancelot reveal how his internalization of the significance of the miracle has turned him into the embodiment of Arthur's political ideal. Although all the central characters have aged, and the age of chivalry is in its sundown, White turns the reader's vision to see Lancelot for what he is: "now that you could see him clearly, [he] was an erect refinement of humanity- a fanatic for human responsibility." (549) We are called to inhabit this space with a direct address, placing us spatially and spiritually beside Lancelot. He is of the same human substance as us, refined not by his Might or internal strife, but by the zealous humanitarianism of chivalric Right. The principles and order he felt he had to impose upon himself to temper his bad side now seem to be coming from within, rather than from without. This inversion represents the broader belief throughout the novel that human nature is basically good, and all the bad we do or feel originates in the world, and thus can be overcome. The order of chivalry Arthur creates, and the systems of civil law he begins to develop near the novel's end are means of guiding society as a whole towards overcoming this worldly evil. In the novel's world, Lancelot is the living embodiment of the truth of this ideal. However, while Arthur and his reign seek to unify opposites for social good, Mordred and his followers bring these opposites into contradiction for their selfish ends.

Mordred does not begin his destruction of the Arthurian world through direct violence, but by using the systems of Right against themselves. He and his followers, the "Thrashers" are direct Nazi figures, "in black…their aims some kind of nationalism…his badge of a scarlet fist," spreading like a plague across the kingdom. (601) This mirroring of modern history in the medieval world maintains the novel's thematic relevance while also revealing the critical flaw in Arthur's ideal- it depends on all actors acting in good faith. By starting with the assumption that people are basically good, it becomes difficult to identify the treachery of evil. Lancelot's evil acts were forgiven because he had a pure heart, but sometimes there are no such psychological twists. Mordred, as far as anyone can tell, is irredeemable on account of being raised by Morgause. His closest followers, the four Orkney brothers, are knights of Arthur's court who believe in Right for Might, but Mordred, like any fascist leader, takes advantage of their inability to think critically to appropriate this ideal for his own ends. Specifically, just like Hitler, Mordred uses a liberal justice system to attain power. Lupack neatly condenses this process:

> When the King is confronted with an accusation and his entire system of law and justice depends on his condemning those he loves, he can no longer look the other way. Mordred, like all true scoundrels, uses against the one he would destroy that person's own goodness. (Lupack 110)

Just as the fragile governments of the post-WWI period were subverted from the inside, Arthur's high ideals exhaust themselves from all the contradictions needed to bring them into reality, embodied by the incestuous relationship between Arthur and Mordred, and between Lancelot and Guinevere. The security of Lancelot and Guinevere's romance, and Arthur's honor by extension, has been entirely dependent on Arthur choosing to look the other way. He wants his subjects to believe in the respectability and impartiality of his law, but his love for the two makes

him act against the very law he is supposed to stand for. Mordred disrupts this tension by bringing evidence of the affair to Arthur, who is then forced to act, and the paradoxically stable trinity at the heart of the Matter of Britain is broken. Tragically, the same "human responsibility" Lancelot has come to embody, the faith and trust he has allowed himself to extend to others under Arthur's ideals, lead him to believe that "Arthur would never do a thing like that," that Arthur would not put his ideals over his loved ones as he does. (568) Again, as at the point of Mordred's conception, we see this phrase "my sins are coming home to roost," used by Arthur to represent this knot at the core of chivalry. (436) Everything is bound up in everything else, and it is this circle that becomes the focus of the meditations of the novel's conclusion. The insular class element of chivalry becomes explicitly problematic because it is incestuous, like historical monarchies. Mordred seeks to continue the pattern of centralized, self-directed violence by murdering his father and marrying Guinevere like a perverse Oedipus eager to see the ruin he could bring. Nothing could have prepared Arthur for this.

