

# Lancelot

*The Knight of the Cart*



Chrétien de Troyes ♦ *Translated by Burton Raffel*



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## *The Knight of the Cart*

Chrétien de Troyes

*Translated from the Old French by*

*Burton Raffel*

*Afterword by Joseph J. Duggan*

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*To the memory of Francis Patrick Sullivan, S.J*  
*– who courted life's adventures*  
*with courage, love, and faith*





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## Translator's Preface

This is the fourth of Chrétien's great narratives I have translated. The first, *Yuain*, was published by Yale University Press in 1987; the second and third, *Erecand Enide* and *Cligès*, were published by Yale in 1997; and after *Lancelot* it is planned to continue and conclude the enterprise with *Perceual: The Story of the Grail*.

Most of what needs to be explained about the technical aspects of this translation has long since been set out, in my Translator's Preface to *Yuain*. And as I also said there, "I will be content if this translation allows the modern reader some reasonably dear view of Chrétien's swift, clear style, his wonderfully inventive story-telling, his perceptive characterizations and sure-handed dialogue, his racy wit and sly irony, and the vividness with which he evokes, for us his twentieth-century audiences, the emotions and values of a flourishing, vibrant world." I need only add that the longer I work with Chrétien, the more "modern" he seems to me, in virtually all his essential characteristics—which may help to explain why, as I said in concluding that prior Translator's Preface, "Chrétien is a delight to read—and to translate." Not easy, but definitely a delight.

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Although I have had constantly before me, in all the translations subsequent to *Yvain*, the two most recent editions of the Old French original, the *Oeuvres complètes* (1994), edited for Gallimard's deservedly famous Pléiade series by the late Daniel Poirion and five collaborating scholars, and the complete *Romans* (1994), edited for Le Livre de Poche series, once again, by a team of scholars, I have grown increasingly convinced of the superiority of the Poirion texts. That for *Lancelot, ou le chevalier de la charette*, edited by Poirion, has accordingly been followed in this translation.

*Université des Acadiens  
Lafayette, Louisiana*

Lancelot

*Chrétien de Troyes*



*Puisque ma dame de Chanpaigne  
Vialt que romans a feire anpraigne,  
Come cil qui est suens antiers  
Je l'anprendrai molt volentiers  
De quan qu'ilpuet el monde feire  
Sanz rien de losange avant treire*

Because my lady of Champagne\*  
Wants me to start a new  
Romance, I'll gladly begin one,  
For I'm completely her servant  
In whatever she wants me to do,  
And these are not flattering words.  
Others, who like to wheedle  
And coax, might start by saying  
—And this, too, would not  
Be flattery—that here was a princess  
Who outshines every lady

\*Countess Marie de Champagne, oldest daughter of King Louis VII  
and Eleanor of Aquitaine

---

Alive, as the winds of April  
And May blow sweetest of all.  
But I, by God, refuse  
To spin sweet words about  
My lady. Should I say: "This lady  
Is worth her weight in queens,  
One gem as good as silks  
And onyx?" No, I won't,  
But even if I don't, she is.  
What I have to say is that this  
Story has been better polished  
By her work and wisdom than by mine.  
As Chrétien begins this tale  
Of Lancelot, the Knight  
Of the Cart, he declares that the subject  
And its meaning come from his lady.  
She gave him the idea, and the story;  
His words do the work of her matter.

And he writes that once, on Ascension  
Day, King Arthur held court  
With all the splendor he loved,  
Being so wealthy a king.

And after dining, Arthur  
Remained with his companions,  
For the hall was full of barons,  
And the queen was there, and many  
Other beautiful high-born  
Ladies, exchanging elegant  
Words in the finest French.  
And Kay, who along with others  
Had waited on table, ate  
With his stewards. But as he sat down,

A singularly well-equipped knight  
Entered, armed to the teeth  
And armored from head to foot.  
Heavily armed as he was,  
He walked straight to where  
The king was seated among  
His barons, but gave him no greeting,  
Declaring: "Arthur, I hold  
Many of your people captive—  
Knights, ladies, girls—  
But I didn't come here to tell you  
I meant to let them go!  
All I want you to know  
Is that neither your wealth nor your strength  
Is sufficient to get them back.  
Understand me: you'll be sooner  
Dead than able to do  
A thing!" The king answered  
That what he couldn't help  
He could live with; but it did not make him  
Happy. And then their visitor  
Started to leave, but got  
Only as far as the door  
Before he turned, stopped,  
And instead of descending the steps  
Threw back this challenge: "King,  
If you have a single knight  
In this court of yours you can trust  
To take your queen to the woods,  
Where I'll be going when I'm finished  
Here, then I'll agree  
To let him have those prisoners



---

I've got in my dungeons, provided  
He can defeat me in battle,  
It being understood  
That possession of your queen is the prize  
For victory." Many people  
In the palace heard him; the court  
Was astonished. The news was brought  
To Kay, as he sat at his food,  
And he rose at once, left  
The table, and came to the king,  
And spoke with bitter anger:  
"My lord, I've served you long  
And most loyally, and in great  
Good faith. But I'm leaving you now,  
Never to serve you again. 90  
From this moment on, I've not  
The slightest desire to serve you."  
The king was deeply shocked;  
As soon as he found himself  
Able to speak, he said, 95  
"Is this a joke, or are you  
Serious?" "Your majesty,  
This is not a time  
For joking, but for saying farewell.  
I've told you what I want, 100  
Nor do I ask for anything  
Else: my decision is final,  
I intend to leave at once."  
"But why is this what you want?"  
Asked the king. "Have I given offense?  
Are you angry? Calm yourself, steward:  
Remain at my court. Believe me,

Kay, there's nothing in the world  
I wouldn't give to keep  
You here, to stop you from leaving."  
"My lord, we're wasting time.  
You couldn't keep me here  
With a basket of gold a day."  
Deeply upset, Arthur  
Hurried to find his queen.  
"My lady," he said, "you won't  
Believe what our steward wants!  
He says he's resigning his post  
At once—and I don't know why!  
He won't listen to me,  
But perhaps you can change his mind.  
So hurry to him, dear lady,  
And even if I can't persuade him  
He might listen to you.  
Throw yourself at his feet!  
I'll never be happy again  
If I lose the pleasures of his presence!"  
So the king sent her to seek  
The steward, and she went, finding  
Kay with a group of knights.  
Coming directly toward him,  
She said: "Kay, let me  
Tell you right away,  
I come to you deeply troubled  
By what I've heard. They say,  
And it hurts my heart to hear it,  
That you wish to leave the king.  
What's happened? Why would you do  
Such a thing? It's not like you—

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Neither courtly nor wise. Please,  
I beg you: stay with my lord!"  
"Lady," he said, "forgive me,  
But I can't and I won't." Then the queen  
Asked him again, and all  
The knights joined in her plea,  
But Kay assured her she was wasting  
Her breath, as they were wasting  
Theirs. So the royal lady,  
Great as she was, dropped  
To her knees and begged him to remain.  
"Rise, my lady." But she wouldn't,  
Swearing she'd stay at his feet  
Until he consented. Then Kay  
Promised to remain, but only  
If Arthur swore in advance  
He could have whatever he wanted,  
And the queen herself agreed.  
"Kay," she replied, "whatever  
It is, we'll grant it together.  
Come: we'll go to the king  
And tell him your terms." So Kay  
And Guinevere went to the king.  
"My lord, Kay has agreed  
To remain. It wasn't easy  
To persuade him. But he said he would stay,  
Provided you give him what he asks."  
The king sighed with pleasure  
And said the steward could have  
What he wanted, whatever it might be.  
"My lord," said Kay, "this  
Is the gift I want and you

Have pledged yourself to give me.  
I'll think myself a fortunate  
Man, if you let me have it.  
Your queen, who stands beside me,  
Will be placed under my protection,  
And we'll ride off to the woods  
In search of the knight and his challenge."  
The king was upset, but his word  
Had been given, and he could not revoke it, 180  
No matter how angry and sorrowful  
It made him (which was easy to see).  
The queen, too, was deeply  
Displeased, and the whole palace  
Denounced Kay's pride and presumption 185  
In making such a demand.  
And then the king took  
The queen by the hand, and said,  
"Lady, it can't be helped;  
You must go with Kay." And the steward 190  
Said, "Just trust her to me;  
There's nothing to be afraid of.  
You can count on me, my lord:  
I'll bring her back safe  
And sound!" Arthur gave him 195  
Her hand, and Kay led her  
Out, the entire palace  
Following, frowning as they went.  
The steward was fully armed,  
Of course; his horse stood 200  
In the courtyard, waiting, and beside it  
The sort of palfrey fit  
For a queen to ride, patient,

Calm, not pulling at the bit.  
Slowly, the queen approached, 205  
And, sighing sadly, mounted,  
Then spoke in a voice so soft  
No one was meant to hear her:  
"Oh, my love, if only  
You knew, you'd never let me 210  
Take a step in this man's  
Care!" It was barely a whisper,  
But Count Guinables, who stood  
Close by, heard what she'd said.  
As they rode toward the woods, everyone 215  
Watching, knights and ladies,  
Were as sad as if she were being  
Buried. They never expected  
To see her again, in this life.  
And so the steward, impelled 220  
By his pride, took her to the woods.  
For all their sorrow, none of them  
Thought to follow along,  
Until Sir Gawain quietly  
Said to the king, his uncle, 225  
"My lord, I'm quite astonished:  
This strikes me as terribly wrong.  
If you'll take my advice, as long  
As there's time, and they're still in sight,  
Let's ride along behind them, 230  
You and I and whoever  
Joins us. I simply can't keep  
Myself from following after:  
It makes no sense not to,  
At least until we know 235

---

What happens to the queen, and how well  
Kay can take care of her."  
"We'll go, good nephew," said the king.  
"Yours is a politic wisdom.  
And now that you've spoken up, 240  
Tell them to bring out our horses  
And have them saddled and bridled,  
So all we need do is mount."  
As soon as the horses were ordered,  
They were led out and readied. The king, 245  
Of course, was the first to mount,  
And then my lord Gawain,  
And after him the others.  
Everyone wanted to come,  
But each in his own way, 250  
Some of them armed to the teeth.  
Some of them neither armored  
Nor carrying weapons. But Gawain  
Was fully armed, and had ordered  
Two of his squires to bring 255  
A pair of battle horses.  
And then, as they neared the forest,  
They saw Kay's horse, which they knew  
At once, come jogging out,  
Riderless, and observed that both 260  
Its reins had been broken. And as  
It approached they saw, too,  
That the stirrup-leather was spotted  
With blood, and the back of the saddle  
Had been broken to bits. It was hardly 265  
A pleasant sight; they nodded  
And shrugged, knowing what had happened.

---

My lord Gawain galloped  
Far ahead of the others,  
Until he saw a knight  
Come riding slowly toward him  
On a tired and heavy-footed  
Horse, panting and drenched  
With sweat. The knight greeted  
My lord Gawain, and Gawain 275  
Returned the greeting. And then,  
Recognizing Gawain,  
The knight stopped and said,  
"My lord, I think you can see  
What a sweat my horse is in; 280  
He's no use at all, in this state.  
I believe those horses over  
There are yours: may I ask,  
Please, that you do me the favor—  
Which I'll gladly repay—of either  
Letting me have, or lending me,  
One, whichever you like?"  
Said Gawain, "Take your pick:  
The one you prefer is yours."  
But the knight's need was so pressing  
He made no attempt to choose  
The better, or bigger, or faster,  
But simply mounted the one  
That happened to be closest, and galloped  
Away at once. The horse  
He left behind him fell dead,  
So hard had he been ridden  
That day, driven till he dropped.  
Without losing a moment,

---

The knight dashed into 300  
The forest, and Gawain followed  
As fast as he could, until  
He reached the foot of a hill.  
Some distance further along  
He found the horse the knight 305  
Had taken, dead in the road,  
And saw the signs of many  
Mounted men, and broken  
Shields and lances all around.  
Clearly, there'd been a furious 310  
Fight, involving a good many  
Knights, and Gawain was upset  
He'd had no part in the battle.  
He didn't stop for long,  
But rode rapidly ahead 315  
Until, suddenly, he saw  
The knight, alone and on foot,  
In full armor, helmet  
On his head, shield around his neck,  
Sword at his side. And there 320  
Was a cart—used, in those days,  
As we use a pillory, now.  
In any good-sized town  
You'll find them by the thousand, hut then  
There was only one, and they used it  
For every kind of criminal,  
Exactly like the pillory  
Today—murderers, thieves,  
Those defeated in judicial  
Combat, robbers who roamed 330  
In the dark, and those who rode



---

The highways. Offenders were punished  
By being set in the cart  
And driven up and down  
The town. Their reputations 335  
Were lost, and the right to be present  
At court; they lost all honor  
And joy. Everyone knew  
What the carts were for, and feared them;  
They'd say, "If you see a cart 340  
Coming your way, cross  
Yourself, and pray to the Lord  
On high, to keep you from evil."  
The knight on foot, who had  
No lance, came up behind 345  
The cart and saw, seated  
On the shaft, a dwarf, who like  
A carter held a long whip  
In his hands. And the knight said,  
"Dwarf, in the name of God, 350  
Tell me: have you seen my lady  
The queen come by?" The dwarf,  
Low-born and disgusting, had no  
Interest in telling the knight  
Anything: "If you feel like taking 355  
A ride in this cart of mine,  
You might find out, by tomorrow,  
What's happened to the queen." The cart  
Rolled slowly on, not stopping  
For even a moment; and the knight 360  
Followed along behind  
For several steps, not climbing  
Right up. But his hesitant shame

---

Was wrong. Reason, which warred  
With Love, warned him to take care; 365  
It taught and advised him never  
To attempt anything likely  
To bring him shame or reproach.  
Reason's rules come  
From the mouth, not from the heart. 370  
But Love, speaking from deep  
In the heart, hurriedly ordered him  
Into the cart. He listened  
To Love, and quickly jumped in,  
Putting all sense of shame 375  
Aside, as Love had commanded.  
Then my lord Gawain came galloping  
Up, chasing the cart,  
And seeing the knight seated  
Inside it could not keep from gaping, 380  
And said, "Dwarf, give me  
News of the queen, if you have any."  
The dwarf answered, "If you loathe  
Yourself, as this other knight does,  
Climb up and sit beside him, 385  
And I'll take you both at once."  
This struck my lord Gawain  
As the height of absolute folly,  
And he said he wouldn't climb in,  
Not caring to exchange his horse 390  
For a dirty criminal's cart.  
"Just go wherever you're going,"  
He said, "and I'll follow along."  
So off they went, one  
On his horse, two in the cart, 395

---

But **all** traveling the same  
Road. That evening they came  
To a castle—and what a beautiful.  
Noble place it was!  
They entered through a gate,  
And the people inside were astonished  
By the sight of a knight in a cart,  
But felt no quiet compassion:  
High-born or low, young or  
Old, they hooted and cried  
Up and down the streets,  
And the knight could hear them saying  
Disgusting things, all of them  
Wondering: "What will happen  
To this knight? Is he ready to be roasted?  
Flayed or hanged? Will they drown him,  
Or burn him on a brushwood fire?  
Tell us, driver, dwarf!  
What did they catch him doing?  
Is he just a thief? Or maybe 415  
A murderer? Was he beaten in combat?"  
No one received an answer;  
The dwarf ignored them all.  
With Gawain riding behind him,  
He drove the knight to his lodgings — 420  
A tower standing in the open  
Fields, right in front of  
The town, a meadow to one side,  
And then a ridge of grayish  
Rock, on which the tower 425  
Was set, straight and tall.  
The cart rolled in, and Gawain

Came riding after. In the great  
Hall of this lovely building  
He was greeted by a beautiful lady, 430  
The fairest in that whole country,  
And with her came a pair  
Of well-born, gracious girls.  
As soon as they saw Gawain  
They clapped their hands in delight, 435  
And after making him welcome  
Began asking questions:  
"Tell us, dwarf: what  
Did he do, this knight in your cart?"  
The dwarf refused to answer, 440  
But ordered the knight out  
Of the cart, then disappeared;  
And no one knew where he went.  
My lord Gawain dismounted;  
Two young pages appeared, 445  
And helped the knights disarm.  
Others brought fur-lined cloaks,  
And both knights put them on.  
When dinnertime came, the table  
Was bountifully set. My lord 450  
Gawain and the lady were seated  
Side by side. Neither  
Knight needed different  
Or better lodgings: all through  
The evening the lady honored 455  
Them both with her noble, elegant  
Company and her gracious manners.  
Once they had eaten their fill,  
A pair of immense beds

---

Were readied, side by side 460  
In the middle of the hall, and then  
A third, richer and finer  
Than either of the others: according  
To the story, no one has ever  
Imagined such a splendid bed, 465  
Delightfully designed and furnished  
And when it was time to sleep  
The lady took her guests  
To where these beds had been readied  
She showed them the first two 470  
And explained, "These are for you.  
But that one's reserved for those  
Who deserve such splendor: it's not  
For you to sleep in." And the knight  
Who'd come to that tower riding 475  
In a cart, with a dwarf as his driver,  
Replied to this prohibition  
With utter contempt and disdain:  
"And why," he demanded, "is this bed  
Forbidden?" The lady's answer 480  
Was ready and waiting; she needed  
No pause for thought or reflection:  
"It's not for you," she declared,  
"To demand such things. Any  
Knight who's ridden in a cart 485  
Has lost his honor forever.  
You have no right to ask  
Such questions and expect to be answered—  
And certainly not to sleep  
In that bed. You'll pay dearly, 490  
If you do! I never prepared

So rich a place for the likes  
Of you. Don't even think of it."  
"You'll be seeing me there," he said.  
"Oh, really?" "Indeed." "Then do 495  
As you please." "Whatever it costs,"  
Said the knight, "whoever's annoyed,  
Whoever gets hurt, by God!  
I haven't the faintest idea.  
But I'll be sleeping in this bed 500  
Tonight, and sleeping well."  
The bed was almost a yard  
Longer than the others, and as soon  
As his armor was off he stretched himself  
Out on the yellow satin, 505  
Embroidered with gold. That bed  
Hadn't been lined with wornout  
Squirrel pelts but with deep,  
Thick sable, worthy of warming  
A king. The mattress he lay on 510  
Wasn't mere hay or reeds  
Or old straw mats! And then,  
At midnight, hurled like lightning,  
A spear came crashing across  
The bed, point first, so close  
To the sleeping knight that it almost  
Pinned him between the ribs,  
Stitched him to the blanket and the white  
Sheets. And that spear bore  
A burning pennant, and the blanket 520  
And sheets began to flame,  
And the whole bed was on fire.  
But though the point passed

So near the knight that it drew  
A faint line across 525  
His skin, it did not wound him  
The knight sat up, beat out  
The flames, took the spear,  
And threw it to the middle of the hall,  
And—never leaving the bed— 530  
Lay down once more and slept  
As calm and restful a sleep  
As before, peaceful and at ease.  
Early next morning, having  
Ordered a Mass for her guests, 535  
The lady who lived in the tower  
Came to call them from their beds.  
Once Mass had been sung,  
The knight who'd ridden in the cart  
Walked, deep in thought, 540  
To a window opening out  
On the meadows, and stood looking  
Across the fields. At the very  
Next window the young lady of the tower  
Was discussing something (I've no idea 545  
What) for a moment, with my lord  
Gawain; no one could hear  
What they said. But while they were leaning  
And looking, they saw a corpse,  
The body of a dead knight, 550  
Being carried down from the meadows  
And along the river, and beside him,  
Weeping and wailing, came  
Three ladies, mourning as they went.  
A great procession followed 555

The bier, preceded by a noble  
Knight, leading at his left  
Hand a beautiful lady.  
The knight at the window knew her  
At once: this was the queen, 560  
And his eyes followed her along  
The path, watching with passionate  
Care, thrilled at the sight,  
For as long as he could. Then,  
When he wasn't able to see her, 565  
His body went slack, he felt  
He could let himself fall from the window,  
And was halfway over the sill  
When Gawain saw him and, from  
Behind, pulled him back, 570  
Saying, "Be calm, my lord:  
In the name of God, don't even  
Think of committing such folly!  
How wrong to despise your life!"  
"He's right to despise it," said the lady. 575  
"Do you think there's anyone who hasn't  
Heard what happened? Of course  
He'd rather be dead, now  
That he's ridden in the cart. For him,  
Death would be better than life, 580  
For all life holds is shame,  
Contempt, and misery." Both knights  
Asked for their armor and weapons,  
And made themselves ready. And the lady  
Displayed a noble politeness: 585  
Having jeered and mocked more  
Than enough, now she gave



The knight, as a mark of affection  
And respect, a horse and a spear.  
And the knights left her like civilized 590  
Men, well trained in courtesy,  
Bowling and wishing her well,  
Then riding away, following  
After the procession they'd seen.  
No one could exchange a word 595  
With either knight, they galloped  
So fast. They rode hard  
Down the road the queen had taken,  
But couldn't catch the funeral  
Party, which had hurried off. 600  
Leaving the fields, they crossed  
A fence and found a well-kept  
Road, which led them across  
A forest. It was early morning  
When they came to a crossroads and saw 605  
A girl, whom they both greeted,  
Asking, with careful courtesy,  
If by any chance she knew,  
And was able to tell them, where  
The queen had been taken. She answered 610  
Soberly, saying, "Offer  
Me enough and, yes,  
I can certainly tell you. I can set you  
On the right road, and name you  
The land they've gone to and the knight 615  
Who's led them there. But you'll need  
To be ready for immense hardships,  
If you try to follow them! It takes  
Pain and suffering to get there."

