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The Acts of John Steinbeck: Medievalist – A Dive into John Steinbeck’s Adaptation of Thomas
Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the honors requirement

For the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English

By

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April 2023

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I. INTRODUCTION

“I wanted desperately for this to be the best work I had ever done” – John Steinbeck.¹

John Steinbeck, author of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden* and Nobel Prize for Literature recipient in 1962, stands as one of the greatest American authors of the twentieth century. Steinbeck is a household name for any American familiar with their country’s literary tradition, and he was a master of realism often depicting a doomed, depression-era United States. However, his fascination with Arthuriana and talent as a medievalist is unexamined and unappreciated. Steinbeck was enamored with the legend of Arthur and medieval culture.

Steinbeck’s infatuation with Arthurian legend began at a young age. In his introduction to his Arthurian novel *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* Steinbeck explains the origin of the passion explaining:

The Bible and Shakespeare and *Pilgrim’s Progress* belonged to everyone. But this was mine – It was a cut version of the Caxton *Morte D’Arthur* of Thomas Malory. I loved the old spelling of the words... Perhaps a passionate love for the English language opened to me from this one book.²

Sir Thomas Malory was a British knight of the fifteenth century and author of Arthurian literature. Malory compiled various sources of French Arthurian legends and translated them into a single unit of Middle English literature. Since then, Malory’s *Morte* has become, “The fountainhead of English Arthurian fiction.”³ Since its composition in 1470, all Arthurian literature owes a debt of gratitude to the foundation set by Malory. Steinbeck’s passion for

¹ John Steinbeck, *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* (Penguin Group), 352.

² Steinbeck, I.

³ Eugene Vinaver, *King Arthur and His Knights* (Oxford University Press), vii.

Arthur began as a childhood obsession, but it developed into something much larger; it was his inspiration. It is important to acknowledge the importance of Arthuriana on Steinbeck as a child, but the influence does not end there. Steinbeck carries the legends of Arthur, Launcelot, and the Holy Grail throughout his life.

Steinbeck set out to adapt Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* in economical English in 1956.⁴ Over the course of the next few years, he did nothing but research Arthur, the Middle Ages, and Malory becoming particularly interested in the historical Thomas Malory. Steinbeck even boasts, "I have read literally hundreds of books on the Middle Ages and have literally a few hundred more to dip into."⁵ As a result, Steinbeck did not begin his adaptation of Malory until retreating into the British countryside with his wife Elaine in 1958 at Discove Cottage in Somerset, England.⁶

Although *Acts* was unfinished, unedited, and published posthumously; the work consumed the thought of Steinbeck in his last two decades. Steinbeck struggled with the gargantuan task in a similar vein to his struggles with *The Grapes of Wrath* or *East of Eden*. Steinbeck believed that his obsession and struggles with Malory caused his second stroke, and Jackson Benson writes, "His search for perfection, his own Grail, the final major work, was slowly destroying him."⁷ Steinbeck's search of something beyond his critically acclaimed writings like *The Grapes of Wrath* resulted in critical defamation of his later works. This tradition of rejecting Steinbeck's later work continued with the posthumous publishing of *Acts*. On the topic, Gregory Robinson writes, "The book remains almost universally disparaged by the

⁴ Jackson J. Benson, *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck: Writer* (New York: Penguin Group), 804.

⁵ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 336.

⁶ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 317.

⁷ Benson, *John Steinbeck*, 860-862.

establishment in academe, both medievalist and Steinbeckian.”⁸ We observe this most succinctly in Agnes Donahue referring to *Acts* as, “The incomplete and puerile *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*.”⁹ Writing off Steinbeck’s *Acts* as “puerile” displays an inability to understand Steinbeck himself, his evolution as a writer, and the influence of Arthuriana on his corpus of writing, we know Steinbeck foresaw this reception of his work. About it, he wrote: “The modern mind, without great knowledge and intra-era empathy is quite incapable of taking on a great part of it [*Morte*].”¹⁰ Steinbeck understood the possibility for widespread misunderstanding, rejection, and even slander, but Steinbeck felt a need to present the splendor of Arthuriana to the modern reader.

In Steinbeck’s mind, however, this was his chef-d’oeuvre. His adaptation of *Acts* would solidify him in eternity among the ranks of Chrétien de Troyes and Malory¹¹. One may claim this sounds melodramatic for the depression era writer best known for his American realism in *The Grapes of Wrath*, but a few critics, such as Robin Mitchell have affirmed this view:

He is aspiring to become one of a select few who are the interpreters of the Matter of Arthur for their age. As Chrétien and Malory had taken the legends and re-woven them to speak to their own times, so Steinbeck wished to translate Malory into terms which would give Arthur new birth into the twentieth century. He had steeped himself so deeply in the Arthurian tradition that he had touched its mystery.¹²

⁸ Robinson, “John Steinbeck’s *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*,” 46.

⁹ Agnes McNeill Donohue. *American Literature* 50, 665.

¹⁰ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 342.

¹¹ Chrétien de Troyes was a twelfth century author of the famous Arthurian romances, a foundational text for any serious Arthurian study.

¹² Robin C. Mitchell, “Steinbeck and Malory” *The Steinbeck Quarterly* Vol. 10 No.3-4, 73.

Steinbeck's obsession with romantic idealism was an inextricable element of his conscience that he desired to communicate to the American public. In the words of John Gardner, acclaimed medievalist and modern author, "*The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* is unfortunately not Steinbeck's greatest book, but as Steinbeck knew, until doubt overcame him, it was getting there."¹³ Arthurian legend was a pillar of Steinbeck's life on which he built his morality, worldview, and literary methods. Steinbeck wanted *Acts* to communicate the relevance, importance, and necessity for Arthur to an American public for which he was deeply concerned. This thesis endeavors to present accurate interpretations of Steinbeck, Malory, and *Acts* in order to dispel erroneous assumptions of *Acts*, affirm Steinbeck's quality as a medievalist, confirm the influence of *Le Morte D'Arthur* on his life, and analyze the competence of the Steinbeckian themes in *Acts*.

II. STEINBECK, MALORY, AND MEDIEVALISM

STEINBECK'S ABILITY AS A MEDIEVALIST

To scholars of Steinbeck, his countless hours of research on the Middle Ages served as a distraction from the pressure to return to "serious" works akin to *East of Eden* or *Grapes of Wrath*.¹⁴ To medieval scholars, Steinbeck's interest in researching and adapting Arthur was that of an amateur seeking to rekindle a childhood fantasy, not a serious respectable approach to Malory. Both of these approaches misunderstand the reverence for Malory, Arthur, and the ideals

¹³ John Gardner, *On Writers & Writing* (Open Road Media), 125.

¹⁴ Benson, *John Steinbeck*, 820.

of the Middle Ages that Steinbeck held throughout his entire life. The intensity and complex methodology of Steinbeck's process stand out as two of the most prominent themes in the appendix of letters in *Acts*. By looking to the actual text of *Acts* and the letters in the appendix, we observe the work of a man that devoted himself to producing a faithful rendition of Malory in every scope, and Steinbeck's talent as a medievalist gives further cause for celebrating his esteemed career as well as providing a foundation for understanding Steinbeck's goal and relationship with the Matter of Arthur. Although Steinbeck claimed, "I am a bad scholar," this examination seeks to cement Steinbeck's ability in medieval, Malorian, and Arthurian scholarship¹⁵

Steinbeck spent years working to procure qualified knowledge on the Middle Ages, Arthuriana, and scholarly opinions on *Morte*. Steinbeck's efforts have passed largely unnoticed and remain unappreciated today. In the appendix to *Acts*, Chase Horton, the editor and collaborator with Steinbeck on *Acts*, included letters detailing the depths to which Steinbeck immersed himself in the Middle Ages. At one point Steinbeck explains, "I have read literally hundreds of books on the Middle Ages... the enormous accumulation of notes which Chase and I have made are necessary, even though they may not come to the surface in the work to be done."¹⁶ In these letters we find Steinbeck exploring medieval philology, broad Arthuriana research, existing scholarship, the biography and prose style of Malory,¹⁷ his own theories and speculations, early *Morte* manuscripts, and many other niche topics of the medieval and Arthurian scholar.

¹⁵ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 380.

¹⁶ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 336.

¹⁷ Although the identity of the historical Thomas Malory is still a debate among scholars, Steinbeck appeared to have sided with the Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel, basing lots of his understanding of *Morte* on this interpretation.

Steinbeck's philology stands out as one of the more surprising elements of his research, providing a biographical angle far removed from that of the American Modernist. Despite the absence of the actual research conducted by Steinbeck, he communicates an assumed familiarity with various languages that go far beyond that of most contemporary Arthurian writers. In a letter to Elizabeth Otis on December 3, 1956 Steinbeck wrote, "In the matter of the Arthurian book I find myself singularly well prepared. I have had some Anglo-Saxon and of course, like everyone else, have read a good deal of Old and Middle English."¹⁸ Steinbeck communicated a proficiency in these languages that communicates a legitimacy of the project beyond an adaptation of *Morte* for children. Malory translated Arthurian French texts in late Middle English, so an ability to read Middle English is the benchmark for any serious reader of Malory, but his reference to Old English signals a depth of research into Arthurian origins that long precede the 15th century English of Malory. By referencing "everyone else," Steinbeck appears to have considered his contemporaries to be Arthurian and Medieval scholars rather than other authors that dabbled in Arthuriana like Mark Twain or T.H. White.¹⁹ Furthermore, Steinbeck alluded to his use of Cornish and Welsh.²⁰ That familiarity signals a qualified, diverse, and holistic approach to Arthuriana including sources such as the Middle-Welsh Mabinogion.²¹ Steinbeck's knowledge of medieval language displays a commitment to the project that refutes attempts to relegate *Acts* as the product of a childhood fantasy.

¹⁸ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 319. The date of this letter is important. Most scholars cite Steinbeck's project beginning upon his sojourn in Somerset in 1958. Here we note that Steinbeck expresses a preparedness to begin the project two years prior to the move to England.

¹⁹ Specifically, Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*, the most popular examples of 20th century Arthurian literature.

²⁰ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 361 & 369.

²¹ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 323.

In Steinbeck's letters, we also observe an obsession over individual words and usages that allows us to further understand his knowledge and goal for the work as a whole. Steinbeck wrote:

“I can give you many examples in the way of word use. Let us take the word worship in the Malorian sense. It is an old English word *worth-ship* and it meant eminence gained by one's personal qualities of courage or honor. You could not inherit worshipfulness. It was solely due to your own nature and actions. Beginning in the thirteenth century, the word moved into a religious connotation which it did not have originally. And now it has lost its original meaning and has become solely a religious word. Perhaps the word honor has taken its place or even better, renown.”²²

A quick glance at the Oxford English Dictionary²³ affirms Steinbeck's definition, “The condition (in a person) of deserving, or being held in, high esteem or repute; honour, distinction, renown; good name. Now archaic or historical.”²⁴ Steinbeck was obsessed with the conventions of Malory's Middle English and how to faithfully communicate the splendor of the language to the modern, disinterested reader that appears to demonstrate a qualified ability with the task. Steinbeck also expressed the influence of Malory's language on his own thinking and writing, “My spelling – never sure and fixed – has become completely infected by Malory. Batayle seems much more normal than battle – more warlike somehow even if it doesn't mean the same thing

²² Steinbeck, *Acts*, 346.

²³ Steinbeck possessed an ardent admiration for the OED as well. See *Acts*, 347 where he described it as “The Greatest book in the world.”

²⁴ "worship, n.". OED Online. March 2023. Oxford University Press. The Middle English Dictionary Online supports this understanding of worship as well. See https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED53452/track?counter=1&search_id=22948104

as battle.”²⁵ Benson cites Steinbeck’s partiality to the Middle English as the cause for Steinbeck’s love for *Morte*, rather than stories; Benson claims the paradox between adaption into modern English and preservation of the Middle English led to Steinbeck’s despair over the work.²⁶ However, this understanding ignores Steinbeck’s admiration for his prose adaptation as evidenced throughout all of his letters.²⁷ In Steinbeck’s passion for a faithful, nuanced rendering of Malory’s Middle English, we better understand the seriousness of Steinbeck’s task and his profound immersion in the gritty work of translation.

Through Steinbeck’s letters, we also observe the depths to which he researched the Arthurian legend beyond Malory. In the appendix of letters to *Acts*, we observe a commitment to broad investigation of Arthurian legend that spans Steinbeck’s entire career. In one of the earliest letters on the project, Steinbeck explained, “I read the Mabinogion thirty years ago and yet in *Sweet Thursday* I repeat the story of the poor knight who made a wife out of flowers.”²⁸ If we take Steinbeck for his word, he first read the Mabinogion in his mid-twenties around 1927, which further corroborates arguments for classifying Steinbeck as a legitimate, lifelong medievalist. Steinbeck demonstrated a further familiarity with Arthurian literature. Steinbeck understood the lack of influence of the alliterative Arthur, and he asserted that Malory’s Arthur was not Galfridian.²⁹ Steinbeck also spent time investigating Malory’s relationship with Chrétien’s Arthurian writings.³⁰ He also draws parallels between Chrétien to Malory and Malory to himself.³¹ We cannot continue to write off the Arthurian influence on Steinbeck as a childhood

²⁵ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 373.

²⁶ Benson, *John Steinbeck*, 853-854.

²⁷ For Steinbeck’s excitement over his prose rendering see Steinbeck, *Acts*, 352 & 357.

²⁸ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 323.

²⁹ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 323. The alliterative Arthur is an English poem of Arthurian legend. The word Galfridian describes works related to the writing of Geoffrey of Monmouth.

³⁰ Chrétien de Troyes was the author for the Arthurian romances, Malory’s chief source for *Morte*.