When the political ideal of chivalry is revealed to be unstable, Arthur's spirit seems to be totally exhausted. Reflecting on all the struggles and contradictions he has worked through in his life, he feels the full magnitude of what he is fighting, as though "he had been struggling all the time to dam a flood, which, whenever he had checked it, had broken through at a new place." (637) There are simply too many contradictions for this one way of life to sustain itself, too many questions for this simple-hearted Wart to answer- whether humanity is fundamentally good or wicked, how the sins of the past can be kept from the present, the problems of inequality, fear, and intolerance. Arthur's struggle to dam this flood is an essential moral battle against the world he was born into, but he is only one man. We see him no longer in the role of distant figurehead that he gradually assumed over the course of the novel, but again as a frustrated but hopeful

individual. With the table broken, his closest relations turned against him, and his country at war, he begins to doubt himself for the first time since childhood. The questions and problems of humanity that have popped up throughout the novel become front and center as Arthur questions if his life's work has been an attempt at grafting on goodness, morality, and reason onto an animal, or if he has been attempting to uncover human decency from the monstrous beings the world shapes us into. All the ideals of chivalric romance are at stake, "chivalry and justice became a child's illusions, if the stock on which he had tried to graft them was to be the Thrasher, was to be *Homo ferox* instead of *Homo sapiens*." (638) Arthur is dealing with the same line of thinking as Lancelot had in his youth, but extended to the entire human race. If chivalry and justice are impositions on a ferocious animal, they will always be futile, foolish movements against an unstoppable tide. The ease with which so many knights he thought to be good allied themselves with Mordred, and how fragile his inner court proved in the face of evil could certainly be read as evidence in favor of this uncomfortable truth. But the essence of chivalry is always a rebellion against the facts of the world: never what is, but what may be. Beaten down but not quite defeated, there is a "tincture of grandness in simplicity," an invincible core in Arthur that empowers him to keep fighting, even when there is all reason to give up.

His last act in White's narrative is to ensure his ideals are carried on to future generations, that they might return if carefully guarded in the right hands.

> "Thomas, my idea of those knights was a sort of candle, like these ones here. I have carried it for many years with a hand to shield it from the wind. It has flickered often. I am giving you the candle now- you won't let it go out?" (645)

That child, represented as Arthur's last knight, is Thomas of Warwick- who would become Sir Thomas Malory, the author of the *Morte D'Arthur* that inspired White. The act of storytelling, of

communicating the legend of King Arthur for future generations to learn from, is a vital part of the solution for the contradictions of human nature the chivalric tradition deals with. In the act of transference, "art and culture, embodied in the young Tom Malory, become crucial so that one is not always starting anew," and the values and lessons of Arthur's life can be carried forth to enlighten the future. (Lupack 112) Unlike Mordred, who uses past sins to unravel present peace, Arthur's effort is to unite these two key parts of human experience, "past and present are brought together in the calm of Arthur's reconciliation," with hope for the future as he goes forth to meet his fate. (Smith 50) By ensuring the survival of chivalry for future generations, he becomes, as Malory wrote, *Rex quondam, Rexque futurus*, the Once and Future King. Arthur's Messianic return is a significant element of the general Arthurian mythos in a religious and cultural sense, but White's identification of Arthur with the unique brand of political idealism constructed throughout the narrative transforms Arthur's mythic return into something with concrete meaning. His status as Once and Future King represents the ultimate reconciliation of opposites, and the book ends with "The Beginning" rather than "The End", signifying that the narrative end of Arthur's story is only a precursor to our own assumption of the ideals of chivalry. Through the transference of ideals, Arthur's chivalry suddenly becomes not just a piece of a mythic past, but something that could exist in the present and future moment. This is the end of the romance focus on something that *may be* over what *is*, and the creation of something that *has been*, and may be *again.*

The Knight Against History

The idea of a chivalric romance is detached from all real space and time. We find no Lancelots in the close scrutinizing of medieval records, no discontented gentlemen picking up swords to fight evil in suburbia, and Arthur himself looks to be no more than a 20th-century shadow cast upon the 14th century, a 14th upon the 12th, a 12th upon the 7th, and so until all you have is a little scribble of Welsh poetry and a mound of dubious stones in Cornwall. Any historical search for a legendary knightly quest inevitably brings the researcher to petty, disappointing land grabs and holy wars. Yet the impact of the worlds of chivalric romance remains potent as ever in modern culture.

The absence of specific historical and material footing plays a significant role in the genre's timelessness. The space of the knight's adventure is always some vague past. Camelot cannot be found on any map, just as the mad inner world of Don Quixote is a jumble of figures and tropes from the full range of romances. Yet in the idealized past of romance, there is never scrutiny on the conditions leading to the knight's departure towards the fantastic. The narrative world is taken as is from the first page, and all movement is towards the future. The ambiguity of a romance setting gives the reader open, imaginative license to interpret their personal relation to it. There are no cultural bounds, no appeals to nationalism, no difficult historical facts to grapple with. The knight's pursuit within the abstracted past sustains an equally abstracted future, where the mental landscapes of chivalry may take on physical form. His immediate reality is a transitory state. Whatever dire straits he finds himself in at any given moment are subordinate to transcendent, idealized past memory and future hope. The sincerity of the knight's belief in this movement empowers his deeds of arms because it places him outside and above reality.

The knight's turning from the real conditions of the present world towards the possibilities of the past and future constitutes a full-scale revolt. Lancelot, Don Quixote, and Arthur are under constant attack from the barren landscape of the world. Their stories are fated to end in death and tragedy. Even when all the forces of the fantastic conspire to aid them in their quests, they are fallible, fragile human beings. But the struggle and death of the individual knight is never an absolute end. Like Sancho Panza's sudden burst of luminous belief as Don Quixote dies, the chivalric struggle against the absurd nature of the world can never be crushed by any real thing- it does not belong to the real. Rather, it is deferred to others, specifically to the reader. In the medieval era, the structures and tenets of the chivalric code are always found first in romance, and later in practice. While the precise interactions between historical knights and romances are hard to concisely pin down, literary depictions of chivalry always seem to appear in anticipation of historical chivalry. Even as the practice of military knighthood fell out of practicality, many courts instituted symbolic orders of chivalry that live on to this day. The mythic past constructed in romance became integral parts of the cultural past in kingdoms where chivalry bloomed. In its relation to real practices, chivalric romance looks like one of those rare artistic movements that informed its world rather than reacting to it. The very distant pasts of England, France, Germany, Rome, and many other countries are saturated in these stories to the point that the historicity of Camelot, for instance, becomes irrelevant.

Speaking of Camelot, it so happens that shortly after the Kennedy assassination, Jackie Kennedy went to great lengths to associate her late husband's administration with Arthur's legendary court as represented in the popular musical *Camelot* which itself was inspired by T. H. White's novel. In interviews, she would quote the musical's end:

> "Don't let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief, shining moment that was known as Camelot. There'll be great presidents again… but there will never be another Camelot." [4]

Even in modernity, the tropes and symbols of chivalric romance retained their mythic potency. The reality of the Kennedy administration was politically divisive, and the Kennedy family itself was torn by JFK's serial adultery. But Jackie Kennedy's story of "Camelot" supplanted even such a recent past with a more sympathetic and positive memory. The past as it was fades in light of the past that ought to have been, so that the element of greatness can exist again in the future that ought to be.

All this is to say that the commonplace complaint- "Chivalry is dead!"- ought to be thrown out. Chivalry is not a thing that can be killed; it is a literary ideal outside our mortal life. Knights-errant of romance belong to its domain, their appearance in the worlds of literature only illusory manifestations descended from the ideal world to instruct, and to the ideal world they always return. The stuff of all literature is the halfway place between the dreams of art and the pages in our hands. But the fervent pursuits of knight-errantry reach out from the immaterial world with an accusatory sword against the entire world. The world is never, we feel, as it ought to be. The gap between our expectations and reality is absurd and intolerable. The heights of chivalric romance invite the space for us to change the world with the belief that the world may yet be set right by no rational cause but spiritual conviction. Overcoming all contradiction and inhibition, the knight embraces the absurdity of his position and sallies forth in peace.

[4] https://www.historyhit.com/inside-the-myth-what-was-kennedys-camelot/

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