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My lord Gawain replied, 620  
"With God's good help, my lady,  
I pledge myself and whatever  
Strength I have to your service,  
Whenever you need me, if only  
You'll tell me the truth." The knight 625  
Who'd ridden in the cart offered  
More than all his strength,  
Swearing, with all the force  
And power that Love had given him,  
That nothing would stand in his way 630  
And, fearing nothing, he'd come  
Whenever she called and do  
Whatever she wanted done.  
"You'll hear it all!" she cried,  
And immediately began her tale: 635  
    "On my faith, lords, a most powerful  
Knight, *Méléagant*,  
Son of the king of Gorre,  
Has taken the queen to that land  
No one visits and ever 640  
Returns, forced to remain  
In exile, serving that lord."  
Then the knight of the cart demanded:  
"Where can we find that land,  
Lady? How do we get there?" 645  
She answered, "I'll certainly tell you.  
But understand: you'll meet  
With many obstacles, and many  
Dangers; it won't be easy,  
Without the king's permission. 650  
His name is Bademaguz.

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But two desperately dangerous  
Bridges can get you in.  
One is called THE **SUNKEN**  
BRIDGE—because, in fact, 655  
It's under the water, exactly  
Halfway down, set  
Right in the middle, as much  
Water below as above it,  
Hung between surface and bottom. 660  
And since it's barely a foot  
And a half in width and thickness,  
It's a feast you ought to refuse—  
Though it's far and away the least  
Dangerous. (There are many other 665  
Pathways I won't even mention.)  
But the second bridge is the worst,  
So exceedingly risky that no one  
Has ever gotten across,  
For it's honed as sharp as a sword blade— 670  
Which is why it's called THE SWORD  
BRIDGE. Whatever I've told you  
Is true, and as much of the truth  
As it's in my power to tell you."  
At which they asked: "Lady, 675  
Would you like to explain how  
We can get to each of these bridges?"  
And the girl answered, "Right  
Over there is a straight road  
To the Sunken Bridge; the other 680  
Will lead you to the Sword Bridge."  
And then the knight who'd ridden  
In the cart said to his companion,

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"Sir, it's up to you:  
Pick whichever route 685  
You prefer; I'll take the other.  
Choose whichever you like."  
"By God," said my lord Gawain,  
"It isn't much of a choice;  
They're both wickedly dangerous 690  
I know no way to decide  
Between them. Which would be better?  
But how can I hesitate,  
Since you've given me the choice?  
I'll go to the Sunken Bridge." 695  
"Then we're agreed. There's nothing  
More to be said. You take  
Your road, and I'll take mine."  
And then the three of them went  
In their different directions, warmly 700  
Commending each other to God.  
But just as she turned to leave them,  
The girl said, "Remember:  
You both owe me whatever  
Reward I want, whenever 705  
I want it. Don't forget."  
"Indeed we won't, my dear,"  
The knights answered as one.  
And so they took their leave.  
Mind and body, the knight 710  
Of the cart remained in Love's  
Firm grip, helpless against it;  
His thoughts were so tumbled about  
That he no longer knew who he was,  
Or if he truly existed,

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Or what his name might be,  
Or whether he was wearing armor,  
Or where he was going or from where  
He'd come. All he could think of  
Was one woman, for whom 720  
He'd forgotten everything else —  
And he thought of her so intently  
That he heard and saw and knew  
Nothing. But his horse galloped  
Ahead, on all the right roads, 725  
The most direct paths,  
And as luck would have it brought  
His master to an open place  
Near a river crossing.  
The other side of the ford 730  
Was guarded by an armed knight,  
Accompanied by a girl who rode  
A peaceful palfrey. The sun  
Was already starting down,  
But our love-stricken knight had never  
Left his silent dreamworld.  
His horse, which was terribly thirsty,  
Saw the bright, dear water,  
And headed directly toward it.  
The sentinel on the other side 740  
Shouted: "Knight! I guard  
This ford. You're forbidden to cross."  
Our knight neither listened nor heard,  
Lost in the whirling thoughts  
That never left him; his horse 745  
Hurried straight to the water,  
The sentinel called out again:

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"Leave, if you know what's good for you  
You can't cross here."

And he swore by the heart in his chest  
He'd attack, if our knight came further.  
And still his words went unheard.

So he cried, one final time:

"Knight! Stay out of the ford.

It's forbidden, I've already told you. 755

I swear by the head on my shoulders  
I'll attack the moment you try it."

But all our knight heard was his own

Thoughts. His horse leapt

Straight from the bank to the water, 760

And drank as fast as he could.

The sentinel swore to make

Our knight pay: no shield would protect him,

Nor would the mail shirt he wore.

He spurred his horse to a gallop, 765

Then whipped it to its fastest pace,

And struck our knight so fiercely

That he stretched him out in the water

No one was allowed to cross.

His spear, too, fell 770

In the water, and the shield from around

His neck. But the water woke him:

Blinking, at best half-conscious,

Like someone just out of bed,

He jumped to his feet, astonished 775

To find himself where he was.

And then he saw the sentinel,

And shouted, "You! Why

Did you hit me? Explain yourself,

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For I never knew you were there,  
And I've done nothing to harm you."  
"You did, by God," was the answer.  
"Didn't you treat me like dirt  
When I told you, three times over,  
And as loud and clear as I could,  
That you couldn't cross? You had  
To hear me, at least the second  
Time, or the third, but you rode  
Right on, although I warned you  
I'd strike if you entered that water."  
But our knight immediately answered,  
"As far as I'm concerned,  
I never saw you and I never  
Heard you! Maybe you did  
Forbid me to cross. But I  
Was lost in my thoughts. Believe me,  
Just let me get my hands  
On your bridle, and you'll regret it!";  
"Oh, really?" the sentinel answered.  
"And what will you do? Come over  
Here and hang on my bridle,  
If you're brave enough to try it.  
All your boasting and threats  
Aren't worth a fistful of ashes."  
"There's nothing I'd like better,"  
Our knight answered. "You'll see  
Exactly what happens as soon as  
I get my hands on you."  
And then our knight waded  
To the middle of the stream, and grasped  
The sentinel's reins in his left

Hand, and seized his leg  
With the right, pulling and twisting  
So hard that the other cried out  
In pain: he felt as if 815  
His leg was about to be pulled  
From his body, and begged our knight  
To stop, saying, "Knight,  
If you'd like to challenge me, man  
To man, go get your horse, 820  
And your shield, and your spear, and I'll gladly  
Fight you." "By God, I won't  
Let go," said our knight. "I'm afraid  
You'll run away the minute  
You're free." Deeply shamed, 825  
The sentinel said, "Knight,  
You can mount your horse in peace.  
I promise I'll neither trick you  
Nor run away. You've shamed me,  
And now I'm angry." But our knight 830  
Only replied, "Not  
Till you've solemnly sworn you won't  
Play tricks, or run, or ride  
Toward me, or touch me, until  
You see me mounted. I'd do you 835  
A great favor, if I set you  
Free, now that I've got you."  
And so he swore, for he had to.  
As soon as he had the sentinel's  
Solemn word, our knight 840  
Went to collect his shield  
And spear, which had floated far  
From the ford, carried by the swift



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Current. Then he returned  
And took possession of his horse. 845  
And when he was back in the saddle  
He hung the shield around  
His neck, and set his spear  
Against the saddle bow.  
And then the knights ran 850  
At one another as fast  
As their horses could gallop. The sentinel  
Struck the very first blow,  
Striking so hard that his spear  
Shattered. Then a blow from our knight 855  
Drove him off his horse,  
Deep down in the water.  
And our knight leapt from his horse,  
Sure he could drive in front of him  
At least a hundred such enemies. 860  
He drew his great steel sword  
Just as the sentinel, leaping  
Up, drew his, gleaming  
Bright, and they fought once more,  
Holding their shining shields 865  
In front of them, protecting themselves,  
For both sharp blades were busy,  
Always moving, never  
At rest. They beat at each other,  
Relentless, the fighting so furious 870  
That our knight began to feel,  
Deep in his heart, ashamed  
To be at it so long, working  
So hard to finish what he'd started,  
And wondering if he'd ever succeed 875

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In his mission, if a single knight  
Could delay him. It seemed to him  
That, just the day before,  
If he'd met a hundred such knights  
In a valley, he'd have beaten them all 880  
By now; he was anxious, and worried,  
Finding himself forced  
To waste his time, and so many  
Blows. He attacked the sentinel  
So fiercely that he turned and ran, 885  
Reluctantly giving up  
Control of the ford. But our knight  
Was not done: he chased the other  
Down, and drove him to the ground  
On all fours, swearing as he swung 890  
His sword he'd soon regret  
Tumbling a traveler in the stream  
And interrupting his thoughts.  
The girl who'd come with the sentinel  
Heard these fearsome threats 895  
And, much afraid, begged  
Our knight not to kill him.  
But the knight of the cart informed her  
He couldn't show mercy to someone  
Who'd made him suffer such shame. 900  
So our knight came forward, sword  
Raised, and the sentinel cried,  
"For the sake of God, and for me,  
Grant me the mercy I asked for!"  
Our knight answered, "May God 905  
Love me, I've never denied  
Mercy to a man who did me

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Wrong, if he asked in God's name.  
I'll grant you mercy, this once,  
For His sake. It's only right:  
I can't refuse you, when you ask  
Not in your own name, but His.  
But first, swear in His name  
You'll remain my prisoner, and come  
Whenever I call you." The oath  
Was a hard one, but the sentinel swore it.  
And then the girl spoke  
Again, "Knight, if you please,  
Now that he's begged for mercy  
And you have agreed to grant it,  
If ever before you've freed  
A captive, release this one  
To me; let me have him  
In return for my pledge to grant you  
Whatever you want, whenever  
You ask it, if I possibly can."  
Hearing her words, the knight  
Of the cart knew who she was,  
And immediately freed his prisoner.  
But knowing that he knew her caused  
The girl immense anguish:  
It was exactly what she did not want.  
So she hurried them off on their way,  
She and the sentinel commending  
Our knight to God, and requesting  
His permission to leave. It was granted.  
Then the knight of the cart rode on  
Until it was almost evening,  
When he saw a beautiful girl,

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Elegantly dressed and bejeweled. 940  
She greeted him with courteous,  
Well-bred words, and our knight  
Answered, "May God grant you  
Good health and happiness."  
She said, "Sir, my house 945  
Is nearby, ready to receive you  
If you decide to use it.  
But in order to enjoy my home  
You have to sleep with me.  
My offer's conditional and these 950  
Are my terms." Many men  
Would have thanked her a thousand times over,  
But our knight's face went dark  
And his answer was very different:  
"I thank you, lady, for the offer 955  
Of your home, which is gracious and welcome:  
But as far as sleeping's concerned,  
With your kind permission, I'll decline."  
"By God, you'll get nothing,"  
Said the girl, "unless you agree." 960  
And seeing he had no choice,  
Our knight accepted her offer,  
Though it gave him pain to say so—  
But that was nothing, compared  
To what he'd suffer that night! 965  
And the girl who took him to bed  
Would experience trouble and shame—  
Or perhaps she'd love him so much  
She wouldn't want to let him  
Leave her. Once he'd consented, 970  
Agreed to do as she wished,

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She led him to a castle courtyard  
Finer than any in Thessaly,  
Surrounded on all sides  
By high walls and a deep  
Moat. But the only man  
In that place was the one she'd brought there.

    She'd had a suite of beautiful  
Rooms readied, and a huge,  
Stately hall. They'd reached  
Her home, after riding along  
Beside a river, and the drawbridge  
Had been lowered, well in advance,  
To allow them to cross. They rode  
Over the bridge, and found  
The castle hall open;  
It was covered by a tiled roof.  
The gate, too, was open,  
And inside they saw a round  
Table on which a great cloth  
Had been spread, and plates had been brought,  
And burning candles glowed  
In their appointed places; there were gold  
Plated silver cups,  
And a pair of bowls, one full  
Of blackberry wine, the other  
Of good strong white. Two basins  
Of warm water, for washing  
Their hands, had been set at one end  
Of a bench, and at the other  
A handsome towel, brightly  
Worked, for drying themselves.  
But not a single servant

Or steward or waiter could be seen.  
The knight of the cart lifted 1005  
His shield from his neck and hung it  
From a hook, and set his spear  
In a rack, high on the wall.  
Then he dismounted, and the lady,  
Too, came down from her saddle. 1010  
And he was grateful, seeing  
How she chose not  
To wait for his help. As soon  
As her feet had touched the ground,  
Not hesitating a moment, 1015  
She ran inside, to a room  
From which she brought a scarlet  
Cloak for him to wear.  
The room was bright, as though the night  
Sky was filled with stars; 1020  
So many candles were burning,  
So many *flaring* torches,  
It was almost like daylight. Once  
She'd draped the cloak around  
His shoulders, she said, "My friend, 1025  
This basin of water, and this towel,  
Are for you to use: there's no one  
Here to help you. You  
And I are alone, as you see.  
So wash your hands, if you like, 1030  
Then seat yourself wherever  
You please, and—since it's time  
For eating—eat what you will."  
"Gladly." So he washed his hands  
And sat where he pleased, and she came 1035

And sat beside him, and they ate  
And drank together. And then  
It was time to leave the table.

    And as soon as they rose, the girl  
Said to the knight, "My lord, 1040  
Try the night air for a bit,  
If you wouldn't mind, and if  
You please, linger a while,  
Until you think I've been able  
To put myself to bed. 1045  
Don't be offended or displeased,  
For then you can honor your promise."  
"You have my word," he replied,  
"That I'll be in your bed as soon  
As I think the hour has come." 1050  
Then he walked outside, staying  
In the courtyard for a long while,  
Until it was time to return,  
For he needed to honor his pledge.  
But coming back to the hall 1055  
He could not find the girl  
Who wanted to be his lover.  
He searched, but could not see her,  
And said to himself, "Wherever  
She's gone, I'll go and find her." 1060  
He set out at once, determined  
To keep his word. And just  
As he started toward the other  
Rooms, he heard a girl  
Screaming, and knew the voice 1065  
For the girl he was supposed to sleep with  
Seeing an open door,

He went in that direction  
And saw, right in front of him,  
A knight who had tumbled the girl, 1070  
Her clothes turned up, across  
A bed, and was holding her down.  
And she, thinking surely  
He'd come to help her, cried  
As loud as she could, "Help me, 1075  
Help me! Knight! My guest!  
Unless you get him off me  
He'll dishonor me while you watch!  
You're the one I'm supposed  
To sleep with—you promised! Can you let him 1080  
Take me like this, by force,  
Right under your eyes?  
Oh noble knight, please!  
Hurry, help me, before  
It's too late!" The girl was almost 1085  
Naked, and the knight was shamelessly  
Pushing her down, and our knight  
Felt deeply humiliated,  
Seeing their bodies one  
On the other; he felt no desire 1090  
And not the slightest jealousy.  
But the door was guarded by a pair  
Of knights, both well armed,  
Their swords already drawn.  
And inside the room were four 1095  
Men at arms, each  
With an ax sharp enough  
To cut an ox in half  
As easily as chopping roots



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And branches from reeds and bushes  
Our knight stood where he was,  
Uncertain: "My God, what  
Can I do? I began this great  
Quest for Guinevere's sake.  
I can't proceed if my heart  
Is only as brave as a rabbit's:  
If Cowardice lends me its strength,  
And I march at its command,  
I'll never achieve my goal.  
To stay right here would be shameful—  
And even thinking such thoughts  
Brings me dishonor. My heart  
Would be black and worthless: by God,  
It makes me miserable to have waited  
This long, it's a mortal shame  
To have lingered here like this.  
How can I hope for God's  
Mercy if I'm driven by pride?  
If I don't prefer an honorable  
Death to a life of shame?  
What honor could I possibly gain,  
If the door had been left unguarded?  
If these fellows stepped back and let me  
Go in unchallenged? By God,  
The lowest man among men  
Could accomplish all that! I hear  
That miserable creature calling  
For help, over and over,  
In the name of the promise I made her,  
And cursing me for not coming."  
He approached the door, risking

His head and his neck for a quick  
Look up at the guards,  
And saw the swords coming  
At him. So he pulled back his head, 1135  
And the knights, unable to stop  
Their stroke, swung so savagely  
Hard that both swords struck  
The ground and shattered. And seeing them  
Smashed to pieces, he worried 1140  
A good deal less about  
Those axes waiting inside.  
He jumped inside, struck  
One man at arms, and then  
Another, the first he could get to, 1145  
Clubbing them with elbows and fists  
And stretching them out on the ground  
The third one swung, and missed;  
The fourth one sliced his cloak,  
And his shirt, and cut through 1150  
To the white flesh of his shoulder,  
Which quickly began to bleed.  
Our knight paid no attention  
To his wound, leaping swiftly  
Across the room and grasping 1155  
By the head the man who was trying  
To force the girl. Our knight  
Meant to honor his promise,  
Before he was done! Like it  
Or not, he yanked the head back. 1160  
But the fellow who'd missed him, at first,  
Came rushing over as fast  
As he could, raising his ax,

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Planning to split our knight's skull  
Down to the teeth. Knowing 1165  
How to defend himself,  
Our knight dragged the rapist  
In front of the blow, which fell  
Right between the neck  
And the shoulder, and cut them apart. 1170  
And then our knight took hold of  
The ax and quickly wrenched it  
Out of the fellow's hands,  
Then dropped the man he'd been holding,  
Needing to defend himself 1175  
Against the two remaining  
Knights and the men at arms  
With axes, who had launched a savage  
Attack. Leaping between  
The bed and the wall, he called: 1180  
"Come on, all of you! Now  
That I've got an ax, and space  
To swing it, you couldn't beat me  
Even with another twenty  
Or thirty to help you!" And then 1185  
The girl, who'd been watching, said,  
"By God, knight, you've nothing  
To fear, with me at your side!"  
With a snap of the wrist, she waved  
Away knights and men 1190  
And all. And at once, without  
A word of protest, they left.  
And then the girl added,  
"My lord, how well you've held off  
My entire household! Now come

With me; I'll show you the way."

