

Lancelot's Lunacy: Clinical Light On A Noble Knight

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PART I: THE QUEST FOR THE GRAIL BEGINS

Perhaps the best way to start is to tell what brought me to this enterprise. When I was in high school, about thirteen years old, I read Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. I had a dream one night in which I saw the Holy Grail. It was enclosed in a filmy white cover. As it floated across my field of vision, I could hear a voice speaking, as if reading from a poem, portentously intoning the following words: 'And from the Grail, there came a crimson light that seared the human eye.' As I watched, entranced by this vision, a beam of light, suddenly shot out from the Grail, struck me in the eyes, I felt a shocking pain. I could not only feel the pain but also I could hear (!) the tears in my eyes brought to a seething boil leaving my eyes in a dry, throbbing painful state. At this point I woke up.

The dream has stayed with me for the larger part of a century. Also, for whatever it is worth, I have suffered from a lifelong photophobia. To this day, I rarely venture into bright light without wearing sunglasses. In addition, I get typical migraine attacks which start with blinding scotomata, which can be precipitated by an even momentary exposure to bright light. My association to the dream at that time was to Lancelot's failed quest for the Grail. Despite the prominence in that dream of a blinding light and intense heat, what impressed me most of all was that Lancelot went mad in the course of his quest. I believe that fact contributed significantly to my lifelong interest in psychiatry, particularly in the psychoses, an interest that was clearly present in my reading and volunteer hospital activities as a college undergraduate and, of course, in my medical education. I felt a deep compassion for Lancelot. For all his public glory, Lancelot lived a lonely life. His public acclaim was repeatedly punctuated by agony-filled psychotic episodes.

In later life, a medievalist scholar who specialized in the Arthurian romances, when I explained my interest in Lancelot's psychotic episode, told me: 'Episode? You mean his series of psychotic episodes!' 'You know,' he continued, 'among the many unstable knights hanging around King Arthur's court, he was the most unstable of all. He was subject to recurrent psychotic attacks. At least four such episodes are recorded in the literature.' I then encountered a Ph.D. thesis written by Judith S. Neaman, a graduate student at Columbia University. I could hardly believe my good fortune when I read the title: *The Distracted Knight: A Study of Insanity in the Arthurian Romances*. Let me quote a few lines from her preface:

Insanity became an increasingly frequent motif in the romances written after the time of Chrétien de Troyes, and the word 'mad' was used so often to describe emotional extremes that it became a convention in medieval European literature. In nearly every major European language in which Arthurian romances were written, there is at least one romance which contains a mad hero.

Although the romance is well-known as a genre which dealt not with reality but with the ideal and the fantastic, the fact that the motif of madness was so popular in the genre suggests a cultural concern with the phenomenon itself.

What a bonanza this thesis was for me! Starting with a parochial concern with Lancelot's Holy Grail psychotic episode, I found myself suddenly inundated with new cases, not only in the Arthurian literature but in other literature of the time. I could not help but ask, why was this theme so popular then?

Many forms of madness are described and analyzed in the Arthurian literature, especially 'love-sickness,' which could lead to severe melancholia and could even result in death by physical wasting or suicide. It was the subject of heated debate: was it a disease of the brain? the heart? or the testicles? The retention of semen was regarded as a serious etiological factor, and 'therapeutic' sexual intercourse at frequent intervals was prescribed as one way of restoring the underlying deranged humoral imbalance. Treatment, in any case, aimed to correct humoral imbalance. In some desperate cases, only restoration to the arms of the beloved could suffice. While most sufferers were males, women too could be afflicted. Indeed, the sad fate of Elaine, the Lilymaid of Astolat, is perhaps the best known, and the saddest, case in the literature of love-sickness.

Elaine, who had nursed a wounded Lancelot back to health, begged him to marry her. Single-minded, he returned to his queen. Inconsolable, Elaine sank into a melancholy which ended in her death. She left a note that she was to be floated to London on a funeral barge with a lily in one hand and an explanatory note to King Arthur in the other. Lancelot left Elaine and returned to Guinevere having fulfilled his quest to win the famous nine diamonds for her. Disdainfully, Guinevere flung them out the window into the Thames below. They fell into the water just as Elaine's funeral barge came into view. At the funeral Arthur read her note confirming that her love for Lancelot had gone unrequited and that, indeed, was why she died a virgin. Lancelot fled from the court, and for years he wandered the forests in a state of madness. Recovering, finally, he was never again the same. Thus, there were two victims, the Lilymaid of Astolat, who lost her life, and Lancelot, who lost his sanity.

PART II: THE GRAIL IS FOUND

In a recent staff change at the Morgan Library on Madison Avenue and 36th Street in New York City, a newly appointed curator, operating with the proverbial efficiency of the clean-sweeping new broom, uncovered a cache of un-filed documents. With permission from the Morgan Library Board of Trustees, I am

quoting in full the document which in its original, is a magnificently illuminated medieval parchment entitled, *King Arthur and His Encounter with King Ban*.