³¹ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 346.

fantasy that received sparse reference in some of his works.³² It was his life. Furthermore, Steinbeck's devotion to the project, despite major lapses in production, continued into his final years. In a letter dated May 15, 1965, three years prior to his death and six years after he left Somerset,³³ Steinbeck sent Chase Horton to Italy to research:

Whether the Arthurian cycle got a foothold in Islam... Also whether the legend can be traced to an Indo-European base... It would be interesting to see whether there is any Hindi or Sanscritic name which sounds in any way like Arthur or Artu... You should, if you possibly can, get into the Vatican Library.³⁴

Steinbeck's research into Arthuriana contained diverse areas of inquisition that displayed his commitment to the legend. Steinbeck and Horton devoted themselves to a never-ending search of Arthur in the Middle-Ages. In a letter to Steinbeck, Horton wrote, "In Modena the cathedral has an archivolt over one doorway, showing Arthur, Gawain, and several or Arthurian characters... as you have said, 'This is a never-ending search.'"³⁵ Their research even led them into a fascination with Sicilian bedspreads.³⁶ Steinbeck devoted himself to an impossible task of gathering any and all knowledge to be found on Arthur

Steinbeck also receives next to no praise for his ability as a textual critic. Throughout the appendix to *Acts*, Steinbeck explains his various dealings with the manuscripts of *Morte*, and he works directly with those manuscript to produce an adaptation that speaks to the modern reader. Even attempts in line-to-line comparisons by scholars between *Morte* and *Acts* fail to understand the manuscript usage of Steinbeck to create *Acts*. Gregory Robinson compares corresponding

³² Christopher Paolini's foreword to *Acts* falls into this misconception. See *Acts*, vii-x.

³³ Many scholars argue Steinbeck lost any intent to continue with the work upon or shortly after he left Somerset. For examples of this, see: Alec Gilmore, "Steinbeck's Translation of *Le Morte D'Arthur*" (The Steinbeck Review Vol. 12).

³⁴ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 400.

³⁵ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 400.

³⁶ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 400.

passages between Malory and Steinbeck,³⁷ but Robinson uses the highly-edited text of Eugene Vinaver.³⁸ Vinaver's colloquial adaptation of the *Morte* contains an English more similar to Steinbeck's *Acts* than the original Middle English. Vinaver himself writes, "The most important innovation in both editions is the modernization of the spelling... For any detailed study of Malory's language the specialist will naturally go to editions in the original spelling,"³⁹ and Steinbeck does exactly that. A year prior to the beginning of writing *Acts*, Steinbeck wrote, "I went also to the Rylands Library in Manchester to inspect one of two existing Caxton first printings in the world.... I went also to Winchester College to see the manuscript of the *Morte* which was only discovered in 1936."⁴⁰ Not only does Steinbeck view these manuscripts in person, but they were indeed his primary sources. In a letter summarizing his methodology, he wrote:

The following will be my best method. There is only one complete *Morte D'Arthur* in existence and that is the Caxton first edition which is in the Morgan Library in New York. There is of course the earlier manuscript at Winchester College in England, which differs in certain things with the Caxton, and but for the misfortune of lacking eight sheets at the end, might be the one unimpeachable source. As it is, all work on Malory must come from a combination of these two copies. I have not only seen and examined both of these originals but I have also microfilm of both, and these two sources must be my basis for translation.⁴¹

Steinbeck placed an importance on the integrity of his source material that rivals that of the devoted medieval scholar. Perhaps now we can understand his frustration at the misunderstandings by his editors of his goal for the work. This remained a massive undertaking

³⁷ See: Gregory Robinson, "Steinbeck's *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*: A Call for Reappraisal" *The Steinbeck Review* Vol. 11 No. 1.

³⁸ Eugene Vinaver was the preeminent scholar on Thomas Malory and a great friend to Steinbeck. Vinaver was responsible for the discovery and publishing of the famous Winchester Manuscript of the *Morte*.

³⁹ Eugene Vinaver, *King Arthur and His Knights* (Oxford University Press), xx.

⁴⁰ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 333.

⁴¹ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 344.

that required sustained knowledge of the topic, and we find that Steinbeck rose to the challenge in most instances, asserting himself as a qualified scholar of Malory and the Middle Ages.

We can also look to the narrative of *Acts* to find accurate inclusions of medieval culture. In a letter to Horton, Steinbeck writes, “Only you will be aware of the mass of reading that went into it [*Acts*]. It is crammed with the medieval, I hope inserted so subtly that it does not protrude as scholarship.”⁴² By investigating some examples of the text itself, we can solidify Steinbeck’s ability as a medievalist and frame the work with an appreciation for the immense amount of research, strategy, and scholarship involved in its creation.

On Steinbeck’s incorporation of the medieval into *Acts*, Benson wrote, “He had incorporated what he had felt and learned in Wales into his writing along with what was by now an extensive knowledge of the details of living in the early Middle Ages, so that the fabric of his work came alive.”⁴³ Steinbeck’s main departures in *Acts* arises out of his desire to communicate and legitimize medieval conventions for the modern reader. In *Acts*, Steinbeck legitimizes his work through meticulous word choice and a narrative description that evokes a profound understanding of chivalric customs.

Lynne, the female mentor to Ewain, exists as one of the best examples of Steinbeckian invention in Arthuriana.⁴⁴ Throughout the training saga with Ewain, she instructs Ewain in every arena of chivalric jousting. For example, Lynne explains, “Short stirrups make an armored man top-heavy. Sit loosely, shoulders back. Take up the motion in your thighs and back. Now, let your feet hang free.”⁴⁵ Steinbeck continues his communication on jousting tactics by writing:

⁴² Steinbeck, *Acts*, 393.

⁴³ Benson, *John Steinbeck*, 857.

⁴⁴ Lynne receives a comprehensive in the section titled “Malory, Steinbeck, and Women.”

⁴⁵ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 191.

The purpose of armor is to protect only what skill and speed and accuracy cannot. It should be as light as possible, and offer only angles to glance a blow. It should never have to be tested with direct impact. Its purpose is to deflect...The sword is more important than the shield, and skill is more important than either.⁴⁶

Through these two examples, we understand that Steinbeck's departures often arise out of a need to explain fifteenth century practice to the modern reader. The explanation frames his text as an accurate adaptation/translation of its source material, rather than a simple work of twentieth century fantasy. Furthermore, Steinbeck displays his ability in these passages to relay information on the practical aspects of medieval jousting "so subtly that it does not protrude as scholarship," as he described in the letter mentioned above.⁴⁷

Although likely for his own amusement, we observe Steinbeck imitate rhetorical strategies of other Arthurian authors, namely Malory. Malory, Geoffrey of Monmouth, and many other authors throughout the later Middle Ages position themselves regarding their writing as translators, compilers, or adaptors of earlier works. It is no secret that Malory created his Arthurian saga by synthesizing many existing French Arthurian legends, and Malory himself writes over and over again, "As the booke of Frenshe makyth mencion."⁴⁸ Steinbeck imitates this medieval rhetorical convention writing, "Now as the Frensshe books say and Malory also, as well as Caxton and Southey, Sommer and Coneybear, Tennyson, Vinaver, and many others."⁴⁹ By including this antiquated convention, Steinbeck again reaffirms his goal in portraying his work as an adaption of *Morte*. The inclusion of such examples solidifies the parallel of Malory and Steinbeck as translators of their source materials.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the inclusion of the other

⁴⁶ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 192-193.

⁴⁷ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 192-193

⁴⁸ Malory, Sir Thomas. *Le Morte D'Arthur* (W.W. Norton Company), 462.

⁴⁹ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 296.

⁵⁰ Malory translates from Chrétien, and Steinbeck translates from Malory.

names showcases his holistic readings of other Arthurian authors and scholars, further separating his work from those of Twain or White, twentieth century contemporaries of Steinbeck that also engaged in Arthurian literature.⁵¹

Steinbeck made efforts to solidify his text as an adaptation of Malory rather than a wholly original work by employing paratext quotations straight from *Morte*. Steinbeck used direct quotations from Malory's Middle English to transition between scenes. In one instance Steinbeck writes, "Now leve we thes knyghtes presoners, and spek we of sir Lancelot de Lake that lyeth undir the appil-tre slepyng."⁵² By examining the corresponding text in Malory, we find this quotation to be exact unto the letter.⁵³ Steinbeck continues this trend once more writing:

Now turn we back to Yonge Syr Gaherys who rode into the manor of Syr Tarquin slayne by Lancelot. And there he found a yoman porter kepyng many keyes. Than sir Gaherys threw the porter unto the grounde and toke the keyes frome hym; and hastily he opynde the person dore, and there he lette all the presoners oute, and every man lowsed other of their bondys.⁵⁴

Again, this passage is a word-for-word quotation from the source.⁵⁵ With this rhetorical strategy, Steinbeck again communicates his desire for his work to receive comparison to that of other Arthurian legends.⁵⁶ Steinbeck emphasizes his role as adaptor of Malory through these direct quotations, allowing the work to be read in comparison to Malory, Chrétien, and the other legends of Arthuriana.

⁵¹ Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* is regarded as an enjoyable piece of satire, and White's *The Once and Future King* is the preeminent work of modern Arthurian literature. Steinbeck's exists as a different project altogether.

⁵² Steinbeck, *Acts*, 244.

⁵³ See Malory, *Morte*, 154.

⁵⁴ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 286.

⁵⁵ Malory, *Morte*, 163.

⁵⁶ It is worth noting that these quotations come from the chapter "The Noble Tale of Sir Lancelot of the Lake," the section of which Steinbeck was most satisfied.

These examples highlight the qualified medievalism that Steinbeck places in his work. By examining his letters on the construction of *Acts*, we observe that a faithful production of Arthurian literature to the source material was of paramount importance to Steinbeck, and he succeeds in this regard. Steinbeck's years of diligent research resulted in the adaptations of the *Morte* that we have today, and we can observe the quality of the work through a medievalist lens although the work was unfinished and unedited. Had Steinbeck finished, he would have produced a powerful work of medievalist literature cementing himself among the ranks of Malory and Chrétien.

STEINBECK AND THE ARTHURIAN INFLUENCE

One would be hard-pressed to overstate the influence of Malory and *Le Morte D'Arthur* on Steinbeck's life. Steinbeck himself admits, "The Matter of Arthur is the Matter of Me."⁵⁷ As mentioned, it is a well-documented, although briefly studied, fact that Steinbeck drew on Arthurian themes in his writing. However, most attempts at contextualizing King Arthur's influence fall short of understanding and communicating just how important Arthuriana was to Steinbeck in every arena of his life. Pascal Covici Jr, the son of one of Steinbeck's closest friends, writes, "The life of John Steinbeck would emerge more clearly to us if we tried to ascertain just what Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* meant to Steinbeck."⁵⁸ The myth and essence of Arthur remains much more important to Steinbeck than commonly understood.

⁵⁷ John Steinbeck, Letter dated July 5, 1965. Not in *Letters*, found in RC Mitchell's "Steinbeck and Malory"

⁵⁸ Covici, Pascal Jr. "Steinbeck's Quest For Magnanimity," *Steinbeck Quarterly* 1977 Vol. 10 No.03-04. 79.

Steinbeck's infatuation with Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table, and a mythic idealized Britain took root in his childhood. We need only look to the dedication of *Acts* to gather the influence of Arthuriana on Steinbeck's childhood:

I toke siege wyth King Arthurs felyship emonge knyghtes most orgulus and worshyppful as ony on lyve. In tho days grate lack was of squyres of hardynesse and noble herte to bere shyldes and glaive to bockle harnyss and succoure wounded knyghtes. Than yit chaunced that squyre lyke dutyes fell to my systir of vi wyntre age that for jantyl prouesse had no felawe lyvyng, Yt haps somtymes in saddnesse and pytie that who faithful servys ys not faithful sene so my fayre and sikker systir squyre dures yet undubbed. Wherefore thys day I mak amendys to my power and rayse hir knyghte and gyff hir loudis. And fro thys hower she shall be byght Sir Mayrie Stynebec of the Vayle Salynis. God gyve hir worshypp saunz jaupardye. – Jehan Stynebec de Montray.⁵⁹

To compose his dedication entirely in Middle English displays Steinbeck's infatuation with Arthuriana more than any argument or extrapolation on his novels, letters, or biographies. We cannot overstate his passion for Arthurian nor the immense importance Steinbeck places on the task of presenting Arthur to a twentieth century reader.

Steinbeck's focus on Arthuriana infected every realm of his life, not just his published works. In his introduction to *Acts*, Steinbeck detailed his first encounter with Malory, explaining that his aunt gave him an abridged Caxton version of Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, and from there, "The pages opened and let me in. The magic happened."⁶⁰ On this idea of magic in Steinbeck's mind, Jackson Benson writes, "In reading Malory, the 'magic' happens... He believed in fairy tales, but in the way that

⁵⁹ Steinbeck, *Acts*, v.

⁶⁰ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 1.

very romantic boys and young men believe in them – as a hope for something special.”⁶¹ Throughout his life, Steinbeck compared the influence of Malory on him to the foundational influence the Bible or Shakespeare has on others.⁶² These ideas or this emphasis is not particularly new, but its influence on the rest of Steinbeck’s life is pivotal in understanding Steinbeck’s writing. Steinbeck adored *Morte* and builds his life upon the principles found in Arthuriana.

Not only did Malory spark Steinbeck’s interest in literature in his youth, Steinbeck’s passion for the romantic idealism in Malory was the chief motivator for his pursuit of writing.⁶³ On the influence of Malory, Benson writes, “It [*Le Morte D’Arthur*] was a book that stayed with him on an intimate basis throughout his life... and he even acted as if, at times, he saw it as a metaphor for his own life.”⁶⁴ Steinbeck’s affinity for Arthuriana did not exist as a childhood fantasy that he later abandoned in favor of more respectable literary method and influence. It overwhelmed him and shaped his identity.

In Steinbeck, we observe Malorian influence in every corner of his life, not just his literature. Steinbeck’s ardent love for the strict moral code that directs and guides knights such as Launcelot, Galahad, and Percival left Steinbeck desperate for this sort of romantic code in his own time. Steinbeck’s literature, especially his later publications like *The Winter of our Discontent*, demonstrated a profound concern for the direction of American values, and Steinbeck obsessed over a perceived decay in morality as he aged. Benson summarizes these sentiments in Steinbeck best by writing, “He was not a

⁶¹ Benson, *John Steinbeck*, 29-30.

⁶² Steinbeck, *Acts*, 1.

⁶³ Benson, *John Steinbeck*, 117.

⁶⁴ Benson, *John Steinbeck*, 804.

philosopher... He was a man with ideas about human nature – about freedom and responsibility, courage and conformity, private morality and public duty.”⁶⁵ Benson’s identification of Steinbeck’s concern of freedom, responsibility, courage, conformity, private morality, and public duty derive from Arthur’s establishment of his knights as protectors of the realm.⁶⁶ These concerns are the concerns of Camelot, and in turn – Steinbeck. In his other literature, we need only look to Ethan Hawley in *Winter* to understand the moral weight and foundation that Malory occupied in Steinbeck’s worldview. After Ethan’s (Launcelot’s) moral failings, he despairs and resolves to quietly go to his death and obscurity by drowning in a cave. However, his daughter’s (Galahad’s) moral purity and possession of a family talisman (The Grail) remind Ethan of the virtues mentioned above leading him to seek redemption.⁶⁷ Furthermore, Steinbeck placed a copy of *Morte* among the classics in Ethan Hawley’s collection which further solidifies a reading of this sort.⁶⁸ The romantic moral code that abounds in Malory took hold of Steinbeck and never let go. In his second letter on the project, Steinbeck writes, “I shall try to put down what I think has been the impact of this book on our language, our attitudes, and morals, and our ethics.”⁶⁹ We observe Steinbeck positing solutions to this moral disintegration by applying Arthurian themes in all of his works, but most profoundly in *Acts*.

⁶⁵ Benson, *John Steinbeck*, 832

⁶⁶ See John Steinbeck, *Acts*, 221-228.

⁶⁷ For widely-accepted interpretations of this sort see Andrew E. Mathis *The King Arthur Myth in Modern American Literature* (McFarland & Company Publishers).

⁶⁸ John Steinbeck, *The Winter of Our Discontent* (Viking Group), 80. It is worth noting that here Steinbeck refers to Malory as “The great, manly Malory.”

⁶⁹ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 318.

Steinbeck's political beliefs and affiliations often stand as the chief fascination of those with any sort of interest in him or his writing. Steinbeck's refusal to fall in line with any popular political orthodoxy and his general disillusion with the entire American political landscape resulted in him receiving criticism from the entire spectrum. By this point, it must come as no surprise that Steinbeck's "political" beliefs and moral code derived from his reading and obsession with Malory. Benson paraphrases Steinbeck's romanticism by writing, "John mused, we have our own Galahads and Mordreds on the street corners and along the highways of our day. But just as the knights in Malory's time needed direction, purpose... this movement today needed an Arthur and a Round Table to hold it together."⁷⁰ This summary of Steinbeck's worldview gives insight into the ever-present romantic idealism of the Round Table that enamored Steinbeck from his youth. However, in terms of a practical political/moral belief system, we continue to observe the Malorian influence on Steinbeck's thought:

He distrusted 'givens' of all sorts – political, social, or personal – yet he had a rather rigid code of personal morality (which did not match conventional morality of the narrowest sort). His code appeared to be partly drawn from his favorite reading – the chivalric code as seen in the *Morte D'Arthur*... A man must have courage, not just physical courage, but the courage to do the 'right thing' even though everyone else around may not understand or approve... All of these values were tied to his appreciation for independence.⁷¹

Attempts to place Steinbeck within a particular political philosophy do not work. In a world of realism, modernism, and emerging post-modernism, Steinbeck latched onto a moral code

⁷⁰ Benson, *John Steinbeck*, 1024.

⁷¹ Benson, *John Steinbeck*, 720.

appropriated directly from the moral code championed by Malory, and he was a rugged individualist comparable to a knight errant for his entire life.

III. OVERVIEW OF SCHOLARSHIP

SCHOLARSHIP ON *ACTS*

Steinbeck scholars approach Steinbeck's adaption of *Le Morte D'Arthur* with a reluctance to examine any merit the text possesses. Steinbeck's fascination with Arthuriana is a well-documented fact observed in his extensive collection of letters, *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*, and Arthurian themes abound in all of Steinbeck's writings. From his earliest publications *Cup of Gold* and *Tortilla Flat* to his final controversial work *The Winter of Our Discontent*, Arthurian motifs characterize Steinbeck's narratives. Scholars appear to possess an ardent desire to examine and praise the use of Arthurian themes as metaphor, allusion, or allegory across his body of works, yet his venture into genuine Arthurian literature lies relatively untouched. Since its postmortem publication in 1976, Steinbeck's *Acts* exists as the black sheep of his writing especially in areas of critical reading, thematic strength, and cultural relevance and interpretation, despite Steinbeck's overwhelming passion and pride in the endeavor.

Scholars studying Arthurian literature in America often provide sustained examinations of Steinbeck and his use of the Arthurian theme. Nonetheless, *Acts* receives minimal attention, written off as an unfinished work and a failure. Andrew E. Mathis in *The King Arthur Myth in Modern American Literature* dedicates two of the seven chapters in his book to discussing the

Arthurian themes in Steinbeck.⁷² Yet, he devotes a meager five pages to direct analysis of *Acts*. In a similar fashion, Alan and Barbara Lupack in *King Arthur in America*⁷³ devote one of eight chapters to examining Arthuriana in Steinbeck, but the examination of *Acts* receives little attention. Mathis and the Lupacks are hesitant to elevate the relevance of *Acts* for a few reasons. It appears most serious American scholars of Arthuriana view *Acts* as a blight in the career of one of the greatest American authors, so stowing it away and pretending it does not exist then seems appropriate. Steinbeck published his last novel and last commercial success *The Winter of Our Discontent* after walking away from Malory, and critics tend to speak of *Winter* as Steinbeck's return to greatness akin to *The Grapes of Wrath*, although Steinbeck himself detested this sort of understanding.⁷⁴ Scholars of American Arthuriana passionately debate the merits of *The Winter of Our Discontent*. To the American public, it achieved success and acclaim that approaches *The Grapes of Wrath* or *East of Eden*, and according to Mathis, "Despite its Shakespearean title, *Winter* is Steinbeck's most Malory-influenced work," (Mathis, 89), which comes across as a ridiculous sentiment because the Steinbeck Estate had made the *Acts* manuscripts available by the time Mathis published his scholarship.

Alan and Barbara Lupack begin their chapter on Steinbeck's Arthurian theme with most of the attention directed towards *Winter*, the work Steinbeck completed while working on his Malory. These authors tend to spend large parts of their writing broadly examining Steinbeck's Arthurian themes, like the reading paraphrased above dealing with the parallels between Ethan Hawley and Launcelot in *Winter*. The authors often do not include close readings of Steinbeck, and the few close readings do not deal with *Acts*. Instead, These works aim to provide broad

⁷² Andrew E. Mathis, *The King Arthur Myth in Modern American Literature*, (McFarland & Company Publishers).

⁷³ Alan and Barbara Lupack, *King Arthur in America* (D.S. Brewer).

⁷⁴ Benson, *John Steinbeck*, 880 & 898.

summaries of Arthurian themes employed by some of America's greatest authors. However, the disregard for Steinbeck's efforts with the Winchester Manuscript of *Morte* is baffling, especially considering the research interests of these scholars. It appears these scholars possess disdain for Steinbeck's *Acts* due to its uniqueness relative to the rest of Steinbeck's canon, remaining comfortable examining works that are more typical of Steinbeck.

Steinbeckian scholars take a similar approach to *Acts*. It does receive some attention, and journal articles dedicated to *Acts* exist in *The Steinbeck Review*⁷⁵ and *The Steinbeck Quarterly*⁷⁶, but due to their research interests, scholars prefer to mention the work in context of Steinbeck's final publications – *The Winter of Our Discontent*, *Travels with Charley*, and *American and Americans*. Alec Gilmore exemplifies this sort of view in arguing, “But did Steinbeck's writing go off after failing to find the Holy Grail, or is *The Winter of Our Discontent* a sign that he had in fact found it, albeit not quite what he had been looking for.”⁷⁷ The popular consensus regarding *Acts* admires the attempt in a conciliatory sense viewing Steinbeck as out of his depth and eventually despairing, so he returns to what he knows with *Winter*. Another example of scholarly consensus on Steinbeck's approach, Daniel Helbert writes, “Steinbeck's adaptation suffered from this admirable but schizophrenic approach.”⁷⁸ After this condescending synopsis on Steinbeck's method, Helbert parrots established readings on the Arthurian themes in Steinbeck's other works. Furthermore, the strongest scholarship on *Acts* arose immediately following its publishing in 1976 from renown Steinbeck scholars,⁷⁹ suggesting that *Acts* has continued to fall further and further into obscurity. Researchers of Steinbeck disregard Steinbeck's Malory episode as an

⁷⁵ *The Steinbeck Review* (Penn State University Press: 2004-2021).

⁷⁶ *The Steinbeck Journal* (Ball State University: 1968-1993).

⁷⁷ Alec Gilmore, “Steinbeck's Translation of Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*: Success or Failure” *The Steinbeck Review Vol 12 No. 1*, 74.

⁷⁸ Daniel Helbert, “Malory in America” in *A New Companion to Malory* (D.S. Brewer), 314.

⁷⁹ Scholars such as Pascal Covici Jr, Roy Simmonds, Warren French, John Gardner, and Robin Mitchell.

attempt to rekindle a childhood infatuation combined with an exploration of morality that morphs into *The Winter of our Discontent*. However, these attitudes misunderstand the value which Steinbeck places on adapting *Le Morte D'Arthur* for the modern reader.

IV. THEMATIC INVESTIGATION AND SIGNIFICANCE

MALORY, STEINBECK, AND WOMEN

Steinbeck's most sustained departure from Malory appears in the complete reworking and invention of female characters in *Acts*. Steinbeck includes the typical hallmark scenes and characters of Guinevere, Morgan Le Fay, Morgause, and Nyneve, but we also observe the first large departures from the source through Steinbeck's elaboration on the women in "VI. Gawain, Ewain, and Marhalt." Steinbeck does not whitewash the members of the Round Table or hide a pseudo-medieval Britain's misogyny and oppressive nature. However, Steinbeck's approach to women in this work is consistent to the realism that we observe across Steinbeck's writing. Furthermore, Steinbeck's inventions with women in the work display Steinbeck's evolving attitude towards translation and proves his assumption of the role of an interpretive translator akin to Malory or Chrétien. Through the female characters in *Acts*, we can better understand the moral message and the quality of the work, with Steinbeck settling into the role of interpretive translator.

In a letter to his editor, Steinbeck complained, "I am constantly amazed at the feeling about women. Malory doesn't like them much unless they are sticks."⁸⁰ Malory left Steinbeck

⁸⁰ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 385.

little to work with in regard to female characters containing literary agency. Looking to the early parts of *Morte* and *Acts*, we observe next to no mentions of female characters besides the Lady of the Lake and the woman bearing the sword that Balin claims. Compared to Malory, Steinbeck translated Arthur's encounter with the Lady of the Lake economically from the Winchester Manuscript, displaying the initial approach Steinbeck took towards Malory.⁸¹ Steinbeck was cautious in departing from the source for a time. We observe his initial hesitancy in his writing:

I intend to translate into a modern English, keeping or rather trying to re-create, a rhythm and tone which to the modern ear will have the same effect as the Middle English did on the fifteenth-century ear...I think that is all for now. I am aching to get to work after the years of preparation. And I'm scared also.⁸²

We can also look to the damsel that approaches the court with the sword that Balin insists on keeping. In Arthurian legend, this is one of the first mythical quests after Arthur's consolidation of his realm. The lady that bestows Excalibur unto Arthur comes to Camelot to exact a favor in return for the sword, but Balin executes her in the court, earning him banishment from the realm. From here, Balin adventures throughout Britain, and Balin and his twin brother Balan unknowingly joust and kill each other which Malory foreshadows as the death of Tristan by Launcelot.⁸³ Through this lady of the lake, we observe another one of Malory's "sticks." Although Malory provides the damsel with lengthy (for Malory) back and forth dialogue between Arthur and then Balin, she is only a plot device, a vehicle to carry forth the narrative of Balin's doom. In this same scene, we observe the return of the Lady of the Lake that bestows Excalibur to Arthur, and Steinbeck once translates economically with the method described above. Malory's portrayal of women as "sticks" was a driving force in Steinbeck eventually

⁸¹ See Steinbeck, *Acts*, 50-51 and Malory, *Morte*, 37.

⁸² Steinbeck, *Acts*, 344-45.

⁸³ Malory, *Morte*, 40-62.

adjusting his approach to translation. Steinbeck's initial attempt at translating render his female characters as lifeless as Malory's. The lifelessness of the lady of the lake and other women early in Steinbeck's translation stands as a chief motivator in his gradual departure from Malorian convention.

As mentioned, Steinbeck did not make noticeable attempts to remove all ideas of women as deceitful, evil, or full of sorcery. In *Acts*, Steinbeck emphasized the moral ambiguity of Nyneve, another lady of the lake, and the blunt evil of Morgan Le Fay. By so doing, Steinbeck bestowed agency unto the women in Arthuriana, showing pivotal narrative scenes dominated by women. For example, Steinbeck's Morgan Le Fay exists as a player in the narrative with as much power and agency as Arthur or Launcelot, and Steinbeck did so intentionally. Susan Austin cleverly points out that, "Steinbeck expresses his appreciation of Morgan as a character (380), an appreciation for the character and her role that apparently led him to change a chapter title from Vinaver's edition, 'Arthur and Accolon' to 'Morgan LeFay.'"⁸⁴ Furthermore, Steinbeck's introduction to this chapter provides insight into his goal for portraying the powerful women actors:

Morgan Le Fay, King Arthur's Half-Sister, was a dark, handsome, passionate woman, and cruel and ambitious. In a nunnery she studied necromancy and became proficient in the dark and destructive magic which is the weapon of the jealous. She joyed in bending and warping men to her will through beauty and enchantment, and when these failed she used the blacker arts of treason and murder. It was her pleasure to use men against men, fashioning from their weaknesses weapons for their strength.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Susan L. Austin, "Gender and class in John Steinbeck's *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*," *Arthurian Legend in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries*, 54.

⁸⁵ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 119.

Nothing resembling this passage exists in Malory. Steinbeck shifted the focus with the change of the section's title, and he introduced the chapter with a character study of Morgan, who is the dominating actor for the events regarding Arthur, Accolon, and Uriens. In Malory, the focus is on Arthur and Accolon, and Uriens. Malory alludes to Morgan vaguely in this section through the actions of Morgan's damsels, but she is a vague force rather than a concrete character with agency in the narrative. Besides a few added lines of Merlin's and a witty mention of Malory, Steinbeck does not depart from his source material.⁸⁶ Steinbeck's first sustained departure from Malory arises in presenting Morgan Le Fay, true to Malory in her actions and morals but a drastically more present and powerful narrative agent. By emphasizing Morgan's antagonistic presence in *Acts*, Steinbeck avoided the misstep of cleansing his narrative into a polar opposite direction of women as agentless, good sticks. Albeit twisted, Steinbeck gave reason to Morgan's motives, presenting her as an embittered, hardened woman that rejoices in her manipulation. Through these inventions, Steinbeck brings Morgan to life through her corrupted motives, while retaining the narrative integrity of Arthurian Legend.

Steinbeck's dealing with Nynveve presents an interesting opportunity for examination. As discussed above, Morgan remains a flat character in Steinbeck. Steinbeck displayed the complexity of her motives, her power in the narrative, and even her ability to experience genuine human emotion, but she does not appear to evolve in the portion of the work that Steinbeck completed. Nynveve possesses comparable narrative efficacy to Morgan. However, Steinbeck utilized Nynveve in a different fashion. Steinbeck used Nynveve to show humanity's complexity,

⁸⁶ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 42 & 68. These contain Steinbeck's earliest departures from Malory.

emphasizing an individual's potential to do extreme harm or extreme good, and we do not find this plurality anywhere in Malory's women.

In Arthurian legend, Nyneve exists as a mystical Lady of the Lake that aids in directing the narrative towards Arthur's eventual fall and ambiguous departure from Britain, mainly by removing Merlin from the story. Nyneve's first appearance in Arthuriana centers around Merlin's infatuation with her, and Nyneve's abuse of Merlin – imprisoning him in a magic cell of his own making by her treachery. In Malory, we observe a Merlin infatuated with Nyneve, “alwayes he lay aboute to have hir maydnhode, and she was every passynge wery of hym and wolde have bene delyverde of hym, for she was aferde of hym for cause he was a devyls son.”⁸⁷ A relationship between Merlin the omniscient counselor of the legendary King Arthur and a young lady contains a significant disparity in power, but Steinbeck chose to emphasize the capability of Nyneve to outwit and defeat Merlin, “She [Nyneve] was weary of him, and impatient with an old man as a damsel must be, and also she was afraid of him because he was said to be the Devil's son.”⁸⁸ Although similar, Steinbeck makes an important distinction. The fear of Merlin for his relation to the devil was an insignificant afterthought in Steinbeck. Nyneve's desire to trap Merlin for eternity arises out of Merlin's unethical methods for pursuing Nyneve, rather than fear of his nature as a child of the Devil. Steinbeck also writes:

Nyneve leaped back and cast the awful spell that cannot be broken by any means... She could hear his voice faintly through the rock, pleading for release. And Nyneve mounted her horse and rode away. And Merlin remains there to this day, as he knew he would be.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Malory, *Morte*, 79.

⁸⁸ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 110.

⁸⁹ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 111.

From these quotes and the context of Merlin's station, we can see Merlin's downfall resulting from his abuse and harassment of Nyneve, and we gain sympathy for his victim Nyneve and an appreciation for her cunning. However, we must also keep in mind the damage that the imprisonment of Merlin eventually causes in Arthur's reign and the fate of Britain.

Through Nyneve, Steinbeck presented the reader with a complex character in an impossible situation. Appeasing Merlin would require Nyneve to submit to a relationship with an oppressor out of fear, but imprisoning Merlin brings certain disaster to Arthur's reign. At the end of the chapter "Morgan Le Fay," Steinbeck details the combat between King Arthur and Sir Accolon, Morgan's paramour. In Arthuriana legend, Morgan Le Fay orchestrates a duel between Arthur (her half-brother) and Accolon in an attempt to kill Arthur and seize the throne. Morgan does so by procuring the legendary Excalibur and the scabbard that prevents Arthur from injury and giving these to Accolon, leaving Arthur in a hopeless situation if not for Nyneve. Steinbeck presents Nyneve's *deus ex machina*:

As they opened the fight, Nyneve of the Lake rode up, driving her horse fast, the same damsel who had beguiled Merlin and sealed him in the rock. The necromantic art she had wrung from the adoring old man had given her power, but also it aroused rivalry and suspicion in Morgan le Fay. Nyneve loved the king and hated his evil sister.⁹⁰

Through this brief passage, Steinbeck adds dimension to Nyneve's nature, integrity, and allegiance. This passage displays the dynamic nature of Steinbeck's humans in *Acts* by showing a hesitancy to reduce motives to matters of black and white. If Nyneve loved the king, why would she permanently imprison his chief counsel? Perhaps Nyneve and others viewed Merlin as a deceptive and malicious influence similar to Morgan? Perhaps she regretted the actions and

⁹⁰ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 125.

attempts to make amends by coming to the king's aid in an attempt to fill the void she created by trapping Merlin, or perhaps Nyneve matures upon receiving the necromantic arts and desires to fill the void she creates by imprisoning Merlin. Through this brief passage, Steinbeck's characterization of Nyneve opens the door for complex examination of morality, agency, and the human potential to do good or evil.

As the battle between Accolon and Arthur orchestrated by Morgan Le Fay progresses, Accolon presses Arthur to his death and stands ready to execute the king unknowingly. Accolon gains the upper hand in this fight thanks to Morgan's treachery in stealing Excalibur and its sheath, and Nyneve decides to intervene. Steinbeck writes:

Nyneve had watched the combat hoping for the decision of God against the treason of Morgan le Fay, but when she saw Arthur's last despairing stroke with the broken sword and Accolon recover his strength and advance on the weak and disarmed king, she knew that he was lost without her help. Then she searched her memory for Merlin's teaching and she forged a spell and flung it with her eyes at the advancing traitor.⁹¹

Here Steinbeck equates the ability of Nyneve's to the "decision of God." Morgan and Nyneve operate on a level superior to that of Arthur and Accolon that Arthur and Accolon appear to be chess pieces in a match between Morgan and Nyneve. Austin quotes Dorsey Armstrong arguing, "Armstrong notes that during the battle that Morgan sets up between them, 'Although Arthur and Accolon strike the blows, Nyneve and Morgan are locked in combat just as surely as are king and knight.'"⁹² Malory acknowledged the presence of Nyneve and Morgan in this scene and does detail their employment of sorcery, but Steinbeck ran with it, creating a new dynamic between

⁹¹ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 126.

⁹² Austin, "Gender and Class," 57.

the two women. By drawing the parallel between Arthur versus Accolon and Nynve versus Morgan, Steinbeck portrayed the women as possessing the efficacy in the fight.

The triple quest of Gawain, Marhalt, and Ewaine stands as an excellent example for investigating Steinbeck's use of women in *Acts*. The triple quest refers to the events of Gawain, Ewain, and Marhalt throughout their yearlong banishment from Arthur's court. During their search for adventure, the three knights encounter a trio of women sitting beside a well. Each knight receives a woman as their respective guide for the next year, and the knights go their separate ways seeking fame and glory. Gawain, per usual, incites disaster amongst everyone he encounters. Marhalt earns fame in a tournament and by defeating a giant. Ewain emerges as a competent knight despite his inability at the outset of the quest. The triple quest is insignificant in Malory, besides foreshadowing of the arrival of Launcelot and the Holy Grail, Malory places little to no literary force on the other events of Gawain, Ewaine, Marhalt, and their ladies. Steinbeck, however, repurposed Malory's disinterest, opting to provide the reader with pronounced exposition on the quests of the three knights, and Steinbeck brings the ladies to life, presenting each of them in comparison with their respective knight. In her article "Lessons from Ladies in Steinbeck's 'Gawain, Ewain, and Marhalt,'" Mary C. Williams writes, "Through the damsels of the fountain and their lessons, Steinbeck adds thematic interest and narrative control to 'Gawain, Ewain, and Marhalt.' In addition, these likable women, who are anything but 'sticks' give a sense both of what a medieval woman's life was."⁹³ Steinbeck's repurposing of the triple quest breathes life into the narrative by creating meaningful, realistic dialogue and dynamics

⁹³ Mary C. Williams, "Lessons from Ladies in Steinbeck's 'Gawain, Ewain, and Marhalt,'" *Avalon to Camelot* 1.4, 41.

between the three couples. The women in Steinbeck's triple quest come to life providing ample opportunity for investigating Steinbeckian themes in *Acts*.

From Steinbeck's letters, we gather that this section of *Acts* is the first one of which his editors, Chase Horton and Elizabeth Otis, approved. Although we do not possess their responses to Steinbeck, we see him write, "I'm glad the triple quest pleases you a little, Chase. At least it gives some reason for the three damsels."⁹⁴ These two sentences contrast starkly with earlier comments Steinbeck makes to his editors. For example, "I am moved by your letter with the implied trust in something you don't much like," and "The answer seems to be that you expected one kind of thing and you didn't get it. Therefore you have every right to be confused as you say and disappointed."⁹⁵ The praise of the editors arose from their reading of the "Gawain, Ewain, and Marhalt" chapter, and the disappointment and reproof came from the early "Merlin" chapter. In terms of method, one can read these two chapters with *Morte* nearby and observe the difference in Steinbeck's translations. As mentioned, the first few chapters are not much more than word-for-word translations into twentieth century American English, but eventually Steinbeck began to realize his goal for *Acts* in this pivotal chapter.

On the subject of the triple quest, Steinbeck writes:

I am working now on Gawain, Ewain, and Marhalt... It's so full of loose ends, of details without purpose, of promises unkept... I think I am breathing some life into it but maybe not enough. As I go along I do grow less afraid of it. But there must be some reverence for the material because if you reject these stories you reject humans.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 378 & 390.

⁹⁵ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 374.

⁹⁶ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 383.

The triple quest and accompanying letters provide the reader with a sustained idea as to Steinbeck's goal in the project. He sought not to rewrite or misconstrue Malory, and he claimed and reinforced his reverence for the source material time and time again, but, to Steinbeck, it did not work for his time or imagined audience. He must revise. Part of that revision included breathing life into the loose ends and lack of direction, especially the sticklike women that Malory includes in his work.

The triple quest describes the events of Gawain, Ewain, and Marhalt. Arthur banished Morgan's son Ewain due to his mother's actions in attempting to murder the king through Accolon. Gawain, outraged by his cousin's banishment, joins Ewain. Marhalt, a battle-hardened Irish knight errant, jousts with Gawain with no victor emerging and joins the two knights. The knights encounter their soon-to-be ladies near a fountain, and Steinbeck described them by writing:

One lady was past middle age, and with the lean memory of beauty, and she wore a heavy chaplet of gold on her white hair. Besides her sat one of thirty years, full-blown and handsome, a golden circlet on her auburn hair, and the third a lovely child of fifteen but lately come to be a woman.⁹⁷

Ewain selects the eldest lady for guidance. Marhalt chooses the one of thirty years, and Gawain receives the youngest lady to his satisfaction. From this point, the knights depart with their respective lady guiding them to various adventures. These six characters contain diverse portrayals of Steinbeck's perception of humanity, highlighting his notions of virtue and vice. From here on we observe Steinbeck at his best, expanding on the narrative and characters of Malory with an equal focus on the ladies and their accompanying knights. By exploring the

⁹⁷Steinbeck, *Acts*, 147.

relationships between the women and their knights, Steinbeck esteems wisdom, humility, pragmatism, and integrity and rejects pride, superficiality, and ignorance. Through this addition, Steinbeck created a moral depth beyond that of Malory or other Arthurian literature, and the women were an integral vessel for communicating Steinbeck's morality.

Steinbeck's portrayal of Gawain and the nameless young girl allows Steinbeck to comment on modern maladies of the human condition, a prevailing theme throughout Steinbeck's canon. Steinbeck continues the Malorian tradition/French Arthurian tradition of portraying Gawain as a prideful, arrogant knight that abuses his privilege and proximity to the king and rarely possesses the ability to vindicate his boasting.⁹⁸ It coincides with his character then that Gawain rejoices at the "lovely child of fifteen" by explaining, "I thank you, gentle companions. The one remaining is the one I would have chosen at the risk of offending. For she is the youngest and fairest of all."⁹⁹ Here we observe a few key revelations. Gawain is superficial, preferring his companion on the basis of beauty. He is ignorant, using beauty as a determining factor in a dangerous, yearlong undertaking. For similar reasons, the girl is upset at her lot due to her desire for Ewain's companionship. She directs the knights to choose, "'As your hearts and minds direct,' said the damsel and she glances at the young Sir Ewain and dropped her eyes and blushed."¹⁰⁰ By drawing parallels between Gawain's and the young girl's reasoning for selection, we observe Steinbeck condemning the sensuality, the material, or physical obsession that drives Gawain's decision making. However, that is not to say that Steinbeck condemns or demeans the girl he creates. She provides a powerful parallel and important characterization of the fool that Gawain is throughout Steinbeck's writing. One expects the teenage girl to base her

⁹⁸ For more examples of this see Steinbeck, *Acts*, 88-89, 92-93, 154, 162. One can only imagine and mourn the absence of Steinbeck's adaptation of Gawain's search for vengeance on Launcelot for the death of his family.

⁹⁹ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 148.

¹⁰⁰ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 148.

preference on immature qualifications, but not the cousin of King Arthur and famous knight of the Round Table. By presenting the girl's and Gawain's priorities together, Steinbeck highlights the shortcomings of Gawain by his immaturity, sensuality, materialism, and the implied moral repugnance in his preference of a fifteen-year-old.

Steinbeck's portrayal of the young lady improves as he writes more of her, and Steinbeck evokes sympathy for her in the reader by expanding on the misery of close proximity with Gawain. Susan Austin points out that Steinbeck provided the young girl with much better reasons to abandon the haughty Gawain than Malory does.¹⁰¹ Gawain showcases his ignorance time and time again in his speech towards the girl, "How like a girl," said Gawain. "Thirsty, hungry, cold, overheated, sad, happy, loving, hating – always something to draw attention. Well, perhaps that is why girls are attractive."¹⁰² Gawain bestows no respect upon the girl, even descending into hypocritical insults. Steinbeck makes a point to emphasize the girl's rejection of Gawain's advances throughout their brief hours together,¹⁰³ which again presents an interesting opportunity to examine Gawain's character if the young girl cannot bear his company. On their second day together, the damsel abandons Gawain in favor of a "disappointed knight." Here Steinbeck rendered a depth and wisdom in the young girl superior to that of Gawain when she explains:

A woman is not misled by the features of a man. She looks more deeply for her love... He [Gawain] is not my love. I do not even like him... He [Gawain] is a

¹⁰¹ Austin, "Gender and Class," 60. Austin's article also presents compelling analyses on other women throughout Malory and Steinbeck not mentioned here, like Igraine, Arthur's mother.

¹⁰² Steinbeck, *Acts*, 150.

¹⁰³ One could argue Steinbeck emphasizes and glorifies celibacy as virtuous. Steinbeck lauds Launcelot before the start of his affair with Guinevere for his sexual piety and the girl refuses Gawain's advances. See Steinbeck, *Acts*, 285.

boaster. He thinks he is better than anyone else. He believes a lady has only to look at him to love him. Such a man needs a lesson.¹⁰⁴

Two days into a yearlong journey, the girl abandons Gawain in favor of another knight seemingly on a whim.¹⁰⁵ She succinctly explains the flaws that follow Gawain throughout most of the Arthurian tradition, and it is significant that Steinbeck used a young girl to provide importance characterization of such a prevalent figure in the Round Table. The young girl's brief presence in the Triple Quest highlights the failings of the prideful man, displays a deep knowledge of love, and exists a strong agent for characterizing Gawain.

Onto a more warmhearted portion of Steinbeck's tale, we now look to Sir Marhalt and the "lady of thirty years." It is worth noting that while Malory allocates a measly two to three pages for Marhalt's yearlong saga with the lady, Steinbeck expanded this section to occupy twenty odd pages for the adventures of the compatible duo.¹⁰⁶ In their journey, Marhalt and the new nameless lady experience a successful, comfortable journey that includes success at a tournament and the defeat of a giant at the hands of Marhalt. Steinbeck explained Marhalt's selection by writing, "I will choose the lady of maturity and grace. We too will have much in common...eased of vanities and not too demanding of each other."¹⁰⁷ Steinbeck immediately praises this lady for her air of maturity and grace, citing her assumed freedom from vanity as a desirable trait for companionship.¹⁰⁸ Steinbeck praised pragmatism and common-sense through Marhalt's companion. We first observe this in the contents of her bag containing items to

¹⁰⁴ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 154.

¹⁰⁵ It is worth noting that the young girl observes another lady select a dwarf over this knight shortly beforehand, adding to the deficiency of Gawain.

¹⁰⁶ Malory, *Morte*, 106-109.

¹⁰⁷ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 148.

¹⁰⁸ Steinbeck intentionally places Marhalt and his lady in the same chamber in the Duke of the South Border's estate on Steinbeck, *Acts*, 170. The lack of intimacy or romantic love suggests further notions of celibacy and sexual purity as virtues of Steinbeck as seen in the case of Gawain's companion, Launcelot, and others in Steinbeck's rendition of Arthur.

improve her and Marhalt's quality of life throughout their venture. Steinbeck adds Marhalt praising her by saying, "'How glad I am to have you for my guide,' he said. 'You are not only wise but also good company.'"¹⁰⁹ Through Marhalt's companion, we observe her leading the direction of the quest, not Marhalt. Steinbeck departed from Malory by elevating the status and agency of Marhalt's companion, making her the director of their fate.

Not only does Marhalt's guide possess the necessary knowledge to improve the quality of life for a knight errant, she guides Marhalt to endeavors within his ability that will increase his esteem. She explains, "Ladies who go on quest must be informed. This is about the time when Lady de Vawse holds her tournament... Then after that and farther south the young Earl Fergus has his seat. And I have heard that he is troubled by a giant."¹¹⁰ Marhalt's companion exists beyond the task of making their days more comfortable; she possesses the knowledge to guide Marhalt to glory, valor, and acclaim – the chief characteristics of a knight seeking membership to Arthur's Round Table. Steinbeck also continually positions Marhalt and his companions as equals. For example, Steinbeck noted, "Sir Marhalt was aware that being a good lady is as much a skill as being a good knight."¹¹¹ This short quote demonstrates the equal relationship between this duo. No where in Malory do we observe this sort of equality between a knight and another individual, much less a woman. Williams pointed out, "The skillful knight learns to appreciate 'the equally skillful lady' and comes to depend on her guidance as to his duties in the way of questing."¹¹² Steinbeck presented Marhalt's companion in possession of diverse knowledge

¹⁰⁹ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 165.

¹¹⁰ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 172.

¹¹¹ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 173.

¹¹² Williams, "Lessons from Ladies," 40.

allowing her to assume a role of equality with the greatest knight in Steinbeck's writing besides Launcelot.

The conflict that arises between the happy duo also allows Steinbeck to communicate important ideas from his own worldview.¹¹³ After Marhalt succeeds in overcoming the giant for Earl Fergus, Marhalt and his companion discuss sojourning with Fergus for some months until they must reunite with Gawain and Ewaine. They both succumb to the allure of inaction and reside in Fergus' estate. After some months in Fergus' domain, the two begin to bicker over trifling matters like an untidy chamber and Marhalt's supposed weight gain.¹¹⁴ The confrontation climaxes with the lady explaining, "You are restless, sir... It's because you have no responsibility."¹¹⁵ In this instance, we observe an important element of the lady's character. She understands the nature of Marhalt. A sedentary life does not offer the satisfaction that it seems, despite the allure that initially grasps both Marhalt and the lady. Their amiable dynamic depends on their actions, that of knight errant and questing guide respectively, but Marhalt cannot see this for himself. His satisfaction depends on the wisdom and knowledge possessed by his companion, despite his abounding humility and ability as a knight.

The last duo of the Triple Quest, Ewaine and Lynne, provide ample opportunity for thematic investigation and examination of female agency in *Acts*. Lynne is the only one of the three women at the fountain to receive a name from Steinbeck. An unfortunate circumstance, especially when advocating for the text's merit in its treatment of women. However, we must

¹¹³ The relationship between these two also presents interesting opportunities for analysis into Steinbeck's own life and struggles with companionship and marriage as outlined in *Letters*. Despite his insistence on Launcelot as the self-character, one can certainly observe the implicit influences of Steinbeck's own life in Marhalt and possibly Elaine Steinbeck or one of his previous two wives before Elaine in Marhalt's companion.

¹¹⁴ In this instance, we observe the two sharing a living quarters with no indication of a romance developing.

¹¹⁵ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 185.

ever remind ourselves that Steinbeck did not finish nor edit this work. It would be apologetically reasonable to assume Steinbeck might have named the other two women at the well at some point in the process of editing and revising, especially Marhalt's companion due to her presence and role in the chapter.¹¹⁶ On the other hand, Malory names none of them and gives them next to no dialogue, presence, agency or characterization throughout their short-lived presence in *Morte*, so Steinbeck's step is a step in the right direction for the body of Arthurian literature.

With Marhalt's companion, I argued that she exists in an equal role to that of her questing knight. The relationship dynamic between Lynne and Ewaine presents something beyond equality; Steinbeck places Lynne as master over Ewaine for the entirety of their time together. Lynne exemplifies prudence, wisdom, and pragmatism as a foil to necromancy, emphasizes the confines of her status in society, and is a superb example for Steinbeck's social commentary and passion for medievalism. We observe Lynne's status as master over Ewaine in a multitude of instances.

With that in mind, Steinbeck portrayed the young Ewaine as an obedient, eager-to-learn knight undeserving of his banishment from Arthur's court. As a result, it comes as no surprise that this ideal young man selects Lynne for, "I am the youngest of the three and not so strong and experienced; therefore, let me have the oldest lady. She has seen much and she can best help me when I have need, for I shall need help more than the others."¹¹⁷ Steinbeck promptly rewards Ewaine for his humility and strategy in choice, rather than choosing or acting impulsively like the other young men Steinbeck portrays.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Steinbeck also addresses this issue, seeming to portray it as mistake of Marhalt's rather than a shortcoming of his own writing, "I never thought to ask [her name]" Marhalt said." See Steinbeck, *Acts*, 187.

¹¹⁷ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 148.

¹¹⁸ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 231-233. For other mentions of young dumb boys in *Acts*. The idea of the immature youth is also covered in the section "Steinbeck and the Self-Character" below.

With Lynne, we observe one of the strongest departures from Malory in *Acts*. Upon returning to Ewaine and Lynne after the events of the other two duos, Steinbeck has Lynne explain, “I was afraid you might not choose me. I willed you to choose me, and you did – you did.”¹¹⁹ It would be easy to write this quotation off as evidence that Lynne possesses some sort of necromancy akin to Morgan le Fay’s or Nyneve’s, but Steinbeck makes it clear that Lynne does not approve of such practices. By including this dialogue, Steinbeck communicates the sheer power of Lynne’s will; she is a strong, domineering presence that exercises control of whoever is around her regardless of gender, kinship, or status.

In terms of narrative, Steinbeck also includes an important departure from his source material with Ewain and Lynne. Malory writes, “Now turne we unto Sir Uwayne that rode westward with his damesell of three score wyntir of ayge. And there was a turnemente nyghe the marche of Walys.”¹²⁰ Between Ewain’s selection (or Lynne’s selection) and the tournament mentioned by Malory, Steinbeck included a ten-month training arc for Ewain through Lynne instruction in the foundations of knightly combat, transforming him from a young boy to an able, formidable opponent. Throughout this training period, Steinbeck gives us some of the richest examples of social commentary in *Acts*. For example, in explaining her reasoning behind preferring Ewaine to the others, Lynne states:

I judged you among the others. Marhalt, a good dependable knight, a superb fighter, and might be great except that he is more good than great. But Marhalt is fixed. Nothing will change in him. Gawain? A temperament, a handsome ugly bachelor who feeds upon himself like those lizards who consume their tails.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 188.

¹²⁰ Malory, *Morte*, 109.

¹²¹ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 188.

Here we observe a continued condemnation of the pride that overwhelms and consumes Gawain, expressed most profoundly by Lynne. Furthermore, Steinbeck condemns the complacency of the modern man through Lynne's opinion of Marhalt. He and his companion obsess over their comfort above all else, and he cannot change. He is no longer malleable. Through Lynne, we observe Steinbeck confront the confines of gender that entomb individuals to roles and cultural elements that do not fit them. Lynne laments:

I watched the young boys practicing and I hated the hobbles of a gown. I was a better rider than they, a better hunter, as I proved, and alone with quintain I proved myself with spear. Only the accident of girlness prevented me from becoming more than equal to the boys.¹²²

It would be easy to misread this quotation and argue Steinbeck presented Lynne as an ally in the institutions that oppress and advocate the deficiency of women simply due to the phrase "accident of girlness," but this would be a gross error. Lynne rails against the extant confines towards women portraying them as deficient, not the women themselves. She proves that women possess no shortcoming in potential for equal or even greater ability in chivalric activity, but they remain limited and confined. This quotation alone signals a departure from Malory of greatest proportion, challenging the prejudices present in the source text rather than removing them altogether. Steinbeck saw the merit in confronting the issues prevailing in Malory's time and its parallels to Steinbeck's day.

In Lynne, we observe a wisdom and sensitivity that supersedes that of any character save maybe Launcelot. In their discussion of Arthur and Morgan, Ewain's mother, Steinbeck presented a dialogue as complicated as any in his canon and certainly more intricate than Malory

¹²² Steinbeck, Acts, 189.

or other Arthuriana. On the topic of Morgan Le Fay, Lynne poses questions to Ewain about his mother and his experience with a feared necromancer for a mother to which Ewain responds positively, except for when she is “not gay.” Ewain explains, “Well, then we have learned to slip away [when she is in a ‘bad temper’]. She is a person of very strong character.”¹²³ Ewain continues to explain, “She never uses magic. She has warned me about that.”¹²⁴ Here Steinbeck appears to remind Lynne as well as the reader of Ewain’s age. He is a young boy, despite his knighthood. He is naïve to his mother’s character and does not possess a pronounced worldview yet. We see Ewain continue to elaborate on Morgan by explaining, “A messenger came to her [Morgan] and she went black. And of course I slipped away as I have learned and went to the battlements.”¹²⁵ Ewain here inadvertently alludes to the domestic abuse inflicted on him by his mother Morgan through references to her temper and his instinctive inclination to escape her wrath. Although Ewain might not see it, Lynne does and despite her grizzled temperament, she responds in a sensitive and comforting manner to a boy with an abusive mother. Lynne does not explain that Morgan lies to Ewain on her abstinence from magic, and she does not press Ewain on his mother’s behavior when her temper sours. She asks the questions from a place of pure inquiry, understanding the sensitive nature of the subject, despite her obvious disdain for Morgan. Through this complicated scene and its delicate dialogue, Steinbeck conveyed a complex dynamic of domestic abuse at the hands of a wicked mother, and as Lynne navigated the situation with expert sensitivity, understanding the potential harm she could bring forth in Ewain.

¹²³ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 193.

¹²⁴ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 194.

¹²⁵ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 194

During Lynne's time training Ewaine, we observe her curiosity regarding King Arthur. Lynne asks Ewaine about the nature of the king and Ewain's interactions with the king, possibly out of curiosity or a desire to instruct Ewain. Ewain grapples with retelling a scene he observes of the king, but he eventually explains, "In the shadow of the tower, I saw the king – and he was weeping with his hands over his mouth to hold it in."¹²⁶ Ewain communicates his puzzlement by stating, "Only puzzling – because you see, ma'am, he is the king," and Lynne explains, "And you saw something human."¹²⁷ The humanity of Arthur stands as a central theme in modern adaptations of Arthuriana, particularly in T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*. However, glimmers of Arthur's character exist in *Morte*, but Malory often finds it easier to place him on the throne as an emotionless figurehead. Here, Steinbeck explored the issue of Arthur's human-knight duality with Ewain and Lynne's discussion.¹²⁸ Arthur is both. He is the king, the symbol for the realm. However, the title cannot strip him of all humanity, and Lynne is integral to advocating these ideas to both Ewain and the reader. Through these two examples, Steinbeck portrays Lynne as the most dynamic character in his work, giving her a qualified yet grizzled temperament, emotional intelligence and sensibility, and a profound understanding of the monarch and his dual nature of divinely appointed figurehead yet still human.

Through Lynne's conversation on Morgan with Ewaine, we can understand how she stands as a foil for necromancy or corruption to Steinbeck. However, other examples abound in

¹²⁶ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 194.

¹²⁷ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 194.

¹²⁸ It is worth noting that Ewain stumbles on Arthur while fleeing the wrath of his mother. The messenger that incites the wrath in Morgan likely relays the failure of the cloak to murder Arthur thanks to Nynveve, as told by Steinbeck at the beginning of this chapter. This connection displays an impressive command of narrative and a profound extrapolation and connection of source material by Steinbeck. Arthur and Ewain are connected by the wrath of Morgan, Arthur's half-sister and Ewain's mother.

this text that present her in complete opposition to Morgan through her motivations and actions.

For example, after coming to terms with her unmovable status in society, Lynne explains:

I recognized superiority and studied it and saw errors and remembered them until I knew possibly more than any knight living about the art of war. And there I sat, loaded with lore and no way to use it until – when the juices of my vanity dried up and the poison of my anger sweetened... I found an outlet for my knowledge. Have you known a young and untried knight to ride away and in a year return as tempered as a sword, as sure and deadly as an ashen spear?¹²⁹

Here we observe an action, or lack thereof, in Lynne that separates her from the characters like Morgan, her cohort, or even Gawain. She does not succumb to her vanity, anger, ambition or malice by applying her knowledge to the harm of those she perceives as more fortunate. She does not allow her knowledge to swell her pride to an insufferable portion. Rather, she waits. She finds a humble, thankless outlet worthy of devoting herself to – the betterment of the realm. Lynne's wisdom through her patience, knowledge, and self-denial in instructing places her in direct opposition to Morgan. Morgan's ambition, pride, and anger characterize her actions. Lynne seeks no higher station and remains passionately loyal to Arthur; she succumbs not to the anger of her oppression while Morgan feasts on it.

Steinbeck placed Lynne as master over Ewaine. Through the prior two duos, we observe a progression in the relationships presented. With Gawain and the young girl, the girl possesses no station in the dynamic with Gawain due to his pride. Between Marhalt and the lady of thirty years, we observe a dynamic of equality and mutual benefit. With Lynne and Ewaine, Lynne

¹²⁹ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 190.

dominates Ewain's life for the entire journey, especially the ten-month training period. On the subject of mastery, Lynne explains:

'You do fairly well, boy,' she said. 'I've seen better. I've watched your pride flare into anger again and again. 'I am a knight,' you said in your mind. 'How shall I live like a pig?' Do you know what 'knight' means? It is an old, old word. It means a servant, and that is well thought out, because who would be master must learn his trade by being mastered.'¹³⁰

As Marhalt directly acknowledges the equality between him and his lady, so Lynne explains the dynamic of her as master and Ewain as subject.

Lynne exists as one of the more pronounced, complex, and active characters in *Acts*. Lynne is a vehicle for Steinbeck to impart his worldview on the reader, glorifying a noble application of knowledge, wisdom, grit, sensitivity, and work ethic. By placing a woman (besides Morgan) as master over a knight, Lynne is a prime example of Steinbeck's success in departing from Malory.

The women of the Triple Quest exist are one of the earliest opportunities where Steinbeck attempted to reconcile the paradox of making *Acts* his own while remaining a translation of Malory's *Morte*. Steinbeck expands on the foundation of Malory as a source and makes the work distinctly modern and distinctly Steinbeckian. The three women at the fountain are important characters in communicating the prevailing themes of *Acts*. One can only lament that Steinbeck did not give two of them names on his first round of writing, but there is no doubt that he transforms Malory's sticks into important, commanding agents.

¹³⁰ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 197. This also further evidences Steinbeck's passion for philology, exploring the sources of the word Knight.

Once Steinbeck grows comfortable with adjusting significant portions of Malory's text, as Malory did with Chrétien, Steinbeck's female characters spring to life adding complex dimensions to the narrative, often expressing themes that are unique to Steinbeck's Arthuriana. Some of Steinbeck's richest writing arises in the Triple Quest and his augmentation of the women in *Morte*. Steinbeck changes Malory's sticks into dynamic, complex characters that often possess a greater ability to affect change than their corresponding men.

STEINBECKIAN APPLICABILITY IN *ACTS*

Although scholarship on Steinbeck's *Acts* exist, and few scholars present positive readings of Steinbeck's Arthurian venture; close-readings of the text and the corresponding letters do not abound. Many readers of Steinbeck possess a tendency to identify *Acts* as the black sheep of his oeuvres. In reality, most critical readers of *Acts* misunderstand it in the same fashion as critics of *Winter*.¹³¹ On the critical reception of *Winter*, Benson writes: "They [critics of *Winter*] were so locked into their expectations for him that they couldn't even see what he was doing... What he wrote was always measured against *The Grapes of Wrath*... He was frequently castigated for not growing, yet that was precisely what he had been doing."¹³²

On *Acts*' thematic prowess, Steinbeck wrote to Elizabeth Otis, "The work [*Acts*] I propose is not a period piece necessarily, and certainly not a specialized piece of work, but one

¹³¹ *Winter* must be seen as a work that arises directly from *Acts*, so we can often examine their characteristics and receptions together. It was also the last novel published by Steinbeck in his lifetime.

¹³² Benson, *John Steinbeck*, 897-898.

with applications in the present day and definitive roots in our living literature.”¹³³ With *Acts*, Steinbeck intended to depart from the cut-and-dry allegorical or even direct commentaries on American culture, class, and politics found in his more popular novels. However, Steinbeck wanted, “to *use* the Malory to say what he wanted to say about his own time... just as Malory had used the legends to speak to the 15th Century.”¹³⁴ Steinbeck’s *Acts* was intended to be a powerful adaptation of the *Morte* that existed as the culmination of every area of Steinbeck’s writing, including his characteristic moral fortitude.

In Steinbeck, especially in his later writings, morality or a lack thereof in American society becomes his chief concern. On the subject of his next book, Steinbeck responded to an interviewer with one word, “Immorality.”¹³⁵ Roy Simmonds, a preeminent Steinbeckian scholar writes, “Steinbeck nursed a feeling of intense disquiet over what he considered to be the continuing process of nationwide moral disintegration.”¹³⁶ If *The Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden*’s biblical allegory do not satisfy Steinbeck’s attempts to correct the moral shortcomings of his day, then the Arthuriana of Steinbeck’s later years must have been the answer. Although the idea of Steinbeck’s solution to American moral disintegration being Arthuriana may appear a stretch to some, Benson writes:

He was a man with ideas and theories about human nature – about freedom and responsibility, courage and conformity, private morality and public duty. For a man who at times was swept with romantic and mystical currents of feeling, he was strangely also a rationalist who observed a world full of problems, large and

¹³³ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 339.

¹³⁴ Benson, *John Steinbeck*, 858. (Emphasis Benson’s).

¹³⁵ Benson, *John Steinbeck*, 886. Although Benson argues this refers to *Winter*, we can understand it as both *Winter* and *Acts* due to the inseparable relation between the two in Steinbeck’s mind. *Acts* occupied the last twelve years of his life, while *Winter* sprung from *Acts*.

¹³⁶ Roy S. Simmonds, “The Unrealized Dream” *Steinbeck Monograph Series No. 5: The Arthurian Theme*, 35.

small, and considered many capable of solution... His solutions were usually unorthodox.¹³⁷

Benson identified the presence of unorthodox, uncommon moral solutions in Steinbeck, so where is the source of these unorthodox solutions? Benson also writes, “His code [political, social, and personal] appeared to be partly drawn from his favorite reading – the chivalric code as seen in the *Morte D’Arthur*.”¹³⁸ Through these quotations and subsequent investigation of Steinbeck, we observe that Steinbeck considered some form of chivalric idealism to be a solution to the problems confronting postwar America in the twentieth century. Steinbeck gradually presented his readers with more and more Arthuriana as his writing progressed with a never-realized culmination in *Acts*. In *Acts*, we observe moments of Steinbeck at his best, combining his romantic idealism, rationalism, and modernist disillusion to form a powerful work with concrete applications to Steinbeck’s time.

We can look to a letter dated August 10, 1959 to gather an understanding of Steinbeck’s method for presenting the applicable moral notions in *Acts*. On the Arthurian legends, Steinbeck wrote, “I believe these stories to be moral parables,”¹³⁹ but Steinbeck struggled with the balance between communicating the moral message of his adaptation without making the work a “period piece.”¹⁴⁰ We observe Steinbeck’s resolution in this same letter:

Where do you place Arthur? Malory believed he lived in the fifth century since he had Galahad take the Siege Perilous in 454 after the birth of Christ. He then proceeded to put his knights in fifteenth-century armor and impose the twelfth-thirteenth-century code of knighthood against a curious depopulated and ruined

¹³⁷ Benson, *John Steinbeck*, 832.

¹³⁸ Benson, *John Steinbeck*, 720.

¹³⁹ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 395.

¹⁴⁰ For an example on an Arthurian period piece of Steinbeck’s, see *Tortilla Flat* and its preface by Steinbeck explaining the Malorian parallels to his paisanos.

countryside... One thing Malory did – he placed his time as BEFORE. Now there is a curious time and one I have tried to adopt... But on the other hand the human problems must all be of the now. Malory put all of his fifteenth-century problems in the ‘before.’ And I must put the problems of our time in the ‘before.’¹⁴¹

Throughout *Acts*, textual examples of twentieth-century problems in the “before” abound. However, we look to Sir Kay the Seneschal, Sir Launcelot of the Lake, Morgan Le Fay and her queens, and Merlin and Arthur’s relationship to identify Steinbeckian application of modern problems to a pseudo “before” in Camelot.

By setting his period in the time of an ambiguous “Before,” Steinbeck mourned the condition of the modern man writing, “They [Gawain & Ewain] were glad and proud and humble to be men in a world where men were valuable.”¹⁴² Through the inclusion of this quote, Steinbeck put “the problems of our time in the ‘before’” as he set out to do, forcing the reader to confront the situation of the modern man when compared to that of the venturing, chivalric, “glad and proud and humble” knight. It is not until much later in the work that Steinbeck provides a victim of modern manhood in the “Before,” but he does so brilliantly through Kay the Seneschal, the foster-brother of King Arthur. Malory’s treatment of Kay is one of the most perplexing narrative choices or inconsistencies in the *Morte*. For example, Kay occupies a pivotal role in securing Arthur as the head of Britain in Arthur’s early wars against rebelling kings. Malory writes, “Sir Kay the Senesciall dyd passyngely well that days of hys lyff the worship wente never frome hym,”¹⁴³ and Steinbeck translates, “Sir Kay fought so well that day that the memory of his deeds has lived forever.”¹⁴⁴ However, as Malory’s narrative progresses, he writes of Kay through Sir

¹⁴¹ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 395.

¹⁴² Steinbeck, *Acts*, 140.

¹⁴³ Malory, *Morte*, 50.

¹⁴⁴ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 68. Worth noting that here we observe Steinbeck’s translation of “worship” as mentioned above in “Steinbeck as a Medievalist.”

Gawter, “He [Kay] wenyth [believes] no knight so good as he – and the contrary is oftyn proved!”¹⁴⁵ By this point, Steinbeck moved past word-to-word translation so the best description is, “You [Kay] are a liar, a cheat, a fool, a coward, and a dishonor to the order or knighthood.”¹⁴⁶ The contradiction is clear, so what happened? Malory does not provide explanation, the degrading characterization occurs suddenly.¹⁴⁷ Steinbeck handled Malory’s puzzling characterization, or lack thereof, masterfully by bestowing modern problems unto Kay.

Steinbeck embraces the puzzling nature of Kay through the dialogue of Launcelot. In a conversation with Kay, Launcelot asks:

You were a very lion at his [Arthur’s] side. Your name lighted terror in the king’s enemies. When the Five Kings of the North made war against Arthur, you with your own hands killed two of them, and the king himself said your name would live forever... what happened to you? Why are you mocked?¹⁴⁸

The decay of Kay seems inexplicable until Steinbeck elaborates through Kay himself:

Granite so hard that it will smash a hammer can be worn away by little grains of moving sand. And a heart that will not break under the great blows of fate can be eroded by the nibbling of numbers, the creeping of days, the numbing treachery of littleness, or important littleness. I could fight men but I was defeated by marching numbers on a page... If only I had never been seneschal! To you a feast is festive – to me it is a book of biting ants... Did you ever know a man of numbers who did not become small and mean and frightened – all greatness eaten

¹⁴⁵ Malory, *Morte*, 168.

¹⁴⁶ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 295.

¹⁴⁷ I believe it probably has to do with contradicting opinions of Kay across Arthurian sources for Malory. Welsh and English texts would treat Kay more hospitably than the French Chrétien. A similar situation arises in Gawain’s status within Arthuriana.

¹⁴⁸ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 290.

away by little numbers as marching ants... Men can be great and fallible – but numbers never fail.¹⁴⁹

After this monologue, Kay responds to Launcelot's encouragement by further explaining:

I am afraid. We call it caution, intelligence, farsightedness, having a level head, good conservative business sense – but it is only fear organized and undefeatable. Starting with little things, I have become afraid of everything. To a good man of business, venture is a sin against the holy logic of numbers. There is no hope for me – ever.¹⁵⁰

Although these quotations are extensive, they display the rich characterization and profound commentary in *Acts* that allow Steinbeck to communicate his concerns for the moral degeneracy he observes in his day.

This characterization of Kay as crippled by the nature of his office stands as a brilliant invention in Arthurian legend. By doing so, Steinbeck reconciles the contradiction in *Morte* and even synthesizes source materials for *Morte* that drastically differ in their perception and presentation of Kay's character. Through his observations on the office of Seneschal, Steinbeck draws parallels to the Seneschal and the modern man with "a good conservative-business sense." The masterful reconciliation by Steinbeck opens the door for unique investigation into Kay's character throughout the legend and must be regarded as an example of his medieval knowledge "that it does not protrude as scholarship."¹⁵¹

As already established, the chivalric code was an important foundation for Steinbeck's morality. With this in mind, we can examine these quotations of Launcelot and Kay. As

¹⁴⁹ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 291.

¹⁵⁰ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 292.

¹⁵¹ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 393.

mentioned, Benson wrote about Steinbeck's own ideas on human nature."¹⁵² Benson also wrote, "All of these values were tied to his appreciation for independence. His 'anti-communism' came largely out of an awareness that it squashed individuality."¹⁵³ Now we may begin to draw the applicability out of the situation of Sir Kay. Through Kay's arc, we observe Steinbeck commenting on shifting priorities he observes in modernity. What Kay and the efficient, modern, venture capitalist see as "caution, intelligence, farsightedness, having a level head, good conservative business sense," Steinbeck saw it all as cowardice. Shifting priorities from capitalist enterprise signal a rejection of freedom and courage. To Steinbeck, this is a heresy against chivalric virtue of the highest degree. In his speech accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962, Steinbeck said, "He [The author] is charged with exposing our many grievous faults and failures...The writer is delegated to declare and to celebrate man's proven capacity for greatness of heart and spirit – for gallantry in defeat, for courage, compassion, and love."¹⁵⁴ The priority of numbers (specifically financially), in Steinbeck's mind, must have been a grievous fault that reduced the once great Kay to that of T.S. Eliot's Prufrock – not daring to disturb the universe. On the importance of individuality, Steinbeck writes in an essay, "The greatest and most permanent revolution we knew took place when all men finally discovered that they had individual souls, individually important...The minds of individual men must and will be free."¹⁵⁵ The numbers usurp Kay's individuality, assimilating him into their infinite obscurity and rendering him incapable of venture, risk, courage, or gallantry. Kay's office of Seneschal, which we may liken to any corporate monotony, renders him valueless "in a world where men were valuable."

¹⁵² Benson, *John Steinbeck*, 832.

¹⁵³ Benson, *John Steinbeck*, 720.

¹⁵⁴ Steinbeck, *Letters*, 898.

¹⁵⁵ John Steinbeck, "I Am a Revolutionary" in *America and Americans* (Penguin Publishing), 90.

In *Launcelot*, we observe further examples of applicability to modernity in *Acts*. Once again drawing on Steinbeck's Nobel Prize speech, he stated, "I hold that a writer who does not passionately believe in the perfectibility of man has no dedication nor any membership in literature."¹⁵⁶ In *Launcelot*, Steinbeck explores what possible perfection looks like, and Steinbeck emphasizes that it comes with a cost. Steinbeck in perhaps a more profound manner than other Arthurian writers communicated the shortcomings of *Launcelot* beautifully by showing his ceaseless striving towards perfection.

Steinbeck created a *Launcelot* that strove for perfection with every fiber of his being despite the vices that plague him. On his status, his nephew Lyonel asks, "You are alone in your perfection... Is it enough? ... Are you content with it?"¹⁵⁷ Steinbeck wrote in response:

In one man he saw a combat more savage than ever he had seen between two, saw wounds given and received and a heart riven to bursting. And he saw victory, too, the death of rage and the sick triumph of Sir Lancelot, fevered eyes hooded like a hawk's, the right arm leashed and muzzled while the blade crept back to its kennel.¹⁵⁸

Through *Launcelot* we find the perfectibility that Steinbeck espoused during his speech in 1962. *Launcelot*'s perfection arises as a fruit of rigid, brutal self-mastery, but Steinbeck understand it does not satisfy. No passage better communicates the despondency of an unsatisfied man than Steinbeck's on *Launcelot* here:

It came about that the best knight in the world was without opponent in the court, and he felt his fighting skill rusting, and he grew despondent, for he could find no opposing sword to keep his sword sharp, not competing arm to muscle and vise

¹⁵⁶ Steinbeck, *Letters*, 898.

¹⁵⁷ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 238-239.

¹⁵⁸ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 239.

his arm. And since the exclusive pathway of his life had led to what he had become, the world's best knight, Lancelot could find no crossroads to lead him to love or ambition... like all unused men, Lancelot grew restless and then irritable, and then angry.¹⁵⁹

Launcelot lives a life banished from union with his love preventing the realization of his perfectibility, self-mastery, or satisfaction. Steinbeck's portrayal of Launcelot exists as one of the strongest examples of his streak both as a romantic and an idealist. On Launcelot, Steinbeck writes:

I think it is true that any man, novelist or not, when he comes to maturity has a very deep sense that he will not win the Quest. He knows his failings, his shortcomings, and particularly his memories of sin... sins of disloyalty, of adultery... The self-character cannot win the Quest, but his son can, his spotless son, the son of his seed and his blood who has his virtues but has not his faults. And so Galahad is able to win the Quest... Now this is so, I know it as surely as I can know anything.¹⁶⁰

Through Launcelot, the Grail, and Galahad we see that Steinbeck's dream of the perfectibility of man exists as one that lies just out of reach. It will come with the next generation, but the virtue of Launcelot still communicates Steinbeck's esteem of courage, integrity, and self-mastery. Steinbeck writes, "That's why I love Launcelot I guess. He is tested. He fails the test and still remains noble."¹⁶¹ Through Steinbeck's portrayal of Launcelot, we can understand better the cost of the self-mastery that Launcelot cultivates, Steinbeck's notions of perfectibility, and the romantic idealism that characterizes more of his thinking than commonly acknowledged.

¹⁵⁹ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 224.

¹⁶⁰ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 327.

¹⁶¹ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 391.

The episode between Morgan Le Fay and Sir Launcelot provides opportunities for investigating the applicability to modernity of *Acts*. In Malory the episode between the four queens and Launcelot does not possess the depth of Steinbeck's. Malory writes, "And every of hem [the four queens] seyde they wolde have hym to hir love."¹⁶² The women in Malory are lustful sticks whose motivations are purely carnal, and their temptations for Launcelot are purely carnal as well. Steinbeck repurposes this aspect of the legend and takes advantage of the queen's commentary to again commentate on the issues of immoral priority in modernity. Steinbeck explains their motives writing, "If something we wish does not exist, we have the power to create it...we thought that you are that rarity, a thing we do not have. And so we took you."¹⁶³ Looking once more to Steinbeck's Nobel Prize Speech, he claimed, "We have usurped many of the powers we once ascribed to God. Fearful and unprepared, we have assumed lordship... The test of perfectibility is at hand... we must seek in ourselves for the wisdom and responsibility."¹⁶⁴ Steinbeck gives these four women the "Powers of God." In material possessions, they cannot lack. On this idea of plenty, Steinbeck writes, "I strongly suspect that our moral and spiritual disintegration grows out of our lack of experience with plenty."¹⁶⁵ In *Acts*, Steinbeck continues the connection between "these usurped powers of God" and the necromancy of characters with Merlin and Nyneve. Then what distinguishes the good from the bad? For one, Steinbeck gives all of these individuals morally questionable deeds and lapses in judgement, including Merlin, but it appears the search for wise and responsible exercise appears to be a noble pursuit to Steinbeck,

¹⁶² Malory, *Morte*, 154.

¹⁶³ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 253-254.

¹⁶⁴ Steinbeck, *Letters*, 898.

¹⁶⁵ Steinbeck, *America and Americans*, 396.

but the queens choose otherwise. Through three of the queens in Steinbeck, we see they covet and offer sensuality, change, and comfort.¹⁶⁶ Culminating with Morgan, Morgan offers power:

Power attracts loyalty and requires none. The will to power keeps a baby suckling grimly long after he is fed, counsels a child to take his brother's toy, reaps a gagging harvest of concupiscent girls. What drives a knight through tortures to his prize or death? The power of fame. Why does a man heap up property he cannot use? Who does a conqueror take countries he will never see? What makes the hermit grovel in the black filth of a cell but the promise of power, or at least influence in heaven... My sisters have laid out cheese for the mice of small desires... I do not offer you a gift, but the ability, the right, and the duty to take all gifts.¹⁶⁷

Here, Steinbeck condemns motives of sensual pleasures, comfort, restlessness, and memory which when used as guiding priorities will corrupt and destroy, but the brunt of his condemnation lies in the idolatry of power. In Morgan, we find an individual that “usurped the power of God” as Steinbeck wrote.¹⁶⁸ Her chief motivation is more power, more control. Steinbeck goes through a list of practices that covet endless power, presenting the humble, simple, self-mastered Launcelot as a foil to the corrupted, powerful necromancers of modernity. By expounding on the driving forces of these four women with Launcelot as their foil, Steinbeck communicates his concern over the misguided priorities and moral decay he observed in his later years.

Steinbeck also places some of his moral commentary in Merlin and Arthur's interactions. Through Merlin, Steinbeck takes his first liberties with *Morte*, adding quotations and elements of Merlin not present in the source material. In Arthur's early encounter with Pellinore, Pellinore

¹⁶⁶ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 255-256.

¹⁶⁷ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 257-258.

¹⁶⁸ Steinbeck, *Letters*, 898.

promptly defeats Arthur breaking Arthur's sword in two. Arthur, then recently made king, complains:

You must be proud to serve me, Merlin, a defeated king, a great and worthy knight who does not even have a sword, disarmed, wounded, and helpless. What is a knight without a sword? A nothing – even less than nothing.¹⁶⁹

To this complaint Merlin responds, “It is a child speaking, not a king and not a knight... there is more to a king than a crown, and far more to a knight than a sword.”¹⁷⁰ Although this moral inclusion may seem rather elementary, it is noteworthy for a couple reasons. This is the first sustained interaction in Steinbeck that does not occur in Malory. Furthermore, Steinbeck communicates his ideas on material possession contributing to moral degradation. Again looking to his essays, Steinbeck wrote, “Worst of all [American children have] no needs. Wants he has, yes, but for more bright and breakable ‘things.’ We are trapped and entangled in things.”¹⁷¹ Steinbeck clearly communicates Arthur as an example of this moral decay through the material. In his early days as king, he cares not for the virtue, gallantry, or responsibility of a king or knight. He cares for the things that accompany the station. On the lost gallantry in America due to moral corruption from the material, Steinbeck lamented, “The American has never been a perfect instrument, but at one time he had a reputation for gallantry, which to my mind is a sweet and priceless quality. It must still exist, but it is blotted out by the dust cloud of self-pity.”¹⁷² Arthur, in his early days, contains no gallantry – only self-pity, which we observe in his complaints about the broken sword. In his mind, the possession of the sword constitutes knighthood, and the self-pitying lament arises out of a material loss. Steinbeck selects a moment

¹⁶⁹ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 50.

¹⁷⁰ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 50.

¹⁷¹ Steinbeck, *America and Americans*, 396.

¹⁷² Steinbeck, *America and Americans*, 394.

of instruction and correction between Merlin and Arthur for his first departure from the source material. The significance of its status as the first departure signals the importance and emphasis of this issue of moral degeneracy, self-pity, and materialism in Steinbeck's thought.

Through these readings of Steinbeck's portrayal of Kay, Morgan, Launcelot, and Arthur and Merlin, it becomes abundantly clear that *Act's* carries a moral fortitude comparable to his other writings. It is not insignificant pandering into a guilty pleasure, but it is also not the strong direct allegory that Steinbeck's simple-minded critics adored. Steinbeck understood the likelihood of misunderstanding among critics for *Acts*. However, comparing the translation directly with Malory reveals the moral priority of Steinbeck's work, and an understanding of Steinbeck's ideology through the Nobel Prize Speech and the essay collection *America and Americans* supports the moral themes that reside in *Acts*.

CAMELOT AND CLASS

Although this thesis spends a considerable amount of time considering and lauding the elements of *Acts* that distinguish it from Steinbeck's other works, compelling similarities exist as well. In typical Steinbeck fashion, we identify commentary on the classist, oppressive nature of a mythical, feudal Britain that privileges men based on their nobility. Through the appearance of various members of the lower-class, Steinbeck reconciles his romancing by explicitly acknowledging that a select few reap the privileges of an idealized, chivalric government system.

Throughout the entire project, Steinbeck explains that he does not want to erase what he deems to be the negative aspects of the Arthurian theme. In his introduction Steinbeck writes:

And in that scene were all the vices that ever were – and courage and sadness and frustration, but particularly gallantry – perhaps the only single quality that the West has invented. I think my sense of right and wrong, my feeling of noblesse

oblige, and thought I may have against the oppressor for the oppressed, came from this secret book.¹⁷³

Steinbeck makes a point to emphasize his sympathy for the oppressed that this legend evokes in him alongside gallantry – the pinnacle virtue of the west in Steinbeck’s mind. Steinbeck further elaborates on the effort to preserve and explain the oppression present in this legend by writing to Eugene Vinaver, “I don’t want to perpetuate the romance of the Middle Ages. It can’t be done... What fifteenth century man found right and good twentieth century readers cannot conceive.”¹⁷⁴ It is no stretch to place the inequity of Arthurian class under this umbrella of concepts inconceivable to the twentieth century reader, yet good and acceptable to the fifteenth century man. Although the textual examples are sparse compared to other prominent themes, the clarity of Steinbeck’s prose regarding class in the Middle Ages gives the reader a jarring shock, forcing them to consider the fallacy of romanticizing the past.

In *Acts* we find quotations from a much more diverse population than Malory’s *Morte*. Malory’s writing surrounds the aristocratic members of the round table and any dialogue given to characters besides the aristocracy will certainly contain discussion with or about the privileged members of Arthur’s realm. Steinbeck does not depart from this trend, but the attitudes of the lower-class regarding the knights seems to differ. For example, Steinbeck write, “‘A knight venturing.’ The dark man laughed. ‘I know your kind, a childish dream world resting on the shoulders of less fortunate men.’”¹⁷⁵ Through this “dark man” Steinbeck confronts the unaware reader with the socio-political climate of this romantic “before,” forcing the reader to consider and acknowledge issues present in this romance, as well as race and class issues in twentieth

¹⁷³ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 2.

¹⁷⁴ Robin C. Mitchell, “Steinbeck and Malory” *Steinbeck Quarterly* 1977 Vol. 10 No.3-4, 75.

¹⁷⁵ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 168.

century America. Dialogue of this nature also reinforces the quality and validity of Steinbeck's mission in modernizing *Morte*. Here we observe direct reference to a prominent theme of Steinbeck's more popular works, adding to this idea of "applicability" rather than direct allegory. The brevity and succinct nature of the character's condemnation also allows Steinbeck to present political commentary both on the Middle Ages and the twentieth century without reducing the work to a "period-piece," which we know Steinbeck strove to avoid. Steinbeck presents the oppression of this world again by narrating, "It is not necessary to inspect a serf or a slave, his shoulder wide and sloping from burdens...the whole frame slowly crushed by weights... the serving people walked under burdens."¹⁷⁶ Again, this comment exists as direct condemnation of the arbitrary nature of privilege versus oppression in the Middle Ages, but Steinbeck wanted the reader to acknowledge its applicability to his day. The burdened, servile, lower-class receive these burdens merely from their birthright, and Steinbeck observed a similar paradigm in modernity.

The brief class commentary present in Steinbeck's *Acts* further distinguishes it as a unique piece of Arthurian legend that is distinctly Steinbeckian. The class commentary further supports an understanding of Steinbeck's successful undertaking in adapting Malory faithfully, while presenting a powerful piece applicable to twentieth century modern thought. Furthermore, Steinbeck's inclusion of class commentary gives agency to marginalized characters in a similar fashion of Steinbeck's treatment of Malory's sticklike women. Through these examples, we see that Steinbeck reconciled the contradictions inherent in modernist realism and Arthurian romance by masterfully colliding the two mediums.

¹⁷⁶ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 310.

STEINBECK AND THE SELF-CHARACTER

Reading an author's life into their respective work is generally a dubious and speculative endeavor that often leaves one grasping for straws. However, Steinbeck's *Acts* exists as an exception. Steinbeck's Arthurian project possessed deep roots in his understanding of himself and his family. Steinbeck himself wrote in a letter to Eugene Vinaver, "This thesis has haunted me for a long time, first as a pestering thing but now I have accepted it and in the workings of my new – the Matter of Arthur is the Matter of Me. In all of it I find myself. And I incline to the thought that it has always been so."¹⁷⁷ Despite his best efforts initially, Steinbeck could not remove the influence of Arthur on his life from his venture into adapting the text. Benson writes, "It [*Le Morte D'Arthur*] was a book that had stayed with him on an intimate basis throughout his life."¹⁷⁸ These two quotations alone qualify an investigation into the evidence of Steinbeck's own biography in *Acts*. In *Acts*, we find Steinbeck himself through Launcelot, his beloved Elain Steinbeck in Guinevere, and his sons in the young knights of Camelot like Lyonel. This treatise also provides ample opportunity for further exploring how important this project remained to Steinbeck for the last decade of his life.

Steinbeck advocated and observed the merit in investigating the presence of an author's self in their work. While musing on Malory in an early letter, Steinbeck wrote:

A novel may be said to be the man who writes it. Now it is nearly always true that a novelist, perhaps unconsciously, identifies himself with one chief or central character in his novel. Into this character he puts not only what he thinks he is but

¹⁷⁷ Benson, *John Steinbeck*, 966.

¹⁷⁸ Benson, *John Steinbeck*, 804.

what he hopes to be. We can call this spokesman the self-character, You will find one in every one of my books and in the novels of everyone I can remember.¹⁷⁹

Steinbeck himself invites us to seek him in his writing, and he also explains his thoughts on Malory in the same letter:

Malory's self-character would be Launcelot. All of the perfections he knew went into this character, all of the things which he thought himself capable. But, being an honest man he found faults in himself, faults of vanity, faults of violence, faults even of disloyalty, and these would naturally find their way into his dream character... I think it is true that any man, novelist or not, when he comes to maturity has a very deep sense that he will not win the Quest... Launcelot could not see the Grail because of the faults and sins of Malory himself... Now this is so. I know it as surely as I can know anything.¹⁸⁰

We then observe Steinbeck's declaration of his self-character two years later, and it is none other than Sir Launcelot of the Lake. Steinbeck wrote, "That's why I love Launcelot I guess. He is tested, he fails the test and still remains noble...the title of that [*Morte*] should not be Arthur but Launcelot. He's my boy. I can feel him."¹⁸¹ It is no coincidence that we find Steinbeck's best writing and most satisfaction in the section titled "Sir Launcelot of the Lake."¹⁸² In the same way that Steinbeck saw himself as a modern Malory, he identified most strongly with the flawed but noble Sir Launcelot of the Lake, who fails the Grail Quest yet still achieved redemption and salvation. This perspective provides new meaning to Steinbeck never finishing the work and Benson writing, "His [Steinbeck's] search for perfection, his own grail, the final major work, was

¹⁷⁹ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 326.

¹⁸⁰ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 327.

¹⁸¹ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 391.

¹⁸² In the same letter, Steinbeck wrote, "I'm beginning to really love the work for itself and I am letting what mind I have go to its own sources," – a strong declaration of a realized methodology regarding his adaptation.

slowly destroying him.”¹⁸³ Steinbeck’s grail was to be the presentation of Malory to modernity, but, like Launcelot, his flaws and shortcomings rendered him incapable of immortalizing himself by achieving the Grail.

Elaine Steinbeck’s presence in *Acts* as Guinevere strengthens our understanding of Steinbeck’s tragic similarity to Launcelot. In Arthurian legend, the promiscuous relationship between Launcelot and Guinevere exists as the catalyst and root cause for Arthur’s eventual death at the hands of his son Mordred. For the most part, I have avoided speculation on why Steinbeck never finished his adaptation of Malory, but the inability to reconcile his happy marriage with Elaine and the relationship between his self-character Launcelot forbidden union with Guinevere must have contributed to Steinbeck’s inability to finish. Steinbeck’s first encounter with Elaine is detailed by Benson in his biography of Steinbeck.¹⁸⁴ Benson explained the tragic but bittersweet connection between Launcelot and Guinevere with Steinbeck and Elaine, recounting Elaine’s first-reading of the Launcelot chapter after Steinbeck’s death:

Reading this Elaine realized that her husband had brought his love for her together with his love for the *Morte D’Arthur*, and as a consequence, had written himself into a corner. Tears came as she put down the manuscript, and she thought, ‘My God, why didn’t you tell me you had written this?’¹⁸⁵

With the knowledge of the mirroring between Steinbeck’s and Elaine’s first encounters and the beginning of the end for Launcelot and Guinevere, we come to a profound understanding of the personal nature of Arthurian legend in Steinbeck. It encompassed every arena of his life, even his

¹⁸³ Benson, *John Steinbeck*, 860. Benson provided this somber interpretation in light of Steinbeck’s second stroke while writing *Acts* which accelerated the decline of Steinbeck’s health in the 1960s.

¹⁸⁴ Benson, *John Steinbeck*, 859.

¹⁸⁵ Benson, *John Steinbeck*, 860.

marriage, and the connection prevented him from advancing further in the tragic tale of Arthur, Launcelot, and Guinevere.

We can also observe that Steinbeck's deep-rooted concern for the moral degeneracy he observes in modern society arises out of a concern on the implications of this decay for his sons – Thomas and John IV. We can look to Sir Launcelot's nephew Lyonel and his contemporaries as described by Steinbeck, as well as Steinbeck's biography to observe the presence of his children, their antics, and his concern for them through *Acts*. After a bitter legal battle between Steinbeck and his ex-wife Gwyn in which his sons were involved, Benson wrote, “[Steinbeck] was hurt by the thought that they had not yet come to the maturity he had hoped for.”¹⁸⁶ At the beginning of “Sir Launcelot of the Lake” Steinbeck launched into a sustained condemnation of the condition of the young men of modernity citing their immaturity, misplaced priorities, irreverence for virtue, and cynical outlook on the chivalric code.¹⁸⁷ On the young men of the court, Steinbeck wrote, “The young men – they earn their spurs in dancing, find their only opponent in a reluctant petticoat, we are lost.”¹⁸⁸ Steinbeck portrayed the young men as devoid of a guiding principle, and the situation is a dire one, a directionless youth will foster the ruin of the mythic, noble realm. Steinbeck's concern for the youth of Camelot stemmed from his concern for the immaturity and lack of direction for his boys. We can then understand the ensuing adventure and change of heart of Sir Lyonel due to Launcelot's gallantry as a desire for Steinbeck to steward his sons and the youth of modernity in a direction towards Steinbeck's most revered virtue – gallantry.

Through the connections of Launcelot, Guinevere, and Lyonel to Steinbeck, Elaine, and his sons, we can better understand the immense influence of the Arthurian legend on the most

¹⁸⁶ Benson, *John Steinbeck*, 952.

¹⁸⁷ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 230-233.

¹⁸⁸ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 230.

intimate parts of Steinbeck's life, and he certainly invites this reading through his understandings of the self-character as evidenced through his letters. The presence of Steinbeck's biography also produces a tragic effect on the unfinished *Acts*, rendering it the unachievable grail of Steinbeck's life, like Launcelot and the Holy Grail.

V. CONCLUSION

This thesis has argued for the importance of understanding Arthurian legend in Steinbeck's life and work. As Steinbeck himself wrote in a letter to Eugene Vinaver, "I tell these old stories, but they are not what I want to tell. I only know how I want people to feel when I tell them."¹⁸⁹ Arthuriana existed as the dominant influence over every arena of Steinbeck's life, greater than the Biblical allegory in *East of Eden* or the rugged agrarian culture of Salinas, California.

This thesis argues that we may also come to a better understanding of the quality of *Acts* as a work of literature. Rather than a "puerile" piece of unfinished distraction, *Acts*, at times, stands as the pinnacle of Steinbeck's writing as he himself attests writing, "I think it is the best prose I have ever written. I believe it and I hope this is so."¹⁹⁰ Steinbeck set out to translate *Morte* through powerful and applicable prose that would communicate the pressing issues of modern society as understood by Steinbeck, and he succeeded in this endeavor, especially in the latter portions. Steinbeck's *Acts* brings the best elements of *Morte* in an understandable, yet profound American vernacular while also breathing life into the shortcomings present in Malory's fifteenth century tale. The tragic tale of John Steinbeck's Arthurian adventure leaves both Steinbeckian and Arthurian enthusiast lamenting the unfinished work. However, the writing

¹⁸⁹ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 365.

¹⁹⁰ Steinbeck, *Acts*, 359.

Steinbeck did accomplish solidifies the work as an integral aspect of both Arthurian medievalism and Steinbeckian modernism.

Steinbeck's *Acts* also improves the corpus of Arthurian literature and Steinbeck's canon. *Acts* breathes life into the stagnant portions of Malory's work, as evidenced by the arguments regarding Nynveve, Morgan, and the triple quest. Steinbeck transformed the shallow women of Malory's *Morte* into relevant actors within the legend, employing these women to communicate Steinbeckian virtue and realism. *Acts* also succeeds in adding a morale depth to the Arthurian legend that is largely absent in Malory's *Morte*. Setting the legend in an ambiguous "before" allowed Steinbeck to apply issues within modern American society to the people of Arthur's realm like Kay the Seneschal, Launcelot, Arthur, and Merlin. *Acts* translates the important themes of Steinbeck's Nobel Prize Speech and essays in *America and Americans* into a narrative style that allows Steinbeck to explore these themes of perfectibility, moral degeneracy, and misplaced priority through his characters. Furthermore, *Acts* is revealing in regard to Steinbeck's biography more so than any of his other works. By interpreting the presence of John and Elaine Steinbeck in Launcelot and Guinevere, this thesis sheds new light on the prevalence of Arthuriana in the most intimate parts of Steinbeck's life. Steinbeck's *Acts* is a vulnerable presentation of his deepest passions and concerns that contained the potential to be Steinbeck's greatest achievement.

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