Holding his hand, she led him

Back to the great hall.

He followed along, unhappy.

A bed stood ready in the middle 1200

Of the hall, beautifully made

With soft, flowing white sheets—

No flat straw mattress for them,

No rough and wrinkled blankets!

A coverlet of flowered 1205

Silk, double thickness,

Had been spread on top, and the girl,

Still wearing her chemise,

Lay on it. How hard it was

For him, taking off 1210

His shoes and undressing! He was sweating

Freely, but even suffering

As he was, he meant to honor

His pledge. Was he being forced?

Almost: he was forcing himself 1215

To sleep with the girl; his promise

Called him, and bent his will.

He lay on the bed, slowly,

Carefully, like her still wearing

His shirt, so cautious as he stretched 1220

Out on his back that no part

Of his body was touching hers.

Nor did he say a word—

As if he'd been a monk,

Forbidden to speak in his bed. 1225

He stared at the ceiling, seeing

Neither her nor anything

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Else. He could not pretend  
Goodwill. And why? His heart  
Had been captured by another woman, 1230  
And even a beautiful face  
Cannot appeal to everyone.  
The only heart our knight  
Owned was no longer his  
To command, having already 1235  
Been given away; there was nothing  
Left. Love, which rules  
All hearts, allows them only  
One home. "All hearts?" No:  
All that Love finds worthy, 1240  
Love's approval being worth  
A great deal. And Love valued  
Our knight higher than any,  
Creating such pride in his heart  
That I cannot blame him, and I will not, 1245  
For renouncing what Love denied him  
And striving for the love Love meant him  
To have. The girl could see  
Her company caused him discomfort;  
He'd gladly have let her go, 1250  
Clearly determined not  
To touch her or seek her favor.  
So she said, "With your permission,  
My lord, I think I'll leave you,  
And sleep in my own bed; 1255  
You'll be more at your ease, alone.  
I can't believe you find me  
Delightful, or ever will.  
Don't think me crude, please,

For speaking my mind so plainly. 1260  
You're entitled to a good night's sleep,  
Having so completely  
Carried out your pledge  
That there's nothing more I can ask.  
Let me commend you to God. 1265  
And now I'll go." She left him,  
Which caused him no grief at all;  
He was pleased to let her leave,  
For his heart was fully committed  
To someone else. The girl 1270  
Saw and understood  
His relief. She sought her own bed,  
Undressed and lay herself down,  
And then she said to herself,  
"Of all the knights I've ever 1275  
Known, none have been worth  
A penny—half a penny! —  
Except for him. And I know  
Exactly why: he's set  
His heart on a quest so grand, 1280  
So painful, so full of danger,  
That no other knight could attempt it.  
May God grant him success!"  
And then she fell asleep,  
And lay in her bed till dawn. 1285  
    But she woke, and hurriedly rose,  
At the very first light of morning.  
The knight was awake, too;  
He dressed and put on his armor,  
Waiting for no one's help. 1290  
Coming to the hall, she saw

He was ready, and said, as soon  
As she joined him, "Knight, may this day  
Go well for you." "May it  
Go well for you, my lady," 1295  
He answered at once, adding  
He was anxious to have his horse  
Brought out with no further delay.  
She led him into the courtyard,  
Saying, "My lord, I'll join you 1300  
For much of this journey, if you think  
You're able to safely escort me  
Along the road, according  
To our ancient rules and customs,  
Here in the kingdom of Logres." 1305  
Which customs were, in those days,  
That a knight finding a lady  
Or a girl, alone and unguarded,  
Should sooner cut his own throat  
Than do her the slightest harm 1310  
Or offer even the faintest  
Thought of any dishonor,  
If he meant to preserve his good name,  
For if he shamed the young woman  
He'd be banished from every court 1315  
In the world. But when a knight  
Was her escort, that knight could be challenged—  
And should he be beaten in battle,  
Conquered by force of arms,  
The winner, without any shadow 1320  
Of disgrace, could do as he liked  
With the woman. Which is why the girl  
Had asked him if he dared take her

In hand, and lead her about,  
According to these rules, which no one 1325  
Could ignore while he was with her.  
And the knight of the cart answered,  
"I guarantee no one  
Will hurt you unless they hurt me  
First." "In which case, I'll come." 1330  
She ordered her palfrey saddled,  
And so it was, at once,  
And led right out, along  
With the knight's horse. They mounted  
Without a squire to help, 1335  
And then they galloped off.  
She tried talking, but he had  
No interest in her words and neither  
Heard them nor replied: he reveled  
In his thoughts, but speech was painful. 1340  
Love kept scratching open  
The wounds he'd suffered for Love.  
He'd never bothered to bandage them  
Over, or tried to heal them:  
From the moment he'd felt the blow 1345  
And known he was hurt, he'd never  
Longed for relief or sought  
To be cured but, grateful, hungered  
For his pain.  
They followed the road  
Wherever it led them, and at last 1350  
Came to a flowing spring,  
Emerging from the middle of a meadow.  
A great rock stood  
Beside it, and lying on that stone,



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Left by God knows who, 1355  
Was a comb of ivory and gold.  
Since the days of the giant Ysoré  
No one, wise man or fool,  
Had seen its like. And half  
A handful of hair had been left there 1360  
By whoever had used it last.

    The girl saw the spring  
And the stone, and thought it better  
That the knight of the cart did not,  
So she turned down another road. 1365  
And he was so lost in his thoughts,  
And all their pleasures, that at first  
He paid no attention, but let her  
Lead him out of the path,  
Yet when he finally noticed 1370  
He was afraid of being tricked,  
Sure she had swerved away  
From the road to keep from encountering  
Something dangerous. "Stop,  
Young lady. This is the wrong 1375  
Road. We need to go that way.  
One never finds the way  
By leaving the right road."  
"My lord," said the girl, "this one  
Is better. I know the way." 1380  
He answered, "I've no idea,  
Lady, what's in your mind,  
But clearly this road's the one  
Everyone's followed. Just look.  
You can't turn me aside 1385  
And start me in some other direction,

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Go back, if you like, or come  
With me down the road we've been riding."  
So on they went, and soon  
He saw the stone, and the comb. 1390  
"My lord!" he exclaimed. "Never  
In all my life have I seen  
Such a comb!" "Fetch it for me,"  
Said the girl. "Gladly," he said,  
And bent, and picked it up. 1395  
And then he held it, staring  
At the strands of hair it held,  
Until the girl began  
To laugh. And the knight of the cart  
Asked her why she was laughing. 1400  
"Just be quiet," she said.  
"I won't tell you, right now."  
"Why not?" "I don't feel like talking."  
Hearing this, he begged her  
In the name of her lover, if she had one, 1405  
To tell him, for lovers should never  
Lie or conceal the truth  
"If there's anyone you love,  
Lady, with all your heart,  
Let me ask and plead and demand 1410  
In his name that you tell me the truth."  
"Who could deny such  
A request?" she said. "I'll tell you  
Whatever I know, and tell you  
Truly. Unless I'm mistaken 1415  
I recognize this comb.  
It belongs to the queen, I know  
It does. And these hairs that you see,

So bright, so clear, so brilliant,  
Left in the teeth of this comb. 1420  
They come from the queen's head:  
No other field could have grown them."  
And the knight replied, "By God,  
The world is full of kings  
And queens. Which one do you mean?" 1425  
She answered, "Good lord, your lordship!  
King Arthur's queen, of course."  
Brave as he was, he almost  
Fell from his horse, hearing  
These words; he supported himself 1430  
By leaning down as hard  
As he could against the bow  
Of his saddle. The girl was astonished,  
Stunned by this sudden reaction  
And truly afraid he might fall. 1435  
And who could blame her, for he seemed  
Unconscious, lost to his senses,  
And very nearly was,  
As close as a man can come,  
For his heart was filled with such sadness 1440  
That for a long moment the blood  
In his face disappeared, and his mouth  
Could not move. The girl slipped  
From her horse and ran to his side  
As fast as she could, to hold 1445  
Him up and keep him from falling—  
The very last thing in the world  
She wanted! But seeing her come  
He was shamed, and demanded, "Why  
Are you here? It's none of your business." 1450

Don't think the girl was stupid  
Enough to tell him the truth  
And shame him still more: she saw  
What pain it would cause him, knowing  
She'd seen his weakness. Guarding 1455  
Her tongue, she said, simply,  
In her best and most courteous manner,  
"My lord, I came for that comb:  
That's all I want — and I want it  
So badly I'll never be happy 1460  
Until I get it!" He was willing  
To hand it over, but first  
He gently removed the queen's  
Hair, not breaking a single  
Strand. Once a man 1465  
Has fallen in love with a woman  
No one in all the world  
Can lavish such wild adoration  
Even on the objects she owns,  
Touching them a hundred thousand 1470  
Times, caressing with his eyes,  
His lips, his forehead, his face.  
And all of it brings him happiness,  
Fills him with the richest delight;  
He presses it into his breast, 1475  
Slips it between his shirt  
And his heart — worth more than a wagon-  
Load of emeralds or diamonds,  
Holy relics that free him  
Of disease and infection: no powdered 1480  
Pearls and ground-up horn  
And snail shells for him! No prayers

To Saints Martin and James: his faith  
In her hair is complete, he needs  
No more. And their real power? 1485  
You'd take me for a liar, and a fool,  
If I told you the truth—if they offered him  
Everything displayed at the Fair  
Of Saint-Denis he wouldn't  
Have exchanged the hairs he'd found 1490  
For the whole bursting lot of it.  
And if you're still hunting  
The truth, let me tell you that gold  
Refined a hundred times,  
And then again, would have seemed 1495  
To him, if you set that gold  
Against a single strand  
Of hair, darker than night  
Compared to a summer's day.  
But I need to get on with my story. 1500  
The girl carried off  
The comb, and quickly remounted,  
While he was ravished with delight  
By what he bore above  
His heart. Then they crossed the plain 1505  
And entered a forest so dense  
That riding side by side  
Became impossible, and they went  
In single file, one  
Behind the other, the girl 1510  
In front, spurring her horse  
Forward in a straight line.  
Just as the path narrowed  
Still further, they saw a man

Approaching, and even at a distance 1515  
The girl immediately knew  
Who he was, and said, "Sir knight,  
Do you see that man riding  
Toward us, fully armed  
And armored, and ready for battle? 1520  
He thinks he's going to take me  
Away, without resistance:  
I know him, I know what he's thinking.  
He loves me with a wild passion,  
And for a very long time he's begged 1525  
For my love, and sent me messages,  
But I'll never love him, it's out  
Of the question, completely impossible.  
In the name of God, I'd rather  
Be dead than his lover! Right 1530  
This minute, I know it, he's as thrilled  
At the thought of having me as if  
I were lying in his arms. And now  
We'll see what you're able to do,  
We'll learn if you're truly brave: 1535  
The time has come. Can you really  
Protect me, as you said you could?  
Can a woman rely on your word?  
I'll be able to tell the world,  
For better or worse, just what 1540  
You're made of." He answered, "Fine,  
Fine," and seemed to be saying,  
"How can you worry? You're frightening  
Yourself for nothing. Why  
Be afraid, as long as I'm here?" 1545  
While they spoke, the approaching

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Knight, wasting no time,  
Came whipping his horse at a furious  
Gallop, dashing straight at them,  
Hurrying hard to keep 1550  
From wasting such a wonderful chance,  
Delighted to see this woman  
He loved. He saluted her warmly:  
"You I've longed for so long,  
From whom I've had so little 1555  
Joy and so much suffering,  
Welcome, wherever you've come from!"  
How rude she'd have been, not  
To reply at all. She returned  
Words that acknowledged his presence, 1560  
And though they were only words,  
And meant nothing, he was thrilled  
To hear even so formal  
A greeting as the girl gave him,  
Though the mere speaking neither 1565  
Stained her lips nor cost her  
Much of an effort. He couldn't  
Have been more pleased, right then,  
Had he fought and won in a splendid  
Tournament; no honor, no glory, 1570  
Would have meant so much. And thinking  
So well of himself, he reached out  
His hand and seized her palfrey's  
Reins: "Now I've got you!  
How well my heart has steered me, 1575  
Bringing me home to this port!  
All my troubles are over!  
At the end of danger there's safety;

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At the end of torment there's delight;  
At the end of sickness there's health. 1580  
Everything I've wanted is mine—  
To think of finding you  
Like this! I can take you for my own  
And no one can call me to account!"  
"You're wasting your breath," she said. 1585  
"I'm under this knight's protection."  
"He's no protection at all:  
I'm taking you right now—  
And this knight of yours would sooner  
Swallow a sack of salt 1590  
Than risk a fight with me!  
The man who can keep me away  
From you has yet to be horn.  
I'll lead you away while he watches,  
Without any trouble, whether 1595  
He likes it or not. Let him  
Try to stop me, if he dares!"  
The knight of the cart replied  
Calmly, paying no  
Attention to this loud boasting, 1600  
But quietly, clearly disputing  
The claim: "Not so fast, my friend.  
Don't waste so many words;  
Speak with a bit of balance.  
I've no intention of depriving 1605  
You of your rights, once  
You have them. But understand:  
This girl is under my  
Protection. Release her: you've held on  
Too long. You're forbidden to harm her."



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But the other would rather have been burned  
Alive than lose his catch!

"It wouldn't be right," said our knight,

"To let you lead her away.

You'll have to fight me first.

But if you're really prepared

For combat, we'll have to find

Some better place than this narrow

Path—some open road,

Perhaps, or a meadow, or a field."

The other wanted nothing

More: "I agree, of course.

You're quite right; this road

Is far too narrow. My horse

Is already squeezed so tight

1625

I doubt he could turn around

Without breaking his leg."

But though it was hard, he managed

To turn, somehow not hurting

Either the animal or himself,

1630

Then said, "What a pity we couldn't

Meet where others could watch us,

With room for ourselves and an audience!

I'd love to have them see

Who was the better knight.

1635

But that's that: let's find

Some nearby field, open

And large enough for combat."

So they rode along, and came

To a meadow crowded with girls

1640

And knights and ladies, playing

All sorts of games, enjoying

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The pleasures of that lovely spot.  
And most enjoyed no simple  
Childish sports, but chess, 1645  
And backgammon, while others  
Played dominoes, and games  
Of dice on metal boards.  
But some among them strummed  
Lutes, and others amused 1650  
Themselves like children, dancing  
Around in circles, singing  
As they went, jumping and tumbling  
Down.

    In the far corner  
Of the field, an elderly knight 1655  
Sat on a sorrel Spanish  
Stallion with gilded saddle  
And reins. His hair was grizzled  
And gray. He sat striking  
A pose, his hand on his hip, 1660  
And watched, wearing nothing  
Over his shirt, in such fine  
Weather; his scarlet, fur-trimmed  
Cloak lay back on his shoulders.  
On a path nearby, awaiting 1665  
His orders, were twenty-three knights,  
Armed, and on excellent Irish  
Horses. But all the games  
Were over, the moment the travelers  
Arrived. Everyone shouted, 1670  
"See! See! It's the knight  
Who rode in the cart! No one  
Can go on playing, as long

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As he's here! Even wanting  
To play in his presence would be  
Unlucky, but daring to try it  
Would surely be cursed." Meanwhile,  
The boastful young knight, madly  
In love with the girl, confident  
He'd finally caught her, approached  
The gray-haired elderly knight,  
Who happened to be his father.  
"My lord," he declared, "I'm wonderfully  
Happy, and I want the world  
To hear it. God in His goodness  
Has given me what I've always desired:  
Crowning me king wouldn't have been  
Better or made me more grateful  
Or granted me more. I've won  
Goodness and beauty both!"  
"I'm not so sure she's yours,"  
The old knight said to his son,  
Who answered at once: "Not sure?  
Is there something wrong with your eyes?  
By God, don't doubt me, father;  
Just look for yourself. I've got her,  
I caught her there in the forest,  
She came riding by, and I got her.  
God Himself must have brought her,  
Made her mine by right."  
"I doubt that knight who followed you  
Here will let you have her.  
I suspect he'll challenge your claim."  
While they were talking, the whole  
Assembly stood still, no one

Wanting to play or dance,  
Filled with loathing for our knight—  
Who hurried over to the girl  
And stayed at her side. "Release  
The young lady, knight," he said. 1710  
"You have no right to detain her.  
And if you insist, here  
And now I'll fight you in her name."  
At which the elderly knight  
Exclaimed, "I told you, didn't I? 1715  
My son, give the girl  
Her freedom, let him have her."  
Deeply upset, the young  
Knight swore he'd never  
Surrender what he'd won, declaring, 1720  
"Let God deprive me of all  
Life's pleasures, if I let her go!  
It was I who won her, and I'll  
Keep her: she belongs to me!  
I'd rather strip my shield 1725  
Of every buckle and strap,  
And lose all faith in myself,  
My arm, my armor, my sword  
And my spear, and all I am,  
Than give up this girl I love!" 1730  
"I won't let you fight," said his father,  
"Whatever you say. You think  
Better of yourself than you should.  
Listen to me, and obey."  
But his proud son replied, 1735  
"Do you think I'm a child, who needs  
To be frightened? Let me tell you:

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Nowhere in this world surrounded  
By oceans is there a knight  
Brave and strong enough 1740  
To make me let her go  
Without a fight. And I'll beat him."  
But his father replied, "So  
You believe, my son; clearly,  
Your trust in yourself is immense. 1745  
No matter: I won't let you  
Engage this knight in combat."  
The young man answered, "What a coward  
I'd be, to take your advice.  
And anyone else who listens 1750  
To you and refuses to fight me  
Can go straight to the devil!  
By God: buying at home  
Makes bad bargains. I'd better  
Leave, since you'd like to cheat me. 1755  
I can prove my courage elsewhere.  
People who've never seen me  
Won't feel obliged to stand  
In my way, tormenting and destroying,  
As you have. What hurts the most 1760  
Is your harsh scolding—as if  
You didn't know, and surely  
You do, that blocking desire,  
A man's or a woman's, can only  
Whip the flame higher. If I give up 1765  
Anything on your account,  
May God deny me joy  
Forever. I'm fighting, in spite  
Of you." "By Saint Peter and the Pope,"

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Said the father, "now I see  
Words are wasted on you. 1770  
I can't teach you a thing.  
Enough talking; let me  
Quickly make sure you do  
What I tell you, not what you want, 1775  
For my will will prevail."  
He called to the knights who'd come  
With him, ordering them all  
To lay hold of this son who refused  
To obey his father. And then 1780  
He told them, "Before I let him  
Fight, I'll tie him up.  
I've made you all what you are:  
You owe me your faith and your love.  
In the name of all I have offered you, 1785  
These are my orders. Obey them.  
Impelled by his swollen pride,  
This son of mine acts  
Like a fool, disdain my wishes."  
As one, they promised to lock 1790  
His unruly son in their arms,  
Completely unable to fight,  
And they'd force him to give up the girl,  
Whether he liked it or not.  
And then they all grasped him, 1795  
Some by the arms, some  
Round the neck. "Now!" said the father.  
"Can you see what a fool you've been?  
No matter what you do,  
Or what you think, or how 1800  
You feel, or how much it hurts,

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You can't fight any battles.  
If you've got any sense, you'll let  
Yourself be guided by me.  
Do you know what I think?  
To help you feel better, we'll follow  
This knight, in daylight and darkness,  
If you like, over the fields  
And through the forests, riding  
Quietly along behind him.  
That way we'll see what sort  
Of knight he is, and whether  
I can agree to let you  
Measure your **skill** against his."  
And although it grated on his **heart**,  
The son was obliged to consent,  
There being no other choice  
But to force himself to be patient,  
And follow the knight, and wait.  
And **all** the **people** in the meadow,  
Having seen what happened,  
Turned to each other and said,  
"Did you see? The knight of the cart  
Just won the honor of leading  
Away the girl beloved  
By our lord's son, and they're following  
Him. By God, there must be  
Something to him, or they'd never  
Let him have her. And now,  
A hundred curses on anyone  
Who won't go back to our games!  
Let's play!" And they all returned  
To their games, and their dances and songs.

But our knight rode right off,  
Not lingering there in those fields, 1835  
And the girl rode along  
Behind him, not needing to be led.  
And they both rode rapidly.  
Father and son followed them  
At a distance; by noon, jogging 1840  
Across a mown field,  
They came to a monastery  
Church, in a lovely setting,  
With a walled graveyard beside it.  
Being neither a peasant 1845  
Nor a fool, our knight went into  
The church to pray, while the girl  
Remained behind, watching  
His horse. And having said  
His prayers, he was heading back 1850  
Outside when he saw an ancient  
Monk walking along  
And stopped to greet him. And then,  
In a gentle voice, he asked  
The old man to tell him what 1855  
Was behind the walls, for he did not  
Know. A cemetery,  
The monk replied. "Show me,  
Please," said our knight, "in the name  
Of God." "Gladly, my lord." 1860  
So the monk led him into  
The graveyard, where he saw the most beautiful  
Tombs to be seen from there  
To Dombes or Pampelona,  
Each inscribed with the names 1865



Of those who were meant to lie there  
When their time came. And our knight  
Began to read those inscriptions,  
And found the following: "Here  
Gawain will lie, and here 1870  
Loholt, Arthur's son,  
And here Yvain" — and a host  
Of other noble knights,  
The bravest and best in all  
Of France and the rest of the world 1875  
And then he saw a marble  
Tomb, and it seemed to him  
Lovelier than anything there.  
So he called to the ancient monk,  
Asking, "For whom are these tombs 1880  
Intended?" The old man answered,  
"You've seen what's written here.  
If you understand these words  
You already know what they say  
And for whom these tombs are waiting." 1885  
"But that huge and lovely one bears  
No name. Who will lie there?"  
"I'll tell you," said the hermit. "This tomb  
Is the grandest ever made  
Anywhere here on this earth. 1890  
No one has ever seen  
Such rich, luxuriant work:  
It's lovelier inside than out.  
But don't imagine you'll ever  
Get to see for yourself. 1895  
That will never happen.  
Seven strapping men

Would be needed to open this tomb,  
If anyone wanted to look,  
For it's sealed by a huge stone. 1900  
Seven men, all stronger  
Than you or me, would surely  
Be needed to lift it. Or even  
More. It's inscribed with these words:  
'He who raises this stone, 1905  
Using only the strength  
Of his own body, will free  
From worldly confinement all those—  
Peasants, and men of noble  
Birth— who lie behind bars 1910  
In a prison from which no one returns;  
They're locked in that faraway place,  
Though those who reside in that distant  
Land come and go  
As they please.' - The knight took hold 1915  
Of the huge stone, which he lifted  
As if it were light as a feather,  
Though ten men heaving  
As hard as they could couldn't do it.  
The ancient monk was so 1920  
Astonished he almost fell over;  
He'd never seen such a miracle,  
And never expected to see one  
As long as he lived. And he said,  
"My lord, you've made me most 1925  
Anxious to know your name.  
Would you tell me, please?" "Me?  
No, by God!" said the knight.  
"Ah, I'm sorry," said the monk.

"But if you would, you'd be wonderfully  
Gracious and polite, nor  
Would the knowledge do you any harm.  
Where do you come from— what land?"  
"I'm a knight; you can see for yourself;  
I was born in the kingdom of Logres. 1935  
I hope that tells you enough.  
Now tell me, please, as you said  
You would, who's meant to lie  
In this tomb." "Whoever can free  
Those prisoners held without ransom 1940  
In that land from which none escape."  
The monk having told what he knew,  
The knight commended his soul  
To God and **all** His saints,  
And then, as **quickly** as he could, 1945  
Returned to the girl, who was waiting.  
The white-haired monk went with him,  
Escorting him out of the church,  
And while the girl remounted,  
Ready to resume their journey, 1950  
The monk **hurriedly** told her  
All that the knight had done,  
And **begged** her, if she knew his name,  
To kindly tell it, but let it  
Be known, too, if she did not 1955  
Know. But all she dared  
Say was this: no knight  
In the four corners of the world  
Would ever be his equal.  
And then she left him, and galloped 1960  
After the knight. In

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The meantime, the two who'd been following  
Behind them arrived, and the monk,  
Alone in front of the church,  
Saw them. The elderly knight  
Asked, "Sir, tell us:  
Have you seen a knight leading  
A young woman?" The monk  
Replied, "It's easy enough  
To tell you whatever I know,  
For they've just ridden away.  
But before he left, that knight  
Entered our church, and all  
Alone performed a wondrous  
Deed, for he lifted—without  
Struggling, without hurting  
Himself—a huge stone  
From a marble tomb. He means  
To rescue the queen, and he will,  
And all the other prisoners.  
You know what's written on that stone,  
My lords, you've often read  
The inscription. No knight his equal  
Has ever been born to human  
Flesh or sat in a saddle."  
The old knight spoke to the young one,  
"What do you think, my son?  
What kind of knight performs  
Such feats? And who was wrong,  
Eh—you or me?  
Not for all the wealth  
In Amiens would I have you  
Fight him! You'd better think,

And think long and hard, if you shouldn't  
Turn around and go home,  
For you'd be an absolute fool  
To go on following behind him."  
And the young knight replied, "I agree.  
Pursuing him would be worthless.  
As long as you're willing, let's leave."  
It made a great deal of sense.  
And all this time the girl  
Rode along beside  
Our knight, trying to talk him  
Into telling his name,  
Asking him over and over,  
Never accepting no  
For an answer. And finally he said,  
"Haven't I told you I come  
From King Arthur's court? In the name  
Of God Almighty, I swear  
I'll never tell you my name!"  
So she asked permission to leave,  
Promising to come back, and the knight  
Was delighted to let her go.

So the girl rode away,  
And the knight, knowing he was late,  
Galloped on alone.  
In the late afternoon, as night-song  
Was sung, he was riding hard  
And saw a knight returning  
From the woods, where he'd spent the day  
Hunting. He rode on his great  
Stallion, his helmet laced on,  
And the deer that God had granted him

Hung across his horse,  
And he came quickly, hurrying  
To greet the knight of the cart  
And ask him to lodge at his home.  
"Sir," he said, "it's late, 2030  
And time to be off the road;  
It makes sense to look for lodging.  
I have a house nearby,  
To which I'd be glad to take you.  
There's nowhere you'd be a more welcome 2035  
Guest; I'll do all I can.  
Please make me happy and accept."  
"I'd be pleased to come," said our knight.  
The host immediately sent  
His son ahead, to make 2040  
Sleeping arrangements and ensure  
That supper was served on time.  
The young man galloped off,  
Delighted to do exactly  
As his father ordered, glad 2045  
To have such a guest and more  
Than willing to serve him. The two  
Knights, having no need  
To hurry, ambled along  
The road, till they reached the house 2050  
The host had married an amiable,  
Well-bred woman; they'd had  
Five beloved sons,  
Two who were knights, three  
Who were squires, plus a pair of lovely 2055  
Young girls. Not born in that land,  
But in the kingdom of Logres,

They were treated as foreign prisoners,  
Having been held in confinement  
For a very long time. The father 2060  
Of the family ushered his guest  
Into their courtyard, and his wife  
Came hurrying out to greet them,  
Followed by his sons and daughters,  
All offering to serve and assist. 2065  
Our knight greeted them all  
And dismounted. But neither the girls  
Nor their five brothers waited  
On his host, well aware  
What their father wanted done. 2070  
They showered the guest with honors.  
And when they'd taken his arms  
And armor, one of his host's  
Daughters took off her cloak  
And wrapped it around his shoulders 2075  
I hardly need to tell you  
How well he dined, that night.  
And once their dinner was done,  
They talked freely, discussing  
All manner of things. The host 2080  
Began by asking their guest  
Who he was and where  
He came from, but never asking  
His name. The knight of the cart  
Answered at once: "I come 2085  
From the kingdom of Logres; I've never  
Been in this land before."  
Hearing this, his host,  
And his host's wife and children,

Were deeply affected, all  
Uttering sighs and groans.  
And then they told him, "Oh good  
Sweet sir, how sad that you've come,  
What a terrible shame! For now  
You'll become, as we all are,  
Slaves and servants in exile."  
"In exile from where?" he asked.  
"My lord, from Logres, like you.  
This prison holds many  
Brave and noble souls  
From our land. May this savage custom  
Be cursed, and those who keep it!  
For no stranger who comes here  
Is ever allowed to leave,  
Tied forever to this land.  
No one's denied entrance,  
But once they're here, they must stay.  
Your fate, too, is determined:  
I doubt you'll ever leave."  
"Oh yes, I will, if I can."  
The host shook his head:  
"Really? You think you can go  
As you came?" "Indeed, with God's  
Blessing, I'll certainly try."  
"Then, surely, none of the others  
Will be afraid to follow  
After, for if one can safely  
Leave, and escape this prison,  
Nothing can hold the rest,  
And no one will try to stop them."  
And then the host remembered



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A rumor sweeping the land,  
That a great and powerful knight  
Had stormed across their border,  
Come to rescue the queen  
Held captive by Méléagant,  
The king's son: "It's him,"  
He thought. "I must say so."  
"My lord," he said, "hide  
Nothing from me, and in  
Return you'll have the best  
Advice I'm able to give.  
I stand to gain, if you  
Can do what you mean to. So tell me  
The truth, on your own account  
As well as mine. I already  
Know you've come to this country  
In search of the queen—here  
Among this infidel race,  
Worse than the Moslem hordes."  
The knight of the cart answered,  
"I've no other reason for coming.  
I've no idea where they're holding  
My lady, but all I want  
Is to help her, and I need advice.  
Counsel me, please, if you can."  
His host answered, "My lord,  
You've begun a dangerous business.  
The road you're on is leading you  
Straight to the Sword Bridge.  
Now is when you need  
Advice. If you'll listen to me,  
You'll approach the Sword Bridge

By a very much safer route:  
I'll show you the way." But our knight, 2155  
Who had no interest in a shorter  
Road, replied, "Is your route  
Just as direct as mine?"  
"No," was the answer. "It's longer,  
Because it's so much safer." 2160  
"Then it's not the road I want,"  
Said the knight. "Now tell me, if you know,  
Just what I'm likely to meet."  
"My lord, your road's not useful.  
If you go that way, tomorrow 2165  
You'll come to a corridor you might  
Be sorry to travel; it's called  
THE STONY PATH. Would you like me  
To tell you exactly why  
It's so exceedingly dangerous? 2170  
It's precisely the width of a horse:  
Two men side by side  
Can't get through, and it's well  
Watched and fiercely guarded.  
They'll come running to stop you 2175  
The moment you appear. Expect  
A shower of sword blows and spear thrusts,  
And plan to give as many  
Back, before you cross over."  
As soon as he'd finished speaking, 2180  
A knight stepped forward, one  
Of the host's sons, who said,  
"My lord, with your permission  
I'd like to go with him, if you please."  
And one of his other sons, 2185

---

A squire, said, "I'd like  
To go, too." The father gladly  
Gave his consent to them both.  
Pleased not to be  
Alone, our knight thanked them;  
Their company would be very welcome.

The conversation over,  
Our knight lay down to sleep,  
For he badly needed rest.  
But as soon as the sun's light 2195  
Could be seen, he rose, and those  
Who'd agreed to travel with him  
Immediately left their beds.

They put on their armor and took  
Their weapons, made their farewells, 2200  
And left. The squire led them,  
And they rode on together,  
Till early that morning they reached

The Stony Path. A small  
Fort barred the way, 2205  
With a sentinel standing inside.

They drew near, and as  
They approached he saw them, and began  
To cry, as loud as he could,  
"Enemy alert! Enemy 2210  
Alert!" And then a mounted

Knight in dazzling new  
Armor rode out from the fort,  
And soldiers with sharp axes  
Appeared from every side. 2215

And as the knight of the can  
Came closer, the knight-defender

---

Hurled insulting words:  
"Fellow," he called, "you're a stubborn  
Fool, coming so far  
Across this land. Once  
He's ridden in a cart, no knight  
Should dare show his face  
Here. God won't let you  
Rejoice at making this trip!"  
Then he and our knight spurred  
Their horses straight ahead.  
The defender thrust so hard  
With his lance that it broke in two,  
And the pieces fell to the ground.  
But our knight's blow, just  
Above the edge of the shield,  
Struck the defender's throat  
And threw him down on the rocks.  
His soldiers ran forward, their axes  
Raised, but careful that none  
Of their blows hurt our knight  
Or his horse. He saw at once  
Their attack was all for show  
And they meant him no harm, and without  
So much as drawing his sword  
Rode quickly on, and his two  
Companions followed after.  
And the younger said to the older  
There'd never been such a knight;  
No one could possibly match him,  
"What en incredible feat,  
Breaking through that defense!"  
"By God, hurry back,

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Brother," said the older, "and find  
Our father, and tell him the whole  
Story." He was already  
A knight. But the young squire  
Swore both up and down  
He'd never go back or leave  
The knight of the cart until  
He'd been made a knight at his hands  
If his brother wanted to tell  
The story, let him go back  
Himself! And off they rode,  
The three together, till just about  
Noon, when they met with a man.  
He asked them who they were,  
And they answered, "We're knights, minding  
Our business and doing what we should."  
And the man said to our knight,  
"My lord, I offer food  
And shelter to you and your friends."  
He addressed our knight, who was clearly  
The lord and master of the three.  
"I can't imagine stopping  
At this hour," said our knight. "Only  
Lazy cowards lie  
Around at their ease, when there's work  
Like this to be done. The task  
I've undertaken is so  
Important I can't stop now!"  
Then the man replied, "Ah,  
We're nowhere near where I live:  
It's still a good long ride.  
The hour will be late, when you get there,

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Let me assure you, and the time  
Will be right for seeking shelter."  
"Agreed," said our knight. "I'll come."  
They rode on down the road,  
The man leading the way,  
The knight of the cart and the others  
Behind him. They'd been riding a while  
When a squire came dashing toward them,  
Down the same road, mounted  
On a nag as fat and round  
As an apple. And he said to the man,  
"My lord, my lord, come quick!  
The people of Logres have taken up  
Arms and invaded our land,  
The battle's already under  
Way, men are screaming  
And fighting all over the place.  
And they're saying a knight who's fought  
All over the world has crossed  
Into this country, and no one's  
Strong enough to block  
His way, he goes wherever  
He wants, no matter who tries  
To stop him. And they say he'll free  
All the prisoners, and grind  
The others into the ground.  
So hurry, please. Hurry!"  
The man whipped up his horse.  
But the others were wonderfully happy,  
For they too had heard  
The squire, and wanted to help  
Their people. "My lord," said the host's

---

Sons, "you've heard this fellow.  
We ought to hurry, too, 2315  
And help our people fight."  
Their guide had galloped ahead,  
Not waiting, riding as fast  
As he could toward a fortress built  
Into the rise of a hill, 2320  
And heading directly for the gate.  
They galloped after him. The fort  
Was surrounded by a high wall  
And encircled by a moat. But the very  
Moment they dashed in 2325  
Behind him, a great gate  
Came crashing down on their heels,  
Blocking the way back.  
"Go on, go on!" they shouted.  
"We can't stop here!" 2330  
Hurrying after their guide  
They saw him ride unharmed,  
Unhindered, clear through  
The exit door, but as soon  
As he'd gotten past it, another 2335  
Gate was dropped behind him.  
And then they were deeply concerned,  
Seeing themselves shut in  
And thinking there was magic at work.  
But the knight of the cart, of whom 2340  
I've more to tell you, wore  
A ring on his finger, and its stone  
Possessed the power to break  
Any enchantment its owner  
Encountered. He held the stone

---

High, and stared in its depths,  
And said, "Oh Lady, Lady,  
If God wishes to help me  
Now is my time of need."

The Lady of the Lake was a fairy  
Who'd tended him as a child;  
She'd given him this ring.  
No matter where he might be,  
He knew she'd come to his aid  
If ever magic threatened.  
But after calling her name,  
And studying the stone, he saw  
Quite clearly this was not magic:  
They were simply well and truly  
Trapped, shut in a prison. 2360  
They saw, to one side, a small  
Door, shut and barred  
Against them, and drawing their swords  
As one, they cut and slashed  
So fiercely that the bar fell away. 2365  
They ran out of the tower  
And saw the battle had begun,  
Fierce and savage, involving  
At least a thousand knights  
On both sides, not counting 2370  
A huge crowd of peasants.  
And as they made their way down  
To the field, the host's son  
Spoke these prudent, sensible  
Words, "My lord, I think 2375  
We'd be wise, before we enter  
The combat, to be sure we know



---

Where the men on our side are fighting,

I'm not yet sure myself,

But I'll go and see, if you like."

2380

"Go," said our knight, "and quickly,

And come back as fast as you can."

He hurried off, then hurried

Back. "How lucky we are!

There's not a doubt in my mind:

2385

These men right here are ours."

The knight of the cart ran

Directly into battle,

And found a knight hurrying

To meet him. He struck one blow

And laid him dead on the ground.

The young squire climbed down

And took the dead knight's horse,

And the handsome armor he'd worn,

And made himself ready to fight.

Without wasting a word

He mounted and took up the shield

And the heavy, painted spear,

Then hung the brightly glittering,

Razor-sharp sword on his belt.

And into battle he went,

Following both his brother

And his lord, who'd been fighting well,

All this time, smashing

And shattering shields and helmets,

Cracking and splitting mail shirts.

Neither wood nor iron could keep

Their lord from wounding his enemies,

Sweeping them, dead, down

From their saddles. All by himself 2410  
He might have won the battle,  
And the two who fought beside him  
Nicely reinforced  
His efforts. The men of Logres  
Were amazed, not knowing who 2415  
He was, and many turned  
To the host's son, hunting  
His name. "Gentlemen," he said,  
"He's come to lead us out  
Of exile and end the misery 2420  
We've suffered so long. Show him  
All the honor you can:  
For our sake, he's met with  
Terrible dangers, and will meet  
With many more. He's accomplished 2425  
Much. But there's still much  
To be done." They were overjoyed,  
As the news spread through their ranks;  
All had heard he would come,  
All had longed to see him. 2430  
Their excitement grew and grew  
Until it gave them such strength  
That they killed their enemies like flies,  
And would have killed many more —  
Though mostly, it seems to me, 2435  
The work was done by one  
Knight in particular. But night  
Was starting to fall, and it saved  
The opposing army from disaster,  
Covering the world in darkness 2440  
And forcing the fighting to stop.

---

The battle interrupted,  
The former prisoners crowded  
Around the knight, almost  
Quarreling, fighting for his reins,  
And all of them crying at once:  
"Welcome, welcome, my lord!"  
And each of them said, "My lord,  
Come stay with me; my lord,  
In the name of God, please,  
Don't stay with anyone else."  
They were all saying the same  
Thing, for young and old  
Were hungry to have him as their guest:  
"You'd be better off staying  
With me than with anyone else."  
They circled around him, each  
Trying to outdo the other,  
Pushing and shoving and very  
Nearly coming to blows.  
And finally the knight told them  
It was all foolish noise:  
"Stop this stupid bickering,"  
He said. "It's a waste of time.  
We mustn't argue among  
Ourselves, but help each other.  
You've got no business quarreling  
Like this, about where I sleep:  
You ought to be thinking, instead,  
How to put me up  
For the night somewhere close  
To the road I need to take."  
And still they argued on:

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"Mine is the best! — No, mine!"  
"I'm still not hearing," said the knight,  
"What I'd like to hear: these noises  
You're making tell me the smartest  
Man among you is a fool.  
You ought to be urging me on,  
But all you're doing is setting up  
Detours. To do things as they should have  
Been done, you'd each and all  
Offer as much honor  
And help as a man could want,  
And then, by all the saints  
In Rome, I'd be as grateful  
To everyone here for your actions  
As in fact I am for your fine  
Intentions. May God give me health  
And joy, but I find myself  
Already as grateful to you all  
As if you'd done me wonderful  
Favors—and the will can stand for  
The act!" And so he calmed them,  
And they led him off to a rich knight's  
Home, right on the road  
He was traveling, and each of them honored  
And sewed him, at great expense,  
And until they went to their beds  
A great good time was had  
By all, for everyone loved him.  
In the morning, when he had to leave,  
Everyone wanted to ride  
With him, anxious to help,  
But he had no interest in anyone

---

Joining his journey except  
The two who'd come with him  
When he first arrived: he'd take  
These two, and no one else.  
They rode quietly, that day,  
From morning to night, without  
Meeting a single adventure.  
Then, galloping hard, late  
In the day, they emerged from a wood  
And as they broke from the trees  
Saw a knight's house,  
And his gracious-seeming lady  
Seated in front of the door.  
The moment she saw them coming  
She rose to greet them, her face  
Fairly glowing with pleasure:  
"Welcome," she said warmly.  
"I'd like you to stay at my home;  
Please be my guests—dismount."  
"Your wish is our command, 2525  
Lady. We will dismount  
And spend the night here."  
Once they were down, she arranged  
For their horses to be led away,  
For hers was a noble house. 2530  
She called her sons and daughters,  
Who came at once—courteous,  
Amiable youngsters, her sons  
Handsome, her daughters lovely—  
And told them to remove the saddles 2535  
And take good care of the beasts.  
They obeyed her without a murmur,

Cheerfully doing her will.  
And her daughters helped the travelers  
Out of their armor, and when this 2540  
Was done they draped over  
Their shoulders three short cloaks.  
And then they were shown straight  
To their rooms, which were very beautiful.  
Although the lord of the house 2545  
Was not there—he had gone hunting  
In the woods, with two of his sons—  
He was expected any minute,  
And the well-trained servants were waiting  
In front of the door. He arrived, 2550  
And the dead deer were quickly  
Untied and carried in,  
And the servants told him the news:  
"You don't know it yet, my lord,  
But you've three knights as your guests." 2555  
"God be praised!" he replied.  
The knight and his two sons  
Were delighted to meet their guests,  
And the servants were hardly asleep:  
Each and all were ready 2560  
To do what they needed to do,  
Some hurrying to prepare  
Food, and others fetching  
Candles, which they quickly lit,  
While others brought in basins, 2565  
So the guests could wash their hands—  
And how they poured out water!  
And when they had washed, dinner  
Was served. Nothing could be seen

---

On that table to offend anyone!  
And then, as the first course came,  
They were treated to the presence, outside  
The door, of a knight as swollen  
With pride as an arrogant bull.  
He was armored from head to foot  
And mounted on a great stallion;  
One leg was in the stirrups,  
The other was thrown, with an air  
Of supreme indifference, over  
His horse's neck, on its mane  
No one had seen him come  
Until, all of a sudden,  
There he was. "Who's  
The one," he asked, "tell me,  
So proud, and also so stupid,  
Blessed with so brainless a skull,  
That he's ridden all this way  
Intending to cross the Sword  
Bridge? He's wasted his time  
And his effort, he's come here for nothing."  
The knight of the cart calmly  
Answered, not in the least  
Impressed: "I'm the one."  
"You? What put the idea  
In your head? What you should have done,  
Before you started this business,  
Was think how it all might end  
For someone who'd ridden in a cart —  
Or had you forgotten all that?  
Did you remember? Are you  
Truly as shameless as you seem?"

---

But no one could be so foolish  
As to take on a task this grand,  
Knowing himself stained  
With such a blemish." Our knight  
Listened to this talk, but didn't  
Bother to respond. But everyone  
Else around his host's  
Table was stunned, as well  
They might have been: "Oh Lord!  
What a horrible thing," they said  
To one another. "What  
A revolting invention! Curse  
The hour when the cart was conceived!  
How vile, how disgusting. Oh Lord:  
What could he be accused of?  
Why was he put in a cart?  
What crime could he have committed?  
He'll never be allowed to forget it.  
Except for this, **only**  
This, you could search the whole  
Wide world and never find  
A knight to match him, no matter  
Who he was or what  
He'd done. Put them all  
In one place, and none would be  
As handsome, as noble. None."  
And everyone there agreed.  
But the arrogant knight outside  
The door spoke again,  
Saying, "Listen, you,  
Before you attempt that bridge:  
If you like, I'll show you an easy



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Way, and a safe one, to get  
Across. I'll ferry you over  
On a boat, and do it quickly.  
But the price I'll ask, once  
I've got you there, will be  
Your head, if I feel l i e having it —  
Or not. The choice will be mine."  
But our knight answered he wasn't  
Anxious to injure himself:  
He wouldn't risk his neck  
Like that, no matter the cost.  
The arrogant knight continued:  
"If you're not willing to try it,  
Since either way you'll be shamed  
Or sorrowful, you'll have to step  
Outside so we can fight."  
And our knight answered, dryly,  
"If I had a choice, I think  
I'd just as soon not bother,  
But I'd much prefer fighting  
To dealing with things still worse."  
And then, before he rose  
From the table, he asked those  
Who served him to have his horse  
Saddled as soon as possible,  
And also to bring his armor  
And weapons, ready for use.  
They quickly did as he asked,  
Some swiftly helping  
With his armor, others with his horse—  
And let me tell you, by God,  
That astride his steed, armor

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Gleaming, his shield hung  
Across his breast, his lance  
In his hand, prepared for combat—  
No one would have been wrong,  
Counting him one of the fairest  
And best! Who could have known  
His horse was borrowed? and the shield  
He carried? and the helmet laced  
Around his head? Everything  
Perfectly suited his looks;  
His manners, his bearing, balanced them  
So well that no one could ever  
Have imagined they were only on loan.  
No: seeing his splendor  
You'd have sworn it had all been his  
From birth. Believe me, it's the truth.

Outside the gate was a field  
With room enough, as the rules  
Require, for the battle to be fought.  
Turning, they looked at each other 2685  
And immediately spurred their horses  
To a furious, headlong charge,  
Thrusting their spears so fiercely  
That they bent like bows and quickly  
Splintered to pieces. Then they drew 2690  
Their swords and smashed them against  
Shields and helmets and mail shirts,  
Slicing away wood and cracking  
Iron, till both were wounded,  
And their angry blows came clanking 2695  
Down like coins being paid  
For a debt. But many of the blows

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Fell on the horses' rumps,  
And stallions and men alike  
Were bathed in blood, for the ravenous  
Swords brought death to the beasts.  
So tumbling out of the saddle  
They fought each other on foot,  
Driven by mortal hatred;  
Such savage assaults are rare,  
Such brutal sword blows and determined,  
Murderous attack. They hammered  
At one another faster  
Than gamblers rattling dice,  
Both of them desperate to win,  
Never pausing for breath,  
But playing a far more deadly  
Game, in which chance had no role  
But only mortal battle-  
Strokes. People poured out  
To watch, men and women,  
Girls and boys, till the house  
Was empty of family and guests  
And everyone stood at the edge  
Of the broad meadow, staring  
As the combat swung this way and that.  
Seeing his host among them,  
The knight of the cart cursed  
Himself for his failure, and then,  
Seeing that literally everyone  
Was watching, he began to shake  
With anger, for as far as he  
Was concerned, he should have finished  
This battle long ago.

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Exploding out at his enemy 2730  
Like a wild storm, he struck  
So close to the arrogant knight's  
Head that he had to step back,  
And our knight pursued him, pressed him,  
Forcing him around and around 2735  
The field until the breath  
Left his body and he could not  
Fight. Our knight could not  
Forget how meanly the man  
Had thrown in his face the little 2740  
Trip in the cart. He quickly  
Sliced away straps  
And laces, opening the armor  
That protected the neck, and then  
Was able to knock the helmet 2745  
Off his head; it rolled  
On the ground, and our knight stabbed  
And struck till the other, like a swallow  
Helpless in front of a hawk,  
So beaten down by his claws 2750  
And wings, utterly  
Defeated, drained, had no choice  
But to beg for his life. Miserable  
And shamed, there was nothing else  
He could do. And hearing this request 2755  
For mercy, the knight of the cart  
Stood very still, saying,  
"You wish me to grant you mercy?"  
"That shows how wise you are,"  
Said the beaten man. "Any fool 2760  
Knows that. I've never wanted

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A thing as much as I long for  
Mercy!" "But in order to get it  
You'll have to ride in a cart.  
Don't bother telling me all  
The clever things you can think of:  
Because your stupid mouth  
Threw such vile words  
At me, you'll ride in a cart."  
And the arrogant knight answered,  
"May God keep it away!"  
"Really? If He does, you die."  
"That's up to you, my lord.  
In the name of God, I beg you  
For mercy, asking only  
That I not be put in a cart.  
I'm ready to receive any  
Pain or punishment but that:  
I'd much prefer to be dead  
Than suffer such misery. Apart  
From that, I accept whatever  
Price you may choose to ask  
As payment for your mercy and grace."

While they bargained for the man's  
Life, a girl came riding  
Across the field, mounted  
On a tawny mule; she wore  
No hat, and her hair waved  
In the wind. She was using her whip  
So freely and well that although  
No mule can truly gallop,  
This one was ambling at remarkable  
Speed. She approached our knight

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And said, "May God grant you,  
Knight, perfect peace 2795  
And happiness, whatever you want."  
He heard her with pleasure, and answered,  
"May God bless you, girl,  
And bring you health and joy."  
And then she told him what she wanted: 2800  
"Knight, I've come a long  
Way, and in great need,  
To ask you to grant me a wish,  
In return for which I promise  
To give you the greatest 2805  
Reward I know of—and one  
Day, I believe, you're going  
To need my help." The knight  
Replied, "Tell me your wish,  
And if it's in my power 2810  
I'll grant it at once, provided  
It's not too painful or hard."  
And she said, "All I want  
Is that knight's head, the one  
You've just defeated. Truly, 2815  
You'll never find a more evil  
Man. It won't be sinful  
To **kill** him, but a pious good deed:  
Believe me, he's the worst man  
Alive or who ever lived." 2820  
When the beaten man heard  
That she wanted him killed, he said,  
"Don't believe her: she hates me.  
Again, in the name of God  
Who is Father and Son I beg you,

---

For Him who chose as His mother  
His own daughter and servant,  
To show me mercy." "Ha!"  
Said the girl. "I beg you, knight:  
Don't believe this traitor.  
May God grant you all  
The honor and happiness you want,  
And bless you with the power to accomplish  
The task you've undertaken!"  
The knight was so caught betwixt  
And between that he stopped, suspended  
In thought, uncertain whether  
To cut off the head she wanted  
Or grant mercy to the beaten  
Man begging for his life.  
He wished he could give each of them  
Exactly what they'd asked for:  
Our knight was kind and generous,  
So Pity and Generosity  
Pulled him in both directions. 2845  
If he gave her the knight's head  
Pity would suffer and die,  
And if he refused her he'd kill off  
Generosity.  
Each emotion held him, 2850  
Pressed him, pulled him, each one  
Pierced his heart, and he suffered.  
The girl was crying, "Cut off  
His head and let me have it!"  
While the knight demanded mercy 2855  
And release, in pity's name.  
And since he'd begged for his life

---

Shouldn't it be restored?  
Indeed! Once the battle  
Was won, and his enemy beaten, 2860  
He'd never refused mercy  
To anyone, no matter who—  
Never. Once it was asked for  
It was granted. His mercy was always  
Available, though no one could ask 2865  
For more. Whoever begged  
For his life would have it: that  
Had always been his custom.  
But should she have the knight's  
Head? Yes—if he 2870  
Could give it. "Knight," he said,  
"You need to fight me again,  
And if you wish to defend  
Your head, I'll grant you that favor,  
Allow you to take back your helmet 2875  
And arm yourself once more,  
At whatever pace you choose  
And as best you can. But let it  
Be clear: if I vanquish you  
Again, you're going to die." 2880  
"Exactly what I want," said the other.  
"It's the only mercy I ask for."  
"But I'll grant you more," said our knight.  
"I'll fight this battle standing  
Right where I am, not moving 2885  
In any direction." The beaten  
Knight made ready, and they went  
To work with a will, but this time  
Victory came neither as slow



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Nor as hard: our knight defeated 2890  
The other one swiftly and well.  
And the girl quickly called out,  
"Don't spare him again, no matter  
What he tells you! He'd never  
Have shown you mercy, if he'd 2895  
Had the chance. Believe me, I know him.  
Let him talk and he'll spin  
A web of words around you.  
This is the most disloyal  
And treacherous head in the kingdom: 2900  
Cut it off, good knight, and give it  
To me. You ought to, believe me,  
For **there**'ll come a time, I know it,  
When I'll be able to pay you  
Back. But listen to him 2905  
And you're likely to lose everything."  
And the beaten knight, seeing  
Death so close, began  
To cry and wail, but it did him  
No good, and neither did his words. 2910  
Our knight grasped him by the helmet  
So fiercely that the straps and laces  
Broke, and all the supporting  
Gear fell away, and his head  
Was bare. He cried even louder: 2915  
"Oh God, mercy, mercy!"  
"May God save my soul," said our knight,  
"You've had all the mercy  
I can give you. I have no more."  
"Ah, what a ghastly sin 2920  
You're committing," he wailed, "murdering

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Me on my enemy's word!"  
And the girl, longing for his head,  
Urged our knight to quickly  
Cut it off and stop  
Listening to his lying words.  
One swing of the sword, the head  
Was off, and it and the body  
Fell to the ground. And the girl  
Was happy. Our knight picked up  
The head and put it in her hands,  
And she smiled with satisfaction  
And said, "May your heart have the joy  
It most wants in this world,  
As I do now, having  
This head I hate so much.  
Seeing him live so long  
Was the only affliction I knew.  
You've done me a great service;  
You may be sure I'll repay you.  
Expect your reward to come  
When it's most needed—believe me  
And now I will leave you. Go  
With God. May He guard you from danger."  
He, too, commended her  
To God, and then she left.  
But among the men of that country  
Who had seen the battle, an immense  
Joy grew and swelled.  
Happy and laughing, they helped  
Our knight remove his armor,  
Then showered him with honors.  
Once again they washed

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His hands and offered him food,  
And the table rang with their great, 2955  
Their deep and unusual, pleasure.  
They dined slowly, and well,  
And finally our knight's host,  
Seated beside him, declared,  
"My lord, it's been a long time 2960  
Since we came here from Logres. We were born  
In that land, so we wish enormous  
Rewards and endless honor  
And joy to be yours, and we long  
To share with you, and with many 2965  
Others, all the success  
And glory you may find here,  
As you finish what you've so well begun."  
And he answered, "May God hear you!"  
    When the host ended his speech, 2970  
And the sound of his words had faded,  
One of his sons rose  
And said, "My lord, we place  
Ourselves, as we must, at your service,  
Offering you deeds as well 2975  
As words. If you wish to accept  
Our help, there's no need to wait  
Until you're obliged to ask.  
Don't worry, my lord, if you think  
Your horse is dead: we have 2980  
A host of fine horses, and they're yours.  
Take the best we have,  
In exchange for the one you've lost;  
You'll need a good one." And our knight  
Answered, "Thank you. I accept 2985

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Most gladly." And then their beds  
Were made, and they went to sleep.  
They rose early in the morning,  
And hurried, leaving as soon  
As they could. But our knight was careful 2990  
To say farewell to his host  
And his host's lady, and to all  
The others. And there's something else  
I need to tell you, for I wish  
To omit nothing. Our knight 2995  
Refused to mount the horse  
Saddled and waiting for his use,  
But insisted that one of the two  
Knights who'd ridden with him  
Be given the gift instead. 3000  
He took the other man's horse  
For himself, and was pleased to have done it  
And when they were all mounted,  
The three of them rode away  
With their host's blessing—he 3005  
Who had served and honored them all  
As well as he possibly could.  
Following the most direct  
Route, just as the light  
Was fading, about nine 3010  
That night, they saw the Sword Bridge.  
They stopped and dismounted at the foot  
Of the terrifying structure, looking  
Down at the treacherous water,  
Black and boiling, swift 3015  
And harsh, as horribly evil  
As if it flowed from the devil

Himself, deep and dangerous  
Like nothing else in this world:  
Whoever fell in would sink 3020  
Like a rock in the salty sea.  
And the bridge that spanned it was just  
As different from other bridges;  
Believe me, nothing like it  
Had ever existed, or ever 3025  
Would, neither as huge  
Or as wickedly built—a single  
Gleaming sword-blade crossing  
That ice-cold water, stiff  
And strong, as wide as a pair 3030  
Of spears, and attached at either  
End to massive tree-trunk  
Stumps. No one would worry  
About it bending or breaking:  
It would clearly stand, no matter 3035  
What weight it was asked to bear.  
But those who'd come with our knight  
Were most concerned at seeing,  
Or *thinking* they saw, a pair  
Of lions, or perhaps they were leopards, 3040  
Chained to a boulder on the far  
Side of the bridge. The water,  
The bridge, and the two great beasts  
Gave them such a shock  
That from head to foot they trembled 3045  
With fear: "My lord, allow us  
To advise you, seeing what we see,  
For advice is what you need.  
This bridge is wickedly built,

Evilly put together. 3050  
Change your mind now —  
Or else you'll lose the chance.  
A man must think both long  
And hard before he acts.  
Suppose you get across— 3055  
But it isn't going to happen:  
No one can hold back the wind  
And stop it from blowing, or forbid  
Birds to open their beaks  
And sing, and keep them silent, 3060  
Or climb into a mother's  
Womb and be born again:  
*All* these things are just as  
Impossible as draining the sea.  
How can you expect 3065  
Those furious lions, chained up  
Over there, not  
To kill you, and drink the blood  
From your veins, and swallow your flesh,  
And finish by gnawing your bones? 3070  
My nerves are strong, but I  
Can barely allow my eyes  
To see them. If you're not careful,  
They'll surely **kill** you, I know it,  
They'll rip you right apart 3075  
And tear off your arms and legs.  
Expect no mercy: they have none.  
So take pity on yourself—  
Stay here with us! Don't  
Commit so grave a sin 3080  
Against yourself, aware

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Of mortal risk, yet seeking it  
Out." He replied, laughing,  
"Gentlemen, I'm deeply grateful  
That you care so much for my welfare: 3085  
You're good and generous friends.  
I know quite well you wish me  
To come to no harm. But my faith  
In God, my trust in Him,  
Compels me to believe He'll protect me. 3090  
Neither bridge nor water  
Nor this harsh world can worry  
Me. I intend to cross,  
Whatever the risk. I'd rather  
Die than turn and go back!" 3095  
There was nothing more to be said,  
But pity and sorrow wrung them  
Both with bitter tears.  
And our knight made ready, as best  
He could, to cross the gulf, 3100  
Preparing, in the strangest way,  
By removing the armor from his hands  
And feet, as if making sure  
He could not arrive uninjured!  
Then he held tight to the sword-blade 3105  
Bridge, as sharp as a razor,  
Hands and feet both bare—  
For he'd left himself no covering,  
Neither shoes nor stockings—  
Not fearing sharp edges slicing 3110  
Away at his flesh, much  
Preferring bloody wounds  
To falling into that icy

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Water from which he would never  
Emerge. Accepting the immense 3115  
Pain and suffering, he crossed,  
Hands and knees and feet  
Bleeding. But Love, who had led him  
There, helped him as he went,  
And turned his pain to pleasure. 3120  
When he came to the other side  
None of his wounds were hurting.  
And then he recalled the pair  
Of lions he'd seen, or thought  
He'd seen, before he crossed, 3125  
But looking here and there  
All he could see was a lizard,  
And nothing there that could harm him  
Raising his hand to his face  
He stared at his ring, and knew 3130  
At once the pair of lions  
Were imagined, and nowhere in sight,  
But conjured out of magic.  
There was nothing living to be seen  
And those on the other shore, 3135  
Watching him make his way  
Across, were overjoyed;  
They had not seen his wounds.  
But he was sure he'd been blessed,  
For it could have been far worse. 3140  
Using his shirt, he was drying  
The blood running from his wounds  
When he noticed, there in front of him,  
The tallest, strongest tower  
He'd ever seen on this earth: 3145

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No one could build a better one!  
And leaning out a window  
He saw King Bademagu,  
A quick-witted man, and wise  
In **all** the ways of honor 3150  
And goodness, forever concerned  
With keeping the laws of knighthood,  
Though his son, standing just  
Beside him, was exactly the opposite,  
Working to smash and break them 3155  
For the sheer joy of devilry.  
Méléagant was never  
Tired of base behavior  
Of every kind, of treason  
And crimes of bad faith. From his post 3160  
At the high window, he had watched  
The Sword Bridge crossing, with all  
Its pain and suffering, and his anger  
And outrage brought blood to his face:  
He knew he was going to be challenged 3165  
For the queen. But he was a prince  
Who never felt fear of any  
Man, no matter how bold  
Or famous. He might have been  
The best of knights, had his soul 3170  
Been pure, but his heart was cold  
As a stone, devoid of pity.  
What thrilled the noble father  
Pained the son: the king  
Knew without a doubt 3175  
That the knight who'd crossed the bridge  
Was as worthy as anyone ever

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Born, for no one stained  
With sin would have dared that journey:  
Evil deeds shame men 3180  
More than good ones help them.  
Courage and virtue are lesser  
Powers than evil and sloth:  
Consider how easy it is  
To sin, and how hard to do good. 3185

    I've a lot to say on these subjects,  
Which would take me too much time—  
And besides, I've other matters  
On my mind—so back to my story.  
Listen as the king instructs 3190  
His son, speaking these words:  
"My son, we came to this window,  
Just now, by the purest chance,  
And stood here, looking out.  
And we've been richly repaid, 3195  
Mowed to behold the greatest  
Feat of courage ever  
Attempted, or even imagined.  
Tell me: how could you not  
Admire such a splendid deed? 3200  
Go make your peace with that knight,  
And give him hack the queen!  
You've nothing to win from a quarrel—  
Indeed, you've a lot to lose.  
Act like a wise and courteous 3205  
Man: bring him the queen  
Even before he sees you.  
Do him the honor, here  
In your own land, of handing

Over what he seeks before 3210  
He can ask. You cannot doubt  
It's Guinevere he's come for.  
Don't let yourself be seen  
As arrogant, stubborn, or a fool.  
And if such a man has come 3215  
Alone, join him, he his friend,  
Noble hearts must seek  
Each other: honor him, praise him,  
Don't hold yourself back. Conferring  
Honor makes you honorable: 3220  
Believe me, you'll honor yourself  
In serving and honoring him,  
For this, my son, is surely  
The greatest knight alive."  
"God confound me," was the answer, 3225  
"If there isn't one as good—  
Or better!" And the father was wrong,  
Forgetting his son, who valued  
Himself no less. "Perhaps,"  
Said the son, "I ought to drop 3230  
To my knees and offer my kingdom?  
God knows, I'd rather give him  
Homage than hand him the queen!  
I'll never let him have her.  
Anyone who tries to take her 3235  
Will have to deal with me:  
I'll fight him tooth and nail."  
The king continued to press him:  
"My son, courtesy requires  
Giving up this stubbornness. 3240  
Settle this matter in peace.

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Don't you see that this knight  
Would be shamed, if he didn't defeat you  
In battle, and win back the queen?  
For him, indeed, victory 3245  
In battle would bring more honor  
Than taking a gift from your hands.  
I doubt he'll want a peaceful  
Resolution; he'll try  
To settle this by force. 3250  
So not permitting him  
To fight for what he wants  
Would be wise. Your folly disturbs me,  
But if you refuse to listen  
I can't be much concerned 3255  
With your fate, which might be unpleasant:  
This knight has nothing to fear  
From anyone but you. On behalf  
Of my men, and myself, I offer  
Him safe conduct and a truce. 3260  
In all my life I've never  
Broken faith, nor will I now,  
Neither for you nor toward  
A stranger here in my land.  
I won't deceive you, my son: 3265  
I hereby vow that this knight  
Must have whatever he needs  
And lacks, whether weapons or horses.  
He's certainly proved his courage,  
Coming here as he has, 3270  
And his safety will be assured  
By every man in this land  
Except, alas, by you.

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Understand me: if he  
Succeeds against you, he need 3275  
Not fear anyone else."  
"I've listened to every word  
You said," was the answer, "and you spoke  
A lot of them. I've held my peace.  
And still, in the end, you've said 3280  
Nothing. I'm no hermit,  
No saint all flowing with compassion;  
I've no interest in earning  
Honor by giving up  
My beloved. He won't get her 3285  
As fast and easy as that!  
Nothing will happen the way  
You or he expect.  
Help him against me, if you like,  
But you and I needn't quarrel. 3290  
Offer a truce, you  
And your men. What's that to me?  
It won't make me afraid!  
I'm just as pleased, by God,  
That I'll be his only concern. 3295  
I won't ask you to help me  
Or do a thing that might make you  
Guilty of treachery or bad faith.  
Go ahead and be good,  
And I'll be as cruel as I like." 3300  
"What? You'll refuse my advice?"  
"Completely." "Then I've nothing to say.  
Do as you will. I'll leave you  
And seek some words with that knight.  
I intend to offer him guidance

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And whatever help I can.  
I endorse both him and his cause."

Then the king came down from the tower  
And ordered his horse saddled.  
Out came a huge war horse; 3310  
And he set his foot in the **stirrup**  
And mounted. He took with him  
Three knights and a pair of soldiers,  
Wanting no display of force.  
They rode straight down the slope 3315  
Until they reached the bridge,  
Where they found our knight cleaning  
His wounds and stopping the flow  
Of blood. The king fancied  
His guest would be a long time 3320  
Healing—but he might as well  
Have planned to dry up the sea.  
The king quickly dismounted  
And the badly wounded man  
Immediately straightened to greet him 3325  
Properly, not knowing who  
This was, but showing no sign  
Of the pain in his hands and feet,  
Acting as if his health  
Were perfect. Seeing this brave 3330  
Effort, the king hurried  
To greet him: "Sir, I'm astonished  
To find you making such  
A sudden visit to this country.  
But I must tell you how welcome 3335  
You are, for no one's ever  
Attempted so dangerous a feat,

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Requiring such incredible courage,  
And no one will again.  
My admiration is greater 3340  
Still, believe me, for you've done  
What no one has even thought  
Of doing. You'll find me well  
Disposed, faithful and courteous:  
I am the king of this land, 3345  
And I place myself completely  
At your service, at your need.  
And I think I know exactly  
Why you're here: it's the queen,  
Is it not, that you've come seeking?" 3350  
"My lord, you've guessed correctly:  
I've come only for the queen."  
"My friend," said the king, "it won't  
Be easy to achieve what you're after.  
You've been badly hurt: I can see 3355  
Your bloody wounds. And he  
Who brought her here is truly  
Ill disposed: he won't  
Return her without a fight.  
You need to rest, and take care 3360  
Of your wounds, and be sure they're completely  
Healed. We'll give you the Holy  
Balm of the Three Marys,  
Or anything better that exists,  
For I'm deeply concerned with your care 3365  
And I long for your cure. The queen  
Is kept in a fine apartment,  
And no one's been guilty of carnal  
Abuse, not even my son,

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Who brought her here. That angers 3370  
Him—and there's never been  
A man with so terrible a temper.  
But I share your feelings, believe me,  
And with God's blessing I'll help you  
As much as I possibly can. 3375  
My son is well equipped,  
But I'll give you weapons and armor  
Just as good, and the kind  
Of horse you deserve, though he won't  
Be pleased. And like it or not, 3380  
I place you under my personal  
Protection. Worry about no one  
In this land, except the man  
Who brought the queen to this kingdom.  
In all my life I've never 3385  
Quarreled with anyone as I have  
With him: I almost sent him  
Into exile, angry  
As I was that he wouldn't return her.  
He's my son, yes—but don't 3390  
Worry: unless he beats you  
In battle there's nothing he can do,  
For I won't allow it." "I thank you,  
Sir!" said our knight. "But I'm wasting  
Precious time I can't 3395  
Afford to lose. Let me  
Assure you I haven't a thing  
To complain of; these scratches don't hurt.  
Bring me to your son, please:  
The weapons I have are good 3400  
Enough, and I'm more than ready



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For the give and take of battle."  
"My friend, you'd do much better  
To wait two or three weeks,  
And let your wounds heal.  
Even a rest of a week  
Or two would do you good.  
Nor can I permit—  
I will not look on, I will not  
Allow—that you go into combat  
Armed and equipped as you are."  
"May it please you, sir," our knight  
Replied, "there's nothing more  
I need, to engage in battle,  
Nor can I permit  
The slightest delay—neither  
An hour, nor a minute, nor a moment.  
Since you insist, however,  
I will wait until tomorrow,  
And to speak of a longer interval,  
I assure you, would waste your breath."  
Then the king agreed: it would be  
Exactly as he wished. He ordered  
Those who'd come with him to conduct  
The knight to his lodging, placing  
Themselves at his service, and they all  
Obeyed to the last detail.  
And the king, who badly wanted  
A peaceful solution, if possible,  
Went to his son once again.  
His mission was to speak for peace,  
For concord, harmony, and agreement,  
So he said, "Dear son, settle

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This business without fighting!  
This knight's not here for amusement, 3435  
For bow-and-arrow contests,  
Or for hunting: it's fame and glory  
And reputation he's after.  
What he really needs is rest,  
As I've seen for myself. If he'd listen 3440  
To me, he'd wait this month,  
And the next one, before he'd engage  
In combat, for which he hungers.  
Do you honestly think returning  
The queen would bring you dishonor? 3445  
Then think again, my son,  
For there's not the slightest chance  
Of that. But keeping what isn't  
Yours is against both reason  
And right. He'd gladly have fought 3450  
The battle right now—at once—  
Though his hands and feet are in pieces,  
Cut and sliced all over."  
"You talk like a frightened fool,"  
Said *Méléagant* to his father. 3455  
"By the faith I owe to Saint Peter,  
I'm not following your  
Advice! Pull me apart  
With horses before I listen  
To you! Let him find his honor 3460  
And I'll find mine. Let him hunt  
For glory on his own road, and I'll  
Take mine. If he's hungry for a fight,  
**I'm** at least a hundred times hungrier!"  
"Clearly, folly attracts you,"

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Said the king. "You'll surely find it.  
Tomorrow you'll test your courage  
Against his, since that's what you want."  
"May nothing I do worry me  
Less than that!" said the son. 3470  
"I only wish it could be  
Today: why wait for tomorrow?  
Just see how sad my face is,  
And the deep rings round my eyes!  
Do you think I'm worried? grieving? 3475  
Troubled? immensely afraid?  
I won't be happy until  
I fight him; nothing will please me."  
    The king saw that nothing  
Could bend or persuade him, and with great 3480  
Regret left, then took  
A fine, strong horse and excellent  
Weapons and armor, and sent them  
To him who was well acquainted  
With their use, and was glad to have them. 3485  
And he also sent an old, old  
Man, a devout Christian  
And as loyal as anyone alive,  
Who was better at curing wounds  
Than Montpellier's learned doctors. 3490  
And all that night he labored,  
As the king had directed, making  
Our knight as healthy as he could.  
Then the news spread, and knights  
And ladies appeared, and girls 3495  
And barons, from neighboring lands,  
The king's people and pure

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Strangers, riding rapidly  
All through the long nighttime,  
Hurrying from far and near  
To reach the king's country  
By dawn. So many came,  
And were packed so densely around  
The great tower, that when daylight  
Broke no one could move  
Hand or foot. And the king  
Awoke at dawn, grieving  
For this battle, and went to his son  
Once more, finding him already  
Wearing his Poitiers-crafted  
Helmet. He could not be stopped,  
Nothing could bring him to peace,  
Though the king felt obliged to try  
And did his best. At the king's  
Direction, the battle would be fought  
In front of the tower, in the center  
Of the square where the great crowd  
Had assembled. The king summoned  
The stranger first, and our knight  
Was led forth and placed  
Among the folk from Logres,  
Who had gathered together in one spot.  
Just as people came,  
Year after year, at Christmas  
And Pentecost, to hear  
The cathedral organ, the crowd  
Poured into the square,  
Packed as they always were.  
And a host of girls from King Arthur's

Realm, fresh from three days 3530  
Of fasting, had been walking barefoot  
And in woolen hair shirts, in order  
To invoke the force and power  
Of God for our knight against  
His enemy, in fighting this hattle, 3535  
As he was, for all the foreign  
Prisoners. And the people of that country,  
For their part, prayed for their prince,  
Begging God to give him  
Victory and honor. Soon 3540  
After dawn, before morning  
Prayers, the knights were led  
To the field of battle, both  
Mounted on horses wearing  
Protective armor. The prince 3545  
Was a well-built, noble-looking  
And handsome man, his hammered  
Mail shirt beautifully fitted,  
His helmet and the shield hung  
From his neck perfectly matching. 3550  
But even those who supported  
His cause preferred the knight  
Of the cart, all agreeing  
That Méléagant was nothing  
In comparison. They waited, there 3555  
In the center of the square, as the king  
Joined them, determined to try  
This one last time, to arrange  
For peace. But he could not persuade  
His son. "Rein in your horses 3560  
With both hands," he said,

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"Till I reach the top of the tower.  
That's hardly too much to ask;  
You can easily wait that long."  
Almost trembling, he left them, 3565  
And immediately went to where  
He knew he would find the queen,  
Who had begged him, the night before,  
To place her in a spot from which  
She could watch the entire battle, 3570  
And having granted her wish  
He went, now, to honor  
His word and, forever courteous,  
Bring her there himself.  
So he set her at a high window, 3575  
Then seated himself to her right,  
Also at a window. And all  
Around them were many notable  
Knights and ladies, some  
From the king's country, some 3580  
From Logres, and native-born girls,  
And others from among the prisoners,  
The latter extremely active  
At their prayers and invocations,  
As all the captive men 3585  
And women were, on their knight's  
Behalf, looking to God  
And to him for their final deliverance.  
And then the combatants, freed  
For their fight, ordered the crowd 3590  
To withdraw, set their shields  
In place, their arms through the straps,  
And, aiming their spears, dashed

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At each other, striking so fiercely  
That the points went two arms deep, 3595  
And the shields split and shattered  
To bits. Their horses, too,  
Came smashing breastplate into  
Breastplate, with incredible force,  
And the crashing shock of shields 3600  
And helmets, horses and men,  
Sounded for all the world  
Like a towering clap of thunder,  
And every strap and belt  
And spur and rein and girth 3605  
Broke, and even the heavy  
Saddles snapped at the bow,  
And neither knight was shamed  
Or surprised to be tossed to the ground,  
As everything underneath him 3610  
Gave way. They leaped to their feet  
And continued the combat like a pair  
Of wild boars, not bothering with insults  
Or boasts, but striking each other  
With heavy blows of their steel 3615  
Swords, like men who violently  
Hate one another. Their slashing  
Strokes often cut  
Through helmets and mail shirts, making  
Blood spurt from the metal. 3620  
They fought savagely, giving  
And taking mighty blows,  
Cruel and heavy. Each  
Assaulted the other on equal  
Terms, neither able

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To gain the slightest advantage.  
But it could not last: he  
Who had crossed the Sword Bridge was surely  
Weakened by all his wounds,  
As everyone watching knew, 3630  
And those who favored that knight  
Were terribly worried, seeing  
His strokes weaken, sensing  
Him getting the worst, afraid  
That *Méléagant* would seize 3635  
The upper hand and victory  
Would be his. A buzzing murmur  
Ran through the crowd. But up  
In the tower, at a window, a wise  
Girl was watching, and she thought 3640  
To herself the knight most certainly  
Wasn't fighting so terrible  
A battle for her, nor  
For anyone standing in the crowd  
Of ordinary people, 3645  
But strictly and solely for the queen  
And no one else—and if  
He knew she was at a window,  
Watching from on high, it might give him  
Strength and courage. And had she 3650  
Known his name, she'd have gladly  
Told him (calling down  
From the tower) that his love was there,  
And he could glance up, and see her.  
So she hurried to the queen and said, 3655  
"My lady, in the name of God,  
For your sake and ours, please,



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Tell me that knight's name,  
If you know it, so I can offer him  
Help." "Young lady," said the queen, 3660  
"Your request, it seems to me,  
Contains nothing in any way  
Hateful or wicked, but only  
Concern for his good. As long  
As I've known him, this knight's name 3665  
Has been Lancelot of the Lake."  
"Oh God!" said the girl. "How my happy  
Heart is leaping with joy!"  
Then she jumped to the window and shouted,  
As loud as she could, in a voice 3670  
That everyone heard: "Lancelot!  
Turn your head up and look—  
See who's here, watching!"  
As soon as he heard his name,  
Lancelot turned and looked 3675  
Behind him, and saw, seated  
High at an open window,  
What more than anything else  
In the world he wanted to see.  
And then, from the moment he saw her, 3680  
He neither moved his head  
Nor looked in any other  
Direction, fighting with his back  
To his enemy, and *Méléagant*  
Immediately began to press him 3685  
As hard as he could, delighted  
To think that, now, the knight  
Could no longer face him and defend  
Himself. And his countrymen, too,

---

Were delighted, whiie the men of Logres 3690  
Were so sick at heart they could not  
Stand, many falling  
To their knees, but many fainting  
Away, stretched on the ground.  
Sorrow and excitement were everywhere. 3695  
But the girl, high at her window,  
Shouted down once more:  
"Ah, Lancelot! Can you really  
Be as stupid as you look?  
You seemed to be all 3700  
That a knight should be, till now:  
You had me convinced that God  
Had never made a knight  
Who could challenge you for courage  
And strength and virtue. And now 3705  
We see you fighting backwards,  
Looking away from your enemy!  
Do your fighting with your face  
Turned to this tower, so you'll see her  
Better! Let her shine on you!" 3710  
Outraged at the insult, and deeply  
Shamed, Lancelot bitterly  
Cursed himself for letting  
The combat go against him,  
Here in the sight of them all. 3715  
With a leap, he drove behind  
Méléagant, forcing  
His enemy to stand with his back  
To the tower. Méléagant  
Struggled to regain his ground, 3720  
But Lancelot charged him, striking

---

So many powerful strokes,  
Swinging with all his strength,  
That he forced a further retreat,  
Two or three unwilling, 3725  
Unwelcome steps. Between  
The strength Love had lent him,  
Offered in willing assistance,  
And the hate swelling in his heart  
As the battle wore on, all 3730  
His powers and quickness had returned.  
Love and his mortal hate—  
Fiercer than any ever  
Known—combined to make him  
So fearsome that Méléagant 3735  
Was suddenly afraid,  
For never in all his life  
Had an enemy seemed so strong,  
Or pressed and hurt him so badly  
As this knight was doing. He tried 3740  
As hard as he could to keep him  
At a distance, feinting, ducking,  
Bobbing, badly hurt  
Each time he was hit. Lancelot  
Wasted no breath on threats, 3745  
Kept driving him toward the tower  
And the queen, over and over  
Coming as close as he could,  
Forcing Méléagant back,  
Each time, barely a foot 3750  
Away from stepping out  
Of her sight. So Lancelot led him  
Up and down, this way

---

And that, always making him  
Stop in front of his lady,  
The queen, who'd set his heart  
On fire, just knowing she was  
Watching— a fiercely roaring,  
Burning-hot flame impelling him  
Straight at *Méléagant*  
And pushing his helpless enemy  
Forward and back like a cripple,  
Tugging him along like a blind man  
Or a beggar at the end of a rope.  
The king saw his son  
Utterly overwhelmed  
And was filled with pity and compassion:  
He had to help, if he could.  
But the queen, he knew, was the only  
Possible source of assistance,  
So he turned to her and spoke:  
“Lady, for as long as you've been  
In my land you've had my love  
And honor; I've served you well,  
And always gladly, in every  
Way I could. Let me  
Ask you, now, to repay me.  
And the gift I ask you to give me  
Could only be granted out  
Of the purest love. I can see  
Quite well— there's not the slightest  
Doubt — that my son has lost  
This battle. And I speak to you, now,  
Not on this score, but because  
It's clear that Lancelot

---

Could easily kill him, if he chose to,  
I hope you want that no more  
Than I do—not that my son  
Has treated you well—he hasn't—  
But simply because I beg you  
For your mercy. Let him live.  
Let the final blow be withheld.  
And thus you can tell me, if you choose,  
How you value the honor  
I've shown you." "Dear sir, if that's 3795  
What you want, I want it, too.  
I certainly hate and loathe  
Your son, for the best of reasons,  
But you indeed have served me  
So well that it pleases me 3800  
To please you by stopping the battle."  
They had not whispered private  
Words; both Lancelot  
And Méléagant heard them.  
Lovers are obedient men, 3805  
Cheerfully willing to do  
Whatever the beloved, who holds  
Their entire heart, desires.  
Lancelot had no choice,  
For if ever anyone loved 3810  
More truly than Pyramus  
It was him. Hearing her response,  
As soon as the final word  
Fell from her mouth, declaring,  
"Dear sir, if you want the battle 3815  
Stopped, I want that, too,"  
Nothing in the world could have made him

Fight, or even move,  
No matter if it cost his life.  
He stood as still as a stone— 3820  
But Méléagant struck  
As hard as he could, angry  
And shamed to find himself  
The object of anyone's pity.  
The king came hurrying down 3825  
From the tower, to stop him. Straight  
To the field of battle he went,  
Speaking these words to his son:  
"What's this? You think it's fine  
To go on fighting, after 3830  
He's stopped? You act like a savage!  
It's far too late for heroics:  
Everyone knows he's won,  
Everyone knows you've been beaten!"  
Out of his mind with shame, 3835  
Méléagant denied  
Defeat: "Have you gone blind?  
There's something wrong with your eyes!  
Anyone who thinks I've been beaten  
Is surely as blind as a bat!" 3840  
"Who do you think believes you?"  
Said the king. "All these people  
Can tell for themselves what's true  
And false. We know you're lying."  
And the king ordered his men 3845  
To take his son away.  
It was done at once, exactly  
As the king commanded. Against  
His wishes, Méléagant

---

Was removed. But Lancelot  
Left of his own free will,  
For he would have stood without fighting  
Even if the prince had hurt him.  
And the king said to his son,  
"As God is my witness, you'll now  
Make peace and give up the queen!  
This quarrel's completely finished.  
It's over, it's done with: that's all!"  
"What stupid things you're saying,"  
Said his son. "You're making no sense  
Go! Just let us fight;  
Stop meddling where no one wants you."  
But the king insisted it was settled:  
"You'd clearly be dead, if I'd let  
This battle continue." "He  
Kill me? He's the one  
Who'd be dead, and I'd be the victor,  
If you hadn't interfered:  
If only you hadn't stopped us!"  
"God save me," said the king,  
"You're simply wasting your breath."  
"Why?" "Because I say so.  
Your stupid pride would kill you,  
If I let you do what you want.  
Only a fool could long  
For death: you understand nothing!  
I know you hate me for trying  
To save your life. But God  
Won't let me watch you die—  
Not if I can help it!  
I couldn't bear the pain."

---

He talked and argued, argued  
And talked, till peace was arranged.  
And the terms of their accord  
Gave Lancelot the queen 3885  
But Méléagant the unquestioned  
Right, for a year to come,  
To call for another combat,  
Man to man, where  
And when he wanted. That combat 3890  
Did not concern our knight  
The peace pleased everyone,  
And the court of King Arthur, ruler  
Of Britain and Cornwall, was chosen  
As the site of that future battle. 3895  
So much was settled—but still  
The queen, and Lancelot with her,  
Had to agree that should  
The second battle he won  
By Méléagant, she 3900  
Would return with him, without  
Opposition. The queen gave  
Her consent, and Lancelot, too.  
And then it was truly over,  
And both knights disarmed. 3905  
    It was the custom, in that country,  
That once anyone left it  
Everyone else could leave,  
If they wished. They all blessed  
Our knight, nor do I need 3910  
To tell you how happy they were—  
Indeed, they were overjoyed!  
All the strangers in that strange

---



Land gathered around him,  
Voicing their profound pleasure: 3915  
"Sir, we were thrilled the moment  
We heard your name, knowing  
That if it was you who came  
To free us, we'd certainly be freed."  
And in their joy they crowded 3920  
Around him, all of them anxious  
To push in close and touch him.  
And those whose hands could reach him  
Were happier than words can express.  
But despite the prisoners' ecstatic 3925  
Joy, there were also those  
Who suffered and could not rejoice:  
Mélégant and his men  
Had nothing to celebrate;  
They were silent, and thoughtful, and glum. 3930  
The king had left the field,  
Leading Lancelot with him,  
And Lancelot asked to be taken  
To the queen. "And how could I  
Object?" said the king. "Of course 3935  
You'd like to see her. Indeed,  
If you wish you can also see  
Sir Kay." Lancelot almost  
Fell to his knees with delight.  
The king took him directly 3940  
To the great hall, where the queen  
Had been waiting for our knight to appear.  
    Seeing Bademagu  
Hand in hand with Lancelot,  
She rose to greet the king, 3945

Seeming greatly embarrassed:  
Head down, she stood there, silent.  
"Lady, I bring you Lancelot,"  
Said the king, "who's come to see you.  
I'm sure his visit will please you." 3950  
"Me?" she answered. "How could it?  
I've nothing to do with his coming."  
"Good Lord, lady!" said the king,  
An exceedingly courteous man,  
"How can you say such a thing— 3955  
Mistreating a man who's served you  
So wonderfully well, often  
Putting his life at risk  
And all for you? A man  
Who came to your aid and fought with 3960  
My son solely for your sake,  
Obliging him to surrender  
What he never wanted to lose?"  
"My lord, truly, he's wasted  
His time. I can't help it: 3965  
I take no pleasure in his sight."  
And Lancelot stood there, thinking,  
Then replied with infinite courtesy,  
As a true lover should,  
"You leave me sorrowful, lady, 3970  
But I dare not ask you why."  
    He could have complained, and bitterly,  
Had she been willing to listen,  
But as if to make him feel worse  
She spoke not a word, just walking 3975  
Away to another room.  
Lancelot's eyes, and his heart

As well, followed her out.  
It seemed to him far  
Too quick, far too short 3980  
A trip: his eyes would have followed  
Her in, if they possibly could.  
His noble heart, which beat  
With greater strength and power,  
Crossed the threshold with her 3985  
And went in, as she shut the door,  
Though his eyes, all filled with tears,  
Remained outside with his body.  
Then the king took him aside,  
Whispering, "But Lancelot, 3990  
What can she mean, refusing  
To see you, not saying a word?  
Surely, if you used to speak,  
You two, she shouldn't be  
Capricious and ignore you this way— 3995  
Not with all you've done  
For her! Tell me, if you know,  
Why would she treat you like this?  
What have you done to deserve it?"  
"My lord, I had no warning. 4000  
But clearly she took no pleasure  
In seeing my face or hearing  
My words, and it weighs on my heart."  
"By God," said the king, "she's behaving  
Badly. You've risked your life, 4005  
And all for her! But come,  
My good sweet friend, it's time  
You had a word with Sir Kay."  
"Gladly," was the answer. "I'd like that."

---

The king led him to Sir Kay, 4010  
And seeing Lancelot there  
In front of him, the steward's  
First words were: "Lord! How  
You've put me to shame!" "I have?"  
Replied our knight. "Explain 4015  
Yourself. How have I shamed you?"  
"You couldn't have shamed me more,  
Doing so easily what I  
Could never do at all."  
And then the king left 4020  
The room, and they were alone,  
And Lancelot asked Sir Kay  
How bad his suffering had been.  
"It's never ended," he said,  
"And now it's worse than before. 4025  
Over and over I was sure  
I was dead, and so I'd have been  
Except for the king, who showed me  
Sweet compassion and friendship.  
Whenever he heard I needed 4030  
Anything, he always arranged  
Whatever was wanted. He never  
Failed me, but acted at once,  
The moment he learned of my pain.  
He was always ready to help, 4035  
But *Méléagant*, his son,  
Was completely different, evil,  
Tracherous, secretly ordering  
The doctors to bind my wounds  
With mortal poisons instead 4040  
Of healing balms. The king

---

Was a true father, the other  
A false one. The king brought me  
Medicines and cures;  
His son, like a stepfather, did his wicked  
Secret best to kill me,  
Taking away his father's  
Blessed gifts, replacing  
Good with evil. He wished  
To see me die. But his father  
The king was not aware  
Of what his son was doing:  
He wouldn't have allowed such cruel  
And traitorous, such murderous acts!  
You can't imagine how generous  
He's been to my lady, the queen.  
Since Noah built his ark  
There's never been a better  
Sentinel, guarding a frontier  
Tower; he's stood at the door,  
Denying entrance even  
To his son, who was bitterly resentful,  
Except when crowds were present  
Or the king himself could be there  
This noble king has shown her,  
And continues to show her, all  
The respect our gracious queen  
Deserves and is able to command.  
She herself, and only  
She, has laid out the rules,  
And the king could not have more  
Admired and approved her conduct.  
But tell me: can it be true,

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As they say, that Guinevere  
Publicly expressed such anger 4075  
Toward you that she wouldn't speak  
A word?" "It's true," was the answer,  
"Absolutely true.  
Have you any idea, in the name  
Of God, why she should hate me?" 4080  
Sir Kay said he did not,  
But thought it exceedingly strange.  
"Let it be as she wishes!"  
Was all Lancelot could say,  
Adding, "It's time I left, 4085  
And went in search of Gawain,  
Who also came to this land:  
He and I agreed  
To meet at the Sunken Bridge."  
And so, leaving Kay's room, 4090  
He came to the king and asked  
Permission to go on his way.  
And the king granted him leave.  
But those he'd set free and released  
From their prison clamored to come 4095  
Along. And Lancelot said,  
"If you wish to come with me  
You may certainly come. But if  
You wish to stay with the queen  
You're equally free to remain. 4100  
No one needs to leave."  
So all who wished to depart  
Joined him, delighted to be going.  
But all the girls stayed  
With the queen, happy to have

---

A choice, and ladies stayed,  
And some knights, but none who desperately  
Longed to return and could not  
Wait any longer. And those  
Who remained did so for the queen, 4110  
Who'd announced she was waiting for Gawain  
And would not move until  
News of him should arrive.

    The news was quickly spread:  
The queen was free, and all 4115  
The others with her; any  
Who wished to leave could go  
When and as they pleased.  
Former prisoners went up  
And down, all asking each other, 4120  
All discussing the same  
Subject, none of them sad  
To see the old control posts  
Demolished: things had changed  
So much, they could come and go 4125  
As they liked! But when those who lived  
In that country heard how the combat  
Had gone, that Lancelot had won,  
Hordes of them hurried down  
To the road he would have to follow, 4130  
Believing the king would he pleased  
If they captured this foreign knight  
And brought him back as a prisoner.  
All those with him were unarmed  
And utterly helpless against 4135  
The men who now surrounded them:  
No wonder Lancelot

Was quickly captured and disarmed,  
And led back, his feet tied  
Together under his horse's 4140  
Belly. "No, no," the former  
Prisoners protested, "the king  
Himself has guaranteed  
Our passage!" "We know nothing about it,"  
They were answered. "But having been captured 4145  
You'll come with us to court."  
A rumor soon reached the king's  
Ears that his people had captured  
Lancelot and killed him. Hearing  
This news, the king was deeply 4150  
Upset, and swore that whoever  
Had done this should die at once,  
Without defense or delay;  
The only choice they could have,  
Once he'd caught them, would be 4155  
Between hanging, burning,  
Or drowning. If they tried to deny it  
He wouldn't believe a word,  
For he'd been struck to the heart,  
And the pain was immense—and the shame 4160  
That would fall on him, if he failed  
To avenge this death, would be even  
Greater—but he would avenge it!

    The rumor ran in every  
Direction, reaching the queen 4165  
As she sat down to eat,  
And the false news of Lancelot's  
Death came close to killing  
Her as well, for she



Took it for truth, and the shock  
Was so intense her lips  
Almost forgot how to speak,  
But because of those around her  
She said, "This death is horribly  
Painful—and I should be grieved,  
Since he came to this country for me.  
He deserves my pain and my grief."  
And then she said to herself,  
Softly and unheard, that eating  
And drinking had now become  
Impossible, if indeed he  
Whose life gave meaning to her own  
Was truly dead. Slowly  
And sadly, she rose from the table,  
Already mourning in so silent  
A voice that no one could hear her.  
And feeling driven to kill  
Herself, she clutched at her throat,  
Silently confessing, first,  
That she alone was at fault,  
Accusing herself of sinful  
Behavior, of wicked acts  
Directed at the man whose heart  
Had always been hers, and still  
Would be hers, were he still alive.  
And knowing she'd been so cruel  
Stole away her beauty.  
The thought of such wickedness drained  
And discolored her skin more  
Than fasting or all-night vigils.  
All the evil she'd done

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Flooded her mind, bit  
By bit; she remembered it all  
And cried, "Oh God! What  
Was I thinking, when my lover appeared,  
Not showing him my pleasure,  
Refusing to allow him a word?  
To deny him every attention  
Was absolutely mad!  
Mad? Better, by God,  
To call me cruel, and a traitress.  
It was only a joke, a whim,  
But he took it deeply to heart  
And never forgave me. I know it,  
It was I who killed him, who gave him  
The mortal blow: I know it!  
He came to me, laughing with joy,  
Believing I would return  
His pleasure, rejoice at his sight—  
And I refused to see him:  
Could I have dealt him a blow  
More mortal? Denying him even  
A word was like cutting out  
His heart and killing him, then  
And there. And so I k i e d him:  
Why hunt for other assassins?  
Oh God! Can I ever redeem  
This murder, this mortal sin?  
No—not unless  
All the rivers stop running  
And the sea goes dry. Lord,  
How good it would be, once—  
Just once—before I die,

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Were he wrapp'd in my arms again!  
How? Why, both of us naked; 4235  
That's when I'd be the happiest.  
But since he's dead, to go on  
Living would simply be wicked.  
And why? To be alive  
After he's dead: would that 4240  
Injure my beloved—nothing  
To delight in except my sorrow?  
And yet how sweet that sorrow  
Would be, had he been able  
To see it when he was alive. 4245  
Would it not be wicked  
To prefer death to such suffering?  
Living as long as I can,  
And enduring this pain, will be pleasure  
Enough: I should live and suffer. 4250  
Not die and be at peace."  
The queen was in mourning for two  
Whole days, not eating or drinking,  
And everyone thought she was dead.  
The world is full of people 4255  
Just waiting to bring us bad news,  
And one of them came to Lancelot,  
Announcing his lady's death.  
His heart was utterly broken;  
No one could doubt how grief 4260  
And sorrow overwhelmed him  
Indeed, to tell you the truth,  
If you really want to know:  
He had no interest in living;  
Death was all he wanted 4265

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But before he killed himself—  
Pulling off his belt  
And tying a fatal knot  
At the end—weeping as he spoke  
He declared, "Death! What a forfeit 4270  
You've taken, turning health  
Into sickness! I've fallen sick,  
But with no disease except sorrow.  
And yet this sorrow is mortal.  
Fine: I hope it proves fatal, 4275  
And Death will allow me to die.  
Indeed? Is death denied me,  
Except when Death wills it?  
Fine—as long as he lets me  
Tie this knot around 4280  
My neck, forcing Death  
To take me, like it or not.  
Death prefers victims  
Anxious to keep him away.  
I'll pull him in with my belt, 4285  
Catch him and make him come,  
And once I've got him, I'll keep him,  
Compel him to please me. The problem,  
Clearly, is how slowly he comes,  
And how much I wish he'd hurry!" 4290  
He moved quickly from words  
To actions, putting his head  
In the noose, with the knot at his neck,  
And determined to die at once,  
Wound the other end 4295  
Of the belt around the bow  
Of his saddle, letting no one

See, then dropped to the ground,  
Intending his horse to drag him  
Along until he strangled.  
He refused to live any longer.  
Seeing him fall, those  
Who were riding with him thought  
He might have fainted, for none of them  
Noticed the noose knotted  
Around his neck. Quickly,  
They bent and pulled him up,  
Their arms clasped about him —  
And saw, only then,  
How he'd made the leather his enemy,  
Knotting it round his neck.  
They cut it off at once,  
But the noose had so constricted  
His throat that it took time  
Before he could speak, the veins  
All up and down his neck  
Close to breaking. And then,  
No matter how much he might want to,  
He could no longer harm himself.  
But how it hurt that they watched him!  
He fairly burned with fury  
And regret, wanting only  
To die, if only they'd let him.  
They would not, and he could not, so he said  
To himself, "Ah Death! You disgusting  
Old fraud, how much are you worth  
If you haven't the strength or the will  
To take me instead of my lady?  
Perhaps it's too good a deed,

And *that's* why you wouldn't do it! 4330  
 That must be the answer: you spared me  
 Like a thief and a traitor! Ha!  
 Such respect and kindness!  
 How well you planned your moves!  
 I'll see you in Hell before 4335  
 I thank you for favors like this!  
 I can't even say who  
 I hate most—Life,  
 For keeping me, or Death, who won't  
 Kill me. You're both against me. 4340  
 And yet it's right, by God,  
 That wanting to die, I'm alive,  
 For I should have killed myself  
 The moment my lady the queen  
 Showed how deeply she hates me. 4345  
 There's got to be some reason;  
 She wouldn't have done it for *nothing*—  
 And yet I can't understand.  
 For had I known what was wrong  
 I'd have moved heaven and earth 4350  
 To amend it, however she liked,  
 Before her soul was called  
 To God, if only she'd shown me  
 Some mercy. Oh Lord: what  
 Did I do? She'd probably heard 4355  
 How I'd ridden in the cart.  
 Yet how could she blame me for that?  
 But what else could it be? It was that.  
 Still, if the cart caused her  
 To hate me, how could Love 4360  
 Allow it? How little Love

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Must be understood, to turn  
Such a thing against me. Nothing  
Done in the name of Love  
Can be held against a lover: 4365  
Whatever a lover does  
For love is love, and is right.  
Did I do it only for my love?  
Oh Lord, what can I say!  
Can I still call her my love? 4370  
Do I dare use that word?  
All I know of love  
Insists that, if she loved me,  
She shouldn't have been repelled  
But loved me even more, 4375  
For doing what Love requires  
Strikes me as honoring Love,  
No matter if it's riding in a cart.  
She should have known it was done  
For Love, had she seen it correctly. 4380  
That's how lovers are tested  
By Love, and how Love knows them  
As hers. But my lady didn't like  
What I did: she more than proved  
That dislike with her cold greeting. 4385  
And just the same, for doing  
This deed her lover has been showered  
With shame, and reproach, many times  
Over, and accepted it gladly,  
Though it soured what I meant to be sweet, 4390  
For those who know nothing of Love,  
By God, are always acting  
That way, washing honor

---

With shame, though honor's not cleansed  
By such a bath, but soiled. 4395  
Those who know nothing of Love  
Constantly treat it badly,  
Unafraid of its laws,  
Pure pagans without belief.  
But those who obey Love's orders 4400  
Achieve honor and glory,  
Forgiven for whatever they do,  
While those who fail it are cowards."  
    And so Lancelot lamented,  
And his men rode sadly along 4405  
Beside him, guarding their lord.  
Then after a time, new news  
Arrived: the queen was not dead!  
And the knight was himself again:  
However profoundly, and long, 4410  
He'd mourned her death, now  
He celebrated her life  
A thousand times more strongly.  
By the time he'd come as close  
As eight or nine miles to King 4415  
Bademagu's castle,  
The king too heard news  
That cheered him immensely: the knight  
Was safe and sound and would soon  
Be with him again. Like the courteous, 4420  
Noble gentleman he was,  
The king hurried to tell  
The queen, who said, "Your majesty,  
Since you bear this news, I believe it.  
But had he truly been dead,



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I'd never have been happy again.

*All* the pleasure in life

Would be gone, had a knight died

In my service and on my account."

And then the king left her,

4430

And she waited, and waited, impatient

For her love and her joy to return

Continuing any quarrel

With him was the last thing on her mind!

But the rumor that came to her ears

4435

Over and over, never

At rest, was that Lancelot

Would have killed himself for her,

And had tried, but they would not let him.

She believed it, and was thrilled at the thought,

4440

But nothing in the world could have made her

Want such a total disaster.

And finally, having hurried

As fast as he could, he came.

The moment the king saw him

4445

He ran and hugged and kissed him,

Feeling so light with joy

He should have been able to fly.

But seeing those who had captured

And bound the knight, his joy

4450

Ended: they'd ridden hard,

He said, to reach their own death.

They answered that whatever they'd done

Had been meant to honor the king's

Wishes. "It may have pleased you!"

Said the king, "But not me. It had nothing

To do with this knight, who was under

My protection. The shame's  
Not his, but mine, only  
Mine. And you'll pay for your pleasure!" 4460  
    Seeing Bademagu's  
Fury, Lancelot sought  
To calm him, and bring about peace,  
And after working long  
And hard, succeeded. Then the king 4465  
Brought him to see the queen  
And now her eyes were not  
Lowered to the ground, she came  
To greet him *gaily*, offering  
All the honor she knew how 4470  
To give, making him sit  
At her side. And they talked  
Of whatever came to their minds,  
Neither of them hunting for words,  
For Love supplied them in abundance. 4475  
And seeing how well it went,  
And nothing he said displeased  
The queen, Lancelot lowered  
His voice: "Lady," he said,  
"I was taken aback at the greeting 4480  
You gave me, the other day,  
Not saying a single word.  
I felt myself close to death  
And had not the courage, as I have  
Today, to say a word 4485  
Or ask you why. Lady,  
If you'll tell me what I've done  
To deserve such torment, I'm ready,  
Now, to make you amends."

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To which the queen answered,  
"Indeed? Didn't the cart  
Shame you the least little bit?  
You must have hesitated,  
For you lingered a good two steps.  
And that, you see, was my sole  
Reason for ignoring your presence."  
"May God keep me from another  
Such error," said Lancelot,  
"And may He show me no mercy  
If you haven't spoken the truth!  
In the name of God, Lady,  
Tell me what I must do  
To earn your forgiveness, and whatever  
It is I will do it at once.  
I beg you: pardon my fault."  
"My friend," said the queen gaily,  
"Your fault is freely forgiven.  
You have my absolute pardon."  
"I thank you, Lady," he said.  
"But I cannot tell you, here,  
All I would like to say.  
I'd be grateful for the chance to speak  
In private, if that can be managed."  
Then the queen motioned—not  
With her hand, but her eyes—to a window,  
And said, "Come speak to me  
Tonight, at that window, when everyone  
Else will be asleep.  
Come by way of that orchard.  
I can't let you in,  
Nor can you stay the night.

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I shall have to stay inside,  
And you will have to stay out.  
I won't be able to touch you,  
Except with my hand, or my mouth 4525  
But if it gives you pleasure  
I'll stay there till dawn, for love  
Of you. We cannot come  
Together, for Sir Kay, the steward,  
Sleeps on a bed in my room, 4530  
Still sick from the wounds he received.  
And the door is always closed,  
And it's strong, and very well guarded.  
Be very careful, when you come,  
That none of those watching see you." 4535  
"Lady," he said, "If I can,  
No one will see me, and neither  
Think nor say an evil  
Word." And thus they talked,  
And parted wonderfully happy. 4540  
Lancelot left her, his spirits  
So high that all his pains  
And sorrows had been forgotten.  
But night was too slow in coming,  
And the day lingered too long: 4545  
It seemed to him a hundred  
Days, or even a year.  
He'd hurry to their rendezvous,  
If only night would come!  
Then finally the thick, dark 4550  
Night fought the day  
To its knees and slowly covered it  
Over with its heavy cloak.

And seeing the light fade,  
He pretended an immense fatigue, 4555  
Saying he'd been awake  
Too long, and needed to rest.  
You who've used the same trick  
Don't need to have it explained:  
He made a great show of weariness 4560  
And took himself off to bed—  
But found no comfort, for sleep  
Was not what he had in mind.  
He could not have slept, nor would he  
Have dared to even had he wanted 4565  
To try. And soon he rose,  
Quietly, not a bit unhappy  
That no moon was shining, and no stars,  
And all through the house not a candle  
Or a lamp or a lantern was lit. 4570  
He slipped outdoors, careful  
That no one was watching; everyone  
Thought he was fast asleep,  
Lost in his bed for the night.  
No one went with him, or showed him 4575  
The path, as he went to the orchard,  
And he met no one on the way.  
And his luck held: part  
Of the wall around the orchard  
Had recently fallen, and through 4580  
The hole he went, quickly,  
And stood beneath the window,  
Still as a stone, careful  
Not to cough or sneeze.  
And then the queen appeared, 4585

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Dressed in a snow-white gown.  
She wore neither a coat  
Nor any covering but a short  
Red cloak, fur-trimmed, across  
Her shoulders. Seeing the queen  
Bend her head against  
The window's great iron bars,  
Lancelot greeted her with gentle  
Warmth, which she returned,  
Immense longing gripping 4595  
Them both, each for the other.  
No harsh or angry words  
Passed between them: pressing  
As close as they could, they were just  
Able to clasp hand 4600  
To hand. How it hurt them,  
Unable to be together,  
And how they cursed those iron  
Bars! But Lancelot assured her,  
Should she be willing, he'd come 4605  
And join her: no iron bars  
Could keep him out! The queen  
Quickly replied, "Can't  
You see? This iron's too thick  
To bend, too strong to break. 4610  
Please: don't even attempt it!  
How could you possibly pull  
Away a single one?"  
"Ah, don't worry, my lady!  
No iron can keep me out. 4615  
Nothing can stop me from coming  
To you, if you want me to come

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Just say the word, and consider it  
As good as done. Your  
Not wanting me in is the only 4620  
Obstacle that could keep me out,  
The only barrier I can't  
Break down." "I want you in,"  
Said the queen. "That's not the question.  
But let me quickly return 4625  
To bed, and lie there, and watch,  
Because it won't be pleasant  
Or at all amusing if my husband's  
Steward, who's sleeping here,  
Hears you at work, and wakes up. 4630  
Besides, it's better for me  
To be back in bed, not standing  
Here for everyone to see."  
"Go back to bed, lady,  
But have no fear: this 4635  
Is work I can do quietly.  
These bars will come out quickly  
And with hardly an effort, and no one  
Will hear me or know what I've done."  
The queen hurried back 4640  
To her bed, and the knight prepared  
To pull the window apart.  
Taking hold of the bars,  
He bent them toward him until  
They snapped away from their sockets, 4645  
But the iron edge was so sharp  
It cut through his little  
Finger, down to the bone,  
And sliced deep in the knuckle

Of the finger next to it. He had no 4650  
Awareness of the blood running out,  
Nor the wounds; he felt no pain,  
His mind on other matters.  
The window was high in the wall,  
But Lancelot had no trouble 4655  
Climbing quickly through.  
Finding Sir Kay asleep,  
He approached the queen's bed,  
Bowing in adoration  
Before the holiest relic 4660  
He knew, and the queen reached out  
Her arms and drew him down,  
Holding him tight against  
Her breast, making the knight  
As welcome in her bed, and as happy, 4665  
As she possibly could, impelled  
By the power of Love, and her own  
Heart. It was Love that moved her,  
And she loved him truly, but he  
Loved her a hundred thousand 4670  
Times more, for if other hearts  
Had escaped Love, his  
Had not. His heart was so  
Completely captured that the image  
Of Love in all other hearts 4675  
Was a pale one. And the knight had  
What he wanted, for the queen willingly  
Gave him all the pleasures  
Of herself, held him in her arms  
As he was holding her. 4680  
It was so exceedingly sweet



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And good—the kisses, the embraces—  
That Lancelot knew a delight  
So fine, so wondrous, that no one  
In the world had ever before 4685  
Known anything like it, so help me  
God! And that's all I'm allowed  
To tell you; I can say no more.  
These pleasures I'm forbidden to report  
Were the most wonderful known, 4690  
The most delightful. That night,  
And all night long, Lancelot  
Experienced incredible joy.  
But the dawn came, against  
His will, and he had to leave. 4695  
Rising from her bed was like  
Some terrible martyrdom;  
He suffered immense pain.  
His heart kept yearning back  
To where the queen was lying, 4700  
Nor could he keep it in his breast,  
For after such joy he had  
No heart to take away with him:  
The body might go, hut the heart  
Would remain. He turned and went 4705  
To the window—but some of him stayed,  
For the curtains were spotted and stained  
With the blood he'd shed as he entered.  
He left more slowly than he'd come,  
With much sighing and many 4710  
Tears. They could plan for nothing  
More, no matter how much  
They longed to: reluctant to leave,

He left, and hated to go.  
His hands had been badlg wounded, 4715  
His fingers were scarred, but he bent  
The bars back where they'd been,  
Set them in their sockets again,  
So no matter how or where  
One looked, top or bottom, 4720  
Inside or out, they seemed  
Completely undisturbed.  
And as he passed through the window  
He bowed and crossed himself,  
As if acknowledging 4725  
An altar. And so he left,  
Sadly, seen by no one,  
And returned to his lodgings. He lay down  
In his bed, naked; no one  
Was disturbed, no one woke up. 4730  
And then he noticed, astonished,  
How badly his fingers had been hurt,  
But was not bothered, quite sure  
That in bending the window's iron  
Bars he must have cut 4735  
And bruised himself. He felt  
No regret: he'd rather let  
Both his arms be ripped  
From his body than never have gone  
Through that window—though the wounds were so 4740  
Sevure that suffering such injuries  
On some other occasion, in some other  
Cause, would have been an affliction.  
Behind the closed curtains  
In her room, the queen sweetly 4745

Slept the morning away,  
Paying no attention  
To all the bloodstained spots,  
Sure the curtains were as white  
And lovely as they'd always been. 4750  
But *Méléagant*, as soon  
As he'd left his bed, and was dressed,  
Decided to pay a visit  
To the room where the queen was lying.  
He found her awake, and saw 4755  
The curtains freshly spotted  
With blood. Nudging his followers  
With an elbow, as if hot on the trail  
Of evil, he turned to Sir Kay  
And saw blood spots all over 4760  
His bed (for as the steward  
Slept, that night, his wounds  
Had opened). "Lady," he exclaimed,  
"Here's the proof I've been wanting!  
Trying to keep a woman 4765  
Honest is truly work  
For a fool, and a waste of time:  
When someone's watching she slips  
Away faster than when no one  
Cares! And my father gave you 4770  
A guard to save you from me!  
That kept me out, all right—  
But Sir Steward, lying right here,  
Managed to find you, last night,  
And took whatever he wanted. 4775  
That's perfectly clear: just look!"  
"At what?" she said. "The blood

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On your curtains cries out against you.  
I won't go into details.  
But I see what I see: blood 4780  
From his wounds spattered all over  
Your curtains, and all over his bed.  
Could one ask for better proof?"  
And then, for the very first time,  
The queen saw the spattered 4785  
Curtains, and the bed, and was stunned;  
Shame brought the color  
To her face: "So help me God,  
But this blood I see on my curtains  
Never came from Sir Kay. 4790  
Last night I had a nose bleed—  
And this, I expect, is the cause."  
And she really thought it was true.  
"So help me," said Méléagant,  
"You're babbling absolute nonsense. 4795  
These empty words are worthless:  
You're guilty beyond a doubt,  
The truth is perfectly clear."  
And then, speaking to his father's  
Guards, he said, "Don't move. 4800  
Keep everything just as it is,  
Let no one touch this bed.  
I intend to demand justice  
From the king, as soon as he's seen it."  
And then he sought out the king 4805  
And threw himself at his feet,  
"My lord, come see what you never  
Suspected. Come see this queen  
You've sheltered, and behold the amazing

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Things I found in her chambers  
And have seen for myself. But first,  
Before you go, I pray you  
Not to forget what's mine  
By justice and right. You know  
As well as anyone what I risked  
For this woman's sake, making  
You my enemy. You kept her  
Guarded against me. I went  
To see her, this morning, as she lay  
In bed, and saw without  
The slightest doubt that she'd spent  
The night with Sir Kay. In the name  
Of God, my lord, don't  
Be angry that I've come complaining  
And in sorrow, for in sleeping with Kay  
She's shown me immense disdain  
And flagrantly flaunted her hatred!"  
"Be quiet!" said the king. "This is nonsense."  
"My lord, come see her curtains,  
And how Kay left them. Since  
You refuse to believe me, and insist  
I'm telling you lies, let  
Those curtains, and the blood from Kay's  
Wounds, convince you of the truth."  
"Let's go, then!" declared the king.  
"My eyes have never told me  
Lies: I want them to see  
For themselves." He hurried to the queen's  
Chamber, and found her there,  
Newly risen from her bed.  
He saw the bloody curtains

And the blood on Sir Kay's bed.  
"Lady," he said, "Alas!  
I see what my son has told me  
Is true." "By God," she replied, 4845  
"No one has ever concocted  
Such a wicked lie, not even  
In a dream! Sir Kay, King Arthur's  
Steward, is too honest and loyal  
A man to accuse of such things. 4850  
And I, I don't sell  
My body to the highest bidder.  
Believe me, such infamy  
Would never have crossed Kay's mind,  
And it never, ever, occurred 4855  
To me, nor would I have done it."  
"My lord," said Méléagant  
To his father, "how pleasant it would be  
If Kay paid for his crime,  
And the queen was properly shamed. 4860  
Justice awaits your word:  
Give it, I beg you. This false  
Steward, in whom King Arthur  
Placed such trust that he let him  
Guard the queen, his dearest 4865  
Love, has betrayed his lord."  
"My lord," said Kay, "let me  
Answer, and defend myself.  
When I leave this world may God  
Refuse my soul forgiveness 4870  
If I took my pleasure of my lady!  
I'd rather — much rather! — be dead  
Than be guilty of such an outrageous

Crime against my lord!  
May God on high not give me 4875  
Back my health—let him  
Take me, here and now,  
If I ever thought such a thing!  
All I know is this:  
My wounds opened and bled 4880  
Freely, last night, and stained  
My bedding, which is why your son  
Suspects me, though he has no right to."  
And Méléagant replied,  
"By God, the devil and all 4885  
The fiends of Hell have betrayed you!  
You worked up too much of a sweat,  
Last night, and that's why your wounds  
Came open, and you bled. There's nothing  
You can say to defend yourself: 4890  
Blood in both places is the plainest  
Proof in the world, and we see it.  
A crime so clearly proven  
Deserves to be punished. No knight  
Of your reputation has ever 4895  
Fallen so far: you stand  
Before us, covered with shame."  
"My lord, my lord," cried Kay  
To the king, "I'll defend my lady  
And myself against your son's 4900  
Accusation! I have no strength,  
It may kill me, but he has no right!"  
"Combat is out of the question,"  
Said the king. "You're too badly hurt."  
"Let me fight him, my lord. 4905

Even sick and weak  
As I am, I'll meet him in combat  
And prove by the blade of my sword  
I'm not guilty of this crime!"  
But the queen had already, in secret, 4910  
Sent for Lancelot,  
And told the king she'd produce  
A knight who'd defend Sir Kay  
Against this accusation,  
If Méléagant had the courage. 4915  
And Méléagant immediately  
Said, "Choose whoever  
You like, without exception—  
Even a giant!—and I promise  
A fight to the death." As he spoke 4920  
These words, Lancelot entered,  
And so many knights crowded  
Into the hall it was filled  
To bursting. The moment he appeared  
The queen set out the quarrel 4925  
For all to hear, young  
And old: "Lancelot, this  
Is the deeply disgraceful thing  
Of which Méléagant has accused me,  
And declares he will spread both far 4930  
And wide unless you make him  
Unsay it. Sir Kay, he claims,  
Enjoyed my bed last night,  
In proof of which he points  
To these curtains, and this bed, both bloodstained. 4935  
And he claims the crime will be proven  
If Kay, or someone fighting



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In his name, can't defend against it."  
"You will never need to defend  
Yourself, my lady, once 4940  
I'm with you. May God in Heaven  
Desire no stain on your name.  
Whoever thinks this is true  
Will have to prove it in combat,  
And with me. Whatever strength 4945  
I have, I hereby pledge  
In your defense. I am ready  
For combat." Then Méléagant  
Leaped forth. "God save my soul,  
That's just what I'd like, I'm more 4950  
Than ready and not in the least  
Worried!" "Your majesty," said Lancelot,  
"As I understand the legal  
Requirements of judicial combat  
In cases of false accusation, 4955  
Such combat can only occur  
Under oath." And Méléagant  
Instantly answered, with great  
Assurance, "Let it be sworn to!  
Bring out the holy relics: 4960  
I stand with justice and right!"  
Lancelot replied at once,  
"May God on high help me,  
But no one who knows Sir Kay  
Could think he had done such a thing." 4965  
They called for their horses, their armor  
And weapons; their orders were obeyed  
As quickly as possible