



Lancelot and Guinevere

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Lancelot and Guinevere.

When we read Malory's tale of love and strife, of piety, treason and loyalty, we may well wonder what made Tennyson see in it the rough material for a moral allegory. For the mind of the mediaeval compiler is divided between admiration for the faithful love of Lancelot and Guinevere and a strong belief that all worldly love is weakness and the human heart, to become perfect, must give itself to God alone. Their passion runs through the texture like a crimson thread that thickens and thickens until it usurps almost the whole fabric of the story and it ultimately leads to the ruin of Arthur and his Table Round; but our sympathy for the too worldly couple is maintained to the end, and the thought that their love is sinful because Guinevere is married, which is uppermost in Tennyson's mind, hardly occupies the older writer.

A God who must punish even guiltless sinning against his laws pursues Malory's heroes as inexorably as jealous Fate drives its victims to perdition in the classical drama. Though it is by divine order that Orestes has killed his mother, Fate sends its servants, the Furies, to plague him and avenge the deed. Arthur's act of unconscious incest brings down on him the wrath of God; it is fated that he shall be slain by Mordred, the fruit of his sin. This God does not pause to weigh motives or make allowance for error; he is not softened by suffering or remorse. How far remote all this is from modern conceptions of divine love and divine justice! A child is born to Arthur and Bellicent; God requires vengeance for it, not because Bellicent is Lot's wife, which Arthur knew, but because she is Arthur's sister, which he did *not* know.

In the old romances, the most beautiful qualities of a knight are strength and courage. A knight is bound to rescue any woman when she is in danger, for women are feeble and timid. But he owes his services and his protection especially to the lady who honours him with the permission to wear her badge; and he neglects every other duty to prove her purity and innocence "with his hands". The lady admits her champion into her intimacy and even makes him her adviser in matters of love.

"Madam", says Tristram to La Beale Isoud, "I promise you faithfully that I shall be all the days of my life your knight". "Gramercy", says La Beale Isoud, "and I promise you there-against that I shall not be married this seven years but by your assent; and to whom that ye will I shall be married, him will I have and he will have me if ye will consent". (Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, p. 172) ¹⁾.

So it was perfectly allowable for this relation to exist between a knight and the wife of another, and this situation seems to have had great attraction and piquancy to our forefathers. The husband accepted this homage to the beauty and purity of his wife until the thought arose in him that the two "s' aimaient d'amour".

This poetical relation of a knight and his lady exists between Lancelot and Guinevere. On the day when Lancelot was made knight, he lost his sword, and Guinevere, finding it, lapped it in her train and gave it him when he needed it; "and else he had been shamed among all knights". And then he promised her ever to be her knight in right or in wrong. But very soon we hear the two mentioned as a pair of perfect lovers. Their

¹⁾ Globe edition.

²⁾ Cf. Pollard in the Preface to his edition of Malory.

relation, however, is not held impure and, although they are not "clean in will and in work" (cf. p. 327), they consider themselves, with perfect naïveté, faithful and loyal to the king. "Ye have betrayed me and put me to the death", Guinevere exclaims when Lancelot is going to depart in quest of the Grail, "for to leave thus *my lord*". (p. 354).

Arthur in Malory is very unlike the moral hero that Tennyson has made of him. He is the true product of a time in its moral infancy. Brave and fond of battle and joust, he is much afflicted when his knights have taken the vow to go in quest of the Grail, for he knows that many will die in the quest and he has "an old custom to have them in his fellowship". But the resolution to have a farewell-tourney in their honour half consoles him. In his conception of love, he is diametrically opposed to Tennyson's ideal knight:

"For Madam", said Sir Lancelot to the queen who reproached him with the tragic fate of Elaine, "I love not to be constrained to love; for love must arise of the heart, and not by no constraint. That is truth, said the king and many knights, love is free in himself, and never will be bounden, for where he is bounden he loseth himself." (p. 432).¹⁾

And the following passage will seem, I am afraid, rather shocking to those who know Arthur only from Tennyson's version:

"And therefore, said the king, wit you well my heart was never so heavy as it is now, and much more I am sorrier for my good knights' loss than for the loss of my fair queen; for queens I might have enow, but such a fellowship of good knights shall never be together in no company." (p. 459.)

Sir Lancelot is of later growth, a product of more civilized times and of a race more versed in courtly manners. Mr. Pollard says of Malory's picture of him that it is "perhaps the most splendid study of a great gentleman in all our literature". There is an atmosphere of loving veneration around him; all the knights — except such types of unknighthood as Meliagrance and Mordred — are glad to own his superiority. He is not only the bravest knight and the most successful in strife; he is also the most generous and the worthiest. We are often reminded that he is a sinful man, i. e. not a perfectly holy man like his son Galahad, who, having what sometimes seems to be the highest mediaeval virtue, chastity, is allowed to see the Sangreal in all its divine splendour; but *of all sinful men* he is the noblest and the best. Lancelot is the avenger of oppressed innocence, the hope of all who suffer wrong. And he possesses that most amiable quality of all: he is truly modest, he is doubtful of his own worth. When all the knights, and many kings, Arthur included, have vainly searched the wounds of the youth who can be cured only by the touch of the noblest, Lancelot happens to come by. The passage is too fine to be much curtailed:

"Then said Arthur unto Sir Launcelot: Ye must do as we have done . . . Heaven defend me, said Sir Launcelot, when so many kings and knights have assayed and failed, that I should presume upon me to enchieve that all ye, my lords, might not enchieve. Ye shall not choose, said King Arthur, for I will command you for to do as we all have done And then all the kings and knights for the most part prayed Sir Launcelot to search him; and then the wounded knight, Sir Urre, set him up weakly, and prayed Sir Launcelot heartily, saying: Courteous knight

¹⁾ Cf. the corresponding passage in *Lancelot and Elaine*:

"Then answered Lancelot
To doubt her fairness were to want an eye,
To doubt her pureness were to want a heart —
Yea, to be loved, if what is worthy love
Could bind him, but free love will not be bound. —
Free love, so bound, were freest, said the King."

I require thee for God's sake heal my wounds, for methinketh ever sithen ye came here my wounds grieve me not. Ah, my fair lord, said Sir Launcelot, Jesu would that I might help you; I shame me sore that I should be thus rebuked, for never was I able in worthiness to do so high a thing And then he held up his hands, and looked into the east, saying secretly unto himself: Thou blessed Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, I beseech thee of thy mercy, that my simple worship and honesty be saved and thou blessed Trinity, thou mayst give power to heal this sick knight by thy great virtue and grace of thee, but, good Lord, never of myself. And then Sir Launcelot prayed Sir Urre to let him see his head; and then devoutly kneeling, he ransacked the three wounds, that they bled a little, and forthwith all the wounds fair healed, and seemed as they had been whole a seven year

Then King Arthur and all the kings and knights kneeled down and gave thankings and lovings unto God and to his Blessed Mother. And ever Sir Launcelot wept as he had been a child that had been beaten." — (p. 449-450).

Lancelot is nobler than the king. Arthur does not scorn to entrap the queen, and to take an adversary at a disadvantage. Lancelot never strikes a fallen knight and he uses consideration even for those who have wronged him. One day his horse is taken from him while he is asleep, and shortly after he meets a knight who is mounted on it. Lancelot strikes the thief down to the earth, and takes away his property; but before leaving the wounded knight he ties the latter's horse to a tree that he may find it when he is arisen.

But the nobleness of his character appears most in his attitude towards the king and the queen. When he has led Guinevere to his own castle to save her from her husband's jealous rage, he hears that the pope has forbidden further hostility. He thanks God for it. "For God knoweth, said Sir Launcelot, I will be a thousandfold more gladder to bring her again than ever I was of her taking away". (p. 464-465).

This peace and safety of the queen, however, is not to last; suspicion spreads at court and to save the honour of his lady Lancelot resolves to leave her for ever.

"And then Sir Launcelot said unto Guenever in hearing of the king and them all: Madam, now I must depart from you and this noble fellowship for ever; and sithen it is so, I beseech you to pray for me and say me well; and if ye be hard bested by any false tongues, lightly, my lady, let send me word; and if any knight's hand may deliver you by battle, I shall deliver you. And therewithal Sir Launcelot kissed the queen; and then he said all openly: Now let me see what he be in this place that dare say the queen is not true unto my lord Arthur, let see who will speak an he dare speak. And therewith he brought the queen to the king and then Sir Launcelot took his leave and departed; and there was neither king, duke, nor earl, baron nor knight, lady nor gentlewoman, but all they wept as people out of their mind. . . . And thus departed Sir Launcelot from the court for ever." (p. 468).

It is strange to remark how, as has been said already, the love of Lancelot and Guinevere is alternately cried down as a worldly weakness and held up as an exemplary virtue. Good and evil meet in this undying passion. Lancelot is sometimes weighed down by a sense of sin. During his quest of the Sangreal, he hears a voice warning him to quit the holy cross by which he has been lying. And then he relates the story of his life to a hermit: "how he had loved a queen unmeasurably and out of measure long; — and all my great deeds of arms that I have done, I did for the most part for the queen's sake; and never did I battle all only for God's sake, but for to win worship and to cause me to be the better beloved, and little or nought I thanked God of it." (p. 364).

The queen does not seem conscious of having done wrong before her husband's death; and then her simple words of remorse and self-reproach

go straight to the heart. She prays Sir Lancelot "never to see her more in the visage"; "for through our love that we have loved together is my most noble lord slain". (p. 483).

Other passages prove the author's admiration for the beauty and constancy of their love, for instance where Guinevere rides 'a-Maying, clad all in green'.

"Nowaday men can not love seven night but they must have all their desires; that love may not endure by reason. . . . But the old love was not so; . . . then was love truth and faithfulness; and lo, in like wise was used love in king Arthur's days. . . . Therefore, all ye that be lovers call unto your remembrance the month of May, like as did Queen Guenever, for whom I make here a little mention, that while she lived she was a true lover, and therefore she had a good end." (p. 419).

The sun of May has entered the author's heart and all that is bright and young and true is fine to him.

Sir Ector mentions Sir Lancelot's love among his virtues: "Ah, Launcelot, he said, thou were head of all Christian knights . . . and thou were never matched of earthly knight's hand. . . . And thou were the truest lover of a sinful man that ever loved woman." (p. 486).

The stern God himself allows a loving smile to dispel his frown, for Sir Lancelot is heaved up to heaven by angels and the gates open before him.

What has Tennyson made of the three great figures of the old legend, the great leader, his lovely queen and the noble knight? It has often been remarked that, to serve his moral principles, Tennyson wrenched the old romance out of its hinges. Lancelot and the queen had to appear tainted by sin, and their love was denied, not only purity, but also genuineness. Arthur was idealized and Tennyson would not have believed that a critic of the generation following his own ¹⁾ would see in Arthur "the wrong sort of man".

Much of the fascinating beauty of earlier versions was preserved and fresh sources of beauty were added under the poet's handling. Who can read without emotion the delicate passage in *Geraint and Enid*, when the horse neighs and Enid treads lightly on her husband's foot to mount into the saddle behind him? She feels like a little child who, after being unjustly rebuked, is fondled and loved with a warmer love; and happy and grateful, she enters the new life, where kindness and confidence will have a place again.

Now and then, too, we come across a passage eloquent with a wisdom that is not quite of this world:

"The sin that practice burns into the blood,
And not the one dark hour that brings remorse,
Will brand us, after, of whose fold we be".

(*Merlin and Vivien.*)

But the crowning glory, to me, is the description of the love that takes possession of Elaine's heart.

"And all night long his face before her lived,
As when a painter, poring on a face,
Divinely, through all hindrance, finds the man
Behind it."

(*Lancelot and Elaine.*)

She is too pure and too innocent to think of reserve, and, like Portia and Desdemona, meets the object of her love more than half-way.

One source of poetic inspiration, however, Tennyson deliberately left aside. The delight of Lancelot and Guinevere in each other's presence, the beauty of their life-long faithfulness is unable to stir Tennyson the poet.²⁾ Their

¹⁾ Oliver Elton, English Literature (1830-1860).

²⁾ In his youth, Tennyson wrote a fragment: *Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere*, in which no reference is made to sin.

passion only arouses the indignation of Tennyson the moralist and dwindles down under his hands into a vulgar instance of stolen love.

We often think, if we could forget the didactic spirit in which the Idylls are written, the reading of them would be pure delight. But Tennyson never allows us to forget it long. Whispers about "guilty love" will come to chill our raptures. Is it worthy of a poet to call one of the noblest passions of which man is capable a sin? Love in itself cannot be guilty or wicked. What makes their love defaming is that it is connected with stealthiness and hypocrisy (cf. *Lancelot and Elaine*).

Morton Luce says that the moral stage of the Idylls has been disastrous to Guinevere. In fact, if we compare her with Malory's Guinevere, we must admit that the latter is not only the more amiable, but also the finer woman of the two. The queen's wordy fit of jealousy in *Lancelot and Elaine* calls up before us the silent grief of the other Guinevere when, thinking that Lancelot loves her less than before, she has dismissed him from the court:

"The queen outward made no manner of sorrow in shewing, to none of his blood, nor to none other. But, wit ye well, inwardly, as the book saith, she took great thought". (p. 413).

"To love one only and to cleave to her", this is Tennyson's ideal for a man; Arthur is careful to say to his queen at their last meeting that he loves her still. But Lancelot and Guinevere, too, follow this moral precept. Lancelot's is the "sin" to love and cleave to one who had already been promised to another; to his king, more than that, his friend. What is the sin in Guinevere? She took Lancelot for her bridegroom (in Tennyson's, not in Malory's version) and loved him from that moment. Of course, according to our views, she ought not to have consented to marry the king, knowing that she loved another, but Tennyson, strange to say, does not speak about this. Once married to Arthur, it is all she can do to be faithful to her husband in deed. To Tennyson, this is not enough. The guilty passion should be eradicated and a virtuous love planted in its stead.

It may be remarked in passing that we find an instance of the same conception of a woman's duty in Corneille. Was Pauline in *Polyeucte* Tennyson's ideal woman? Having married Polyeucte in obedience to her father's will, though she loved a young warrior, Sévère, she gives

"*par devoir à son affection (= Pol.'s affection)*
Tout ce que l'autre avait par inclination." (I, II).

Her *confidante*, to whom she confesses her passion, calls Sévère:

"La digne occasion d'une rare constance!"

But Pauline corrects her:

"Dites plutôt d'une indigne et folle résistance." (I, II).

She says to her father, speaking of her husband:

"Je l'ai de votre main; *mon amour est sans crime*;
Il est de votre choix la glorieuse estime;
Et j'ai, pour l'accepter, *éteint le plus beau feu*
Qui d'une âme bien née ait mérité l'aveu." (III, IV).

It is painful to see that Tennyson's views are, in this respect, not in advance of Corneille's. William in *Dora*, who had been sent out of his father's house because he refused to marry his cousin, dies saying to the wife of his own choice "that he was wrong to cross his father thus". —

The tender care with which Tennyson has painted Elaine, the pure maiden, and Erid, the pure wife, shows his great love of them. If Lancelot had been

married and Elaine, after hearing this, had continued to love him, would this have made her feeling impure? A noble emotion cannot be made into an ignoble one by circumstances only. The power of loving is a gift, not a virtue and not a sin. Lancelot prays for the wish to loosen his bonds, and, in the poet's view, his prayer is heard at last; his dying a holy man points to this. Browning's knight would have prayed that he might keep his love and keep it pure. For the passion itself need not and cannot be conquered, but the desire to indulge it may be conquered by a nobler desire. Brave acceptance of what power of affection Heaven grants us with was unknown to Tennyson.

In the eleventh idyll, *Guinevere*, the poet's remodelling hand is best discernible. The consequences of her love for Lancelot afflict the queen heavily and she thinks she is repentant. Then we read how Arthur comes, trampling her into real repentance . . . And suddenly two other, humbler creations of English literature rise before us. They are Dr. Strong (*David Copperfield*, Chapter XLV) and the plain, dull Carrier (*Cricket on the Hearth*, Chirp the Third), who come to teach Arthur a lesson of real goodness and real love.

Tennyson does not believe in Guinevere's repentance before she has transferred her love from her lover to her husband.¹⁾ So it is by becoming false to the great passion of her life (till then she had loved one only and had cleaved to him), by crushing what was best in her, that she is saved.

As could have been expected, the modern poet came to more precise conclusions in his moral attitude towards love and marriage than the mediaeval author. Tennyson gives us something to go by: the object of our love once chosen, no doubt, no wavering should be admitted into our heart. But Malory, who does not preach or theorize, is fairer to the lovers; he is braver, too, for he allows no "social ties to warp him from the living truth".

Yet, what might is there in Tennyson the poet that almost wards off criticism from his moral views? What mysterious power in the man made the poem *Guinevere* so fine? The charm is, I think, not only in the verse, but also in the strength and the moral earnestness of him who wrote it. It was the poet's conviction that the individual should make his interests, his desires, nay, his emotions, subservient to the interests of society. But he forgot that we cannot choose our emotions; they come to us unasked and unsought for. We may swear that we will always be faithful, we cannot swear that we shall always continue to love.²⁾

It was part of Tennyson's altruism and benevolence that his moral conceptions were dogmatic and conventional. But in his few poems which treat, not of our relation to one another, but of our relation to eternity (*De Profundis*, *The ancient Sage*, *The higher Pantheism*), he soars high above convention and dogma. Striking the root of all religion, he sings the wonder of wonders, which, through our familiarity with it, will seem a matter of course: the gift of life, the ever unexplainable, which has come out of the deep.

De Profundis! has not the gift of loving also come out of the deep?

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¹⁾ The same reasoned love is again found in *Polyeucte* (V, III), where Pauline, seeing that her husband is *the greater man*, altogether loses her love for Sévère.

²⁾ "Sware at the shrine of Christ a deathless love."

Coming of Arthur.

"Then, being on the morrow knighted, sware
To love one only."

Pelleas and Ettarre.