It was springtime in Normandy, but the heavens belied the season. Fierce winds lashed the blossom-laden apple trees, casting petals and unborne fruit to an untimely grave in the rain-soaked soil. The way was obscured by a fog impenetrable to the eye. An icy rain fortified by rock-sized hail stones rained destruction on all living things. Through the twisted hedgerows struggled a weary horse on whose back there clung a weary knight, too tired to proceed another step but too cherishing of life to accept the certain death that awaited him if he descended from his horse and tried to sleep in the mighty deluge that was falling. Never given to despair, King Arthur's heart (for it was indeed Arthur) leaped with joy when suddenly, as if by magic, there loomed before him a great castle. The bridge across the moat stood unprotected and the castle battlements were devoid of nighttime guard, all of whom had taken shelter from the unseasonably frigid night.

Arthur approached the towering metal gates of the castle. He blew the gateway horn and cried out a word of greeting. His salutation was lost in the screaming gale. As if challenging a knight to combat, he struck the gate with his lance. The booming sound echoed through the vast halls behind the door. After a brief delay, a sleepy attendant pulled open the door. Because of the stormy night and the lateness of the hour, King Ban himself came down from his chambers to find out what was happening, and behind him followed the queen. His hosts received their distinguished guest with warmth and love. King Ban, exhausted from the duties of his previous day, turned over his guest to the care of his gracious queen to see that he was ensconced with proper hospitality. The queen was a beautiful woman who was subject to periods of melancholy, and indeed, was just now emerging from such an episode. She encouraged King Arthur to divest himself of his armor and ordered a servant to provide warm robes and told her servant to light a welcoming fire in the fireplace. After King Arthur was fed, his body warmed by the hospitable spirit, the roaring fire and the wine in his veins, he gratefully accepted the queen's suggestion that he retire to his bed. When the distinguished visitor disrobed and lay beneath the covers, the recently recovered, and no longer melancholy, queen was seized suddenly with a surge of strength and strong desire. The servant had retired to his own quarters and the queen was left alone in the guest chamber with the visiting king. Feeling great waves of warmth from the fireplace and thinking the blankets covering her guest did not sufficiently warm him, she slid under the covers. King Arthur awoke from his deathlike sleep to find himself in the embrace of the beautiful queen. In the hours that followed, they alternately renewed their passion and exhausted their passion. By daybreak the storm outside the castle had subsided as did the storm within the bed. A weary queen left her royal guest and returned to her place in the royal chamber beside her husband, King Ban.

Nine months later, the queen gave birth to a little boy, a well-built, beautiful child but with a curiously disfigured face. The king summoned his ancient-aged counselor and asked his opinion concerning this newborn boy with the strange face that bore no family resemblance to King Ban. The counselor said, "This babe will bring much joy and fame to his father, but the grief which he will bring will be even greater. He will break his father's heart. He will undo all the good things his father has achieved and ultimately cause the ignominious defeat of his father in battle." When King Ban heard this pronouncement, he ordered servants to wrest the child from the loving embrace of the queen mother with instructions to abandon the child in the fields, to die of exposure.

The next evening, when the abandoned baby seemed about to expire from the cold, a noble lady, sitting on a gaily caparisoned horse came by. She was surrounded by festively attired lady courtiers. When she saw the babe, frozen and seemingly about to die, she directed that the child be covered with warm blankets and brought to her castle for further care.

Her castle rested on a mighty outcropping of rock in the center of a placid lake, a rock apparently cast up in some cataclysmic earthquake in the distant past. The steep wall of rock made an impregnable defense for the castle itself. The surrounding lake was an impassible moat which provided further protection. On some days the reflection of the castle in the depths of the waters was so clear that the reflection seemed more real than the castle itself. And neighbors whispered that what was visible above the lake's surface was deception and that the real home of the mysterious lady was at the bottom of the lake. Thus, she was called 'The Lady of the Lake.'

She summoned great teachers from far and wide to educate her newly acquired child. One teacher was a great master of the martial arts. He instructed the child from early years in the techniques of war. As a youngster, barely a teenager, the student already outclassed his master, and at age seventeen, when the Lady of the Lake felt she had done all she could for him, she dispatched him to King Arthur's court laden with gifts. And so began the extraordinary career of Lancelot of the Lake.

When King Arthur and Sir Lancelot first set eyes on each other, it was love at first sight. The older man and the teenaged boy experienced a bonding that was mysterious and inexplicable to both of them, but that was never to be shaken in the years that followed. Lancelot was soon knighted by Arthur. His surpassing skill in the martial arts, his physical grace and generosity won the hearts of all who knew him.

What happened between him and Guinevere has been recounted in detail by Sir Thomas Mallory and many others in the subsequent centuries. King Arthur's strange blindness to the passionate love that grew between his queen and his newly-acquired champion of the Round Table first bewildered those

who witnessed it and subsequently demoralized them, and caused them in the end to turn against their king and ultimately to leave him dead on a battlefield of a great civil war instigated by his other son, Sir Mordred.

Thus, King Arthur's desecration of the hospitality offered to him on that stormy night by King Ban led to this sad end.

The manuscript ends with the following words: 'May he who wore the crown of thorns forgive us for our sins!'

So concludes the strange manuscript which seems to explain so much that called for explaining. Why was Lancelot carried off in infancy by the Lady of the Lake? Why was the bonding between King Arthur and this young boy so intense? There too a father-son resonance might have accounted for the uncritically loving and forgiving behavior on the part of the king in spite of the rash excesses of this young man who came to his court. And why did this boy fall so deeply in love with the young woman who (in this case) was his father's wife? Perhaps other mysteries will find their solution—for example, his mother's history of mental illness may explain Lancelot's vulnerability to psychotic episodes.

T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* tells of a recurrent dream which plagued Lancelot for much of his life. In this dream, Lancelot and his younger brother, Ector Demaris, were each mounted on a horse. Along came a powerful man who unseated Lancelot, beat him mercilessly, stripped him of his fine clothing and forced him to ride on a jackass in tattered clothing. Lancelot, now bedraggled, comes upon a well with enticingly cool water; he leaned over to drink from the well, but the water sank away so that his thirst remained unslaked. He would wake up from this recurrent dream feeling desolate and abandoned. Was this an Oedipal dream expressing rivalry not only with his brother but with his father, the unidentified adversary who castrates him in the dream? Was the enticing cool spring the mother, from whose breast he was wrested mercilessly as an infant? And was his mother also the queen whom he was never truly able to possess?

White felt that Lancelot's much vaunted compassion was really a reaction formation to a nagging rage which he fought to repress all his life. Lancelot was torn by an unshakable love which attached him on the one hand to the beautiful Guinevere, and an equally unshakable bond, which had deeply religious overtones, tying him to his idealistic king. These opposing pulls—his love for the queen and his love for the king—tore him apart emotionally time and again. White says rather bitterly of Lancelot, 'People have odd reasons for ending up a saint. A man who is not afflicted by ambitions of decency in his mind might simply have run away with his hero's wife and then, perhaps, the tragedy of Arthur would never have happened.' I would add that a king, less tortured by his own strange attachment to Lancelot, might have taken the painful steps which the preservation of his social order demanded. He would have accepted Mordred's wish that the faithless queen and her lover pay the price demanded by the law of the land, and perhaps by ending this moral rot at the top, he might have salvaged his peaceful kingdom for many more years.

This situation reminded me of the classical study reported in 1954 by Stanton

and Schwartz on the psychoanalytic treatment of chronic schizophrenic patients at Chestnut Lode. Stanton and Schwartz observed that the disturbed behavior in this setting tended to occur in waves or epidemics. Patients seemed to go violently mad all at once, with a rash of elopements, suicidal attempts, and destructive psychotic excitement. They concluded that disruptions tended to occur during periods of staff conflict, when doctors, nurses, and aides were in serious disagreement among themselves for whatever cause. Their disunity based on their own unresolved conflicts seemed somehow to affect the minds of the schizophrenic patients whose minds were already in a state of inner war. Thus, the staff's outer war intensified the patients' inner war. It is my hypothesis that something like this characterizes the Arthurian kingdom in its final days: prevailing disgust with the corruption and the weakness at the top was exploited by Mordred.

You can see how far afield my quest for the Holy Grail has led me. But I will wander no more. Instead, let me return to the Holy Grail dream that I had as a teenager with its emphasis on crimson light and searing heat. As Tennyson's note of Lancelot in the *Idylls of the King*:

Up I (Lancelot), climb a thousand steps with pain; as in a dream I seem to climb forever; at last I reach a door, a light was in the crannies and I heard, 'Glory, and joy and honor to our Lord and to the holy vessel of the Grail!' Then, in my madness I essayed the door. It gave, and through a stormy glare, a heat as from a seven times heated furnace, I, blasted and burned, and blinded as I was, with such fierceness that I swooned away—Oh, yet me thought I saw the Holy Grail, all palled in crimson samite and around great angels, awful shapes and wings and eyes! But for all my madness and my sin, and then my swooning, I had sworn I saw that which I saw, but what I saw was veiled and covered, and thus this quest was not for me.

Was this then also a quest that was not for me? I too saw the Grail, like Lancelot, in a dreamlike state, and it was also considerably veiled and covered over. Certainly, we both deserved and received an un-equivalent hotfoot. Neither of us merited any extended time in the company of the Grail. I hope that the reader has realized that the so-called 'newly discovered medieval manuscript' about the birth of Lancelot was a figment of my imagination. The details of the so-called 'medieval manuscript' came to my mind in an effortless rush of imagination. Composed in my mature years, it seems clearly a continuation of the oedipal dream of my early adolescence. I myself was surprised at the detail with which the Lancelot–Guinevere romance unfolded before me in my fictional composition. Perhaps, the biggest surprise of all for me was the fact that I had contributed merely one more myth to the anthology of Arthurian mythology. Strange as it may seem to the reader, previously I had accepted all the King Arthur's stories as essentially factual rather than dream-like fantasies, distillations of the unfinished business of growing up.

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