Stories of grandeur have captivated human imagination for centuries. In the modern age, the desire for large-scale adventure is satisfied with superheroes battling on cinema screens. Arthurian literature, the ancient precursor to these contemporary superhero myths, taps into the same fervour for magnified action, creating and destroying knights and ladies in a rigorous exploration of the limits of human capability. One of Camelot's grandest knights is Lancelot du Lake, who appears in both Chretien de Troyes' *Lancelot, The Knight of the Cart*, and in *The Quest of the Holy Grail*. Both these tales rely on the premise of Lancelot as a heroic figure, but where one story focuses on the construction of this narrative, the other is concerned with disassembling it. The comparison of these texts therefore leads us to the question: is there a solid, perceivable Lancelot beneath all the shining armour?

King Arthur's court is well-staffed by knights, yet none of them command the same weight as Lancelot. In *The Knight of the Cart*, he is physically unmatched. He lifts the lid of a tombstone 'without the slightest trouble, more easily than ten men would do' (de Troyes 26). His strength is defined relative to that of his peers, and he proves himself the champion in this competition. Lancelot also excels in direct conflict with his peers – he '(does) so well that he discomfit(s) all whom he (meets)' in a fight for the captive people of his kingdom (31). Heroism is a socially-defined characteristic, and so to be a hero-figure requires some manner of public performance. Lancelot's physical prowess allows him to receive approval and renown, thereby satisfying the base requirement to construct him as a heroic character. To bolster this characterization, *The Knight of the Cart* allows glimpses into Lancelot's moral code and thought patterns. He repeatedly feels 'greatly ashamed in his heart' (15) when he does not display his skills in battle to their best advantage, suggesting a deep-rooted drive for exceptionality, and a protectiveness towards his social standing. When challenged to a fight by another knight, he states he 'would rather fight than be compelled to do what is wrong'

(31); this commitment to honour provides the opportunity for him to make a display of his physical superiority. It also provides him with a moral background: the reader connects Lancelot's heroic mindset to his acts of prowess, thus creating a narrative wherein his displays of power are not the products of chance, but rather the outward manifestations of an ethically wholesome inner life. The final touch to the construction of a heroic Lancelot is the spiritual element woven through his narrative. Lancelot possesses a ring which dispels 'the power of enchantment' (31); this mystical item reflects the supernatural aid given to him, and consequently reflects the extraordinary nature of his story. When he makes his displays of power, he is recognised by the captive people of Logres as the figure who will 'deliver (them) all from durance and misery' (32), which suggests that his adventures, and resultant victories, were fated to occur. Thus, by developing Lancelot through the trifecta of body, mind, and soul, *The Knight of the Cart* illuminates him as a singular heroic figure. There is a delight in constructing this character who surpasses all around him; it satisfies the desire to explore the limits of human ability, to make extraordinary demands of a character and witness them fulfilled. The construction of a heroic Lancelot reflects the intrusion of grandeur into the realm of the ordinary, and provides a relief from the cycles of mundanity which characterize day-to-day life.

The Quest of the Holy Grail uses Lancelot's heroism as a springing-board, and so it mirrors the elements of heroic characterization seen in *The Knight of the Cart*. For instance, in *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, Lancelot is the 'best knight in the world' (Comfort 11) – again, he is seated at the height of a social hierarchy. Yet the texts diverge in terms of the function that Lancelot plays within them. *The Knight of the Cart* uses Lancelot's heroism to create the expectation of his triumph, and then fulfils this expectation to allow the tale to come to a satisfying close, with the people of Logres freed, the queen saved, and the errant knights defeated (de Troyes 83). *The Quest of the Holy Grail* instead uses the expectation of

Lancelot's success to emphasise the magnitude of his consequent failure. He sets out on a quest for the Grail, but fails 'to see the Holy Grail when it pass(es) before him' (Comfort 129). This failure springs from Lancelot's 'sin… of (his) lady whom (he) has loved all (his) life… Guinevere' (63). This love is a corrupting force, and so Lancelot loses the spiritual aid which he took for granted in *The Knight of the Cart*, and is reminded that 'chivalry… can avail (him) nothing, unless the Holy Spirit prepares the way' (107). Without this spiritual endorsement, he struggles with his knightly performances, and his opponents in a battle '(wear) him out so thoroughly… he (thinks) he could never carry arms again' (129). As Lancelot's physical prowess diminishes, so does his heroic mind. He becomes more reliant on others, 'begging (another character) to counsel him' (64), whereas in *The Knight of the Cart*, he is the tool of others' deliverance (de Troyes 32). He is 'filled… with dismay' when facing a 'deep and dangerous' river (Comfort 133), a striking contrast to the self-assured Lancelot of *The Knight of the Cart*. The latter tale delights in an exploration of heroism, drawing narrative power from the construction of a larger-than-life figure who satisfyingly responds to a series of challenges. On the other hand, Holy Grail revels in the destruction of heroism. It takes a fundamentally different view of the world, one where failure is the mode, and only the truly pure – like Galahad – are permitted success. Myths of Lancelot often place little restriction on his grandeur: he is beloved, handsome, wealthy, noble, and the lover of an equally grand woman, Guinevere. *The Quest of the Holy Grail* forces the constructed hero to pay a price for the luxuries he has enjoyed. It makes him acknowledge God as the source of his power, a power that can be taken away at whim. The unknowability of others' inner selves can be a source of great distress – unlike observable physical traits and actions, the character of a person's mind and soul cannot be easily perceived. The tragic disintegration of a once-heroic Lancelot reflects this distress; it is a ghoulish indulgence in the fear of inner corruption.

Lancelot: Peeling back the heroic shell

Lancelot is a tool for the construction and destruction of heroism, but does he hold any value independent of his role as a high-ranking knight? In *The Knight of the Cart*, there are instances where Lancelot is spurred not by his commitment to knighthood and valour, but rather by more instinctive patterns of thought. A human Lancelot breaks through. He 'pretends to be tired' so he can sneak into the queen's chambers (de Troyes 55), showing a distinct abandonment of codes of honour in favour of a pursuit of his own desire. Love magnifies the grandeur of Lancelot's exploits, but it also humanises him: when Guinevere refuses to acknowledge him, he puzzles over her reaction, wondering 'what could (his) crime have been' (53), and coming up with various reasons and counterarguments. To see Lancelot, a knight with extraordinary social standing, stricken with confusion and self-doubt in the face of a botched social interaction, is an endearing instance of mundanity which concretes the sense of his personhood. Similarly, in *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, he 'did not dare' confess his affair with Guinevere, being 'more cowardly than brave' (Comfort 63) – although this weakness tears apart the heroism of Lancelot, it also imbues the character with a sense of vulnerability, an almost childlike fear of confession. This vulnerability is echoed in *The Knight of the Cart,* when, during his imprisonment, he 'feel(s) hurt… that (Gawain) has so long deserted' him (de Troyes 77). Lancelot is mainly characterized through his relationship with Guinevere, which often isolates him from other characters and lends him an air of emotional inaccessibility. Hence his connections to other characters like Gawain serve to contextualise him within a wide social landscape, revealing a multi-faceted Lancelot beneath the figure of the questing knight. *The Quest of the Holy Grail* mirrors the idea of a Lancelot who loves – and is loved by – figures apart from the Queen. In this tale of spiritual torment, one of Lancelot's few joyous moments comes from his reunion with his Galahad; 'he (runs) to him with outstretched arms… and rejoice(s)' (Comfort 225). Then when Lancelot's quest falls apart and he returns home, 'all (give) him a joyous welcome' (234). After all his

failures, Lancelot is still welcomed back by his society, suggesting that he still has a place and a story in the court of Camelot, even though his time as the world's greatest knight has ended. Lancelot's moments of weakness and self-doubt, his relationships with other characters and with Camelot itself, all reveal a complex characterisation that goes beyond a two-dimensional discussion of knighthood and heroism.

Lancelot's knightly excellence places him in the epicentre of Camelot, but also distinguishes him from other characters. Arthurian texts like *Lancelot, The Knight of the Cart* and *The Quest of the Holy Grail* play with this constructed hero, using him to explore of human accomplishments and failures. Lancelot has earned dozens of titles throughout his expeditions – the greatest knight, the knight of the cart – but these titles do not form a shell around some hollowness. There is a substance underneath, an essential Lancelot, who shines through the gaps in his armour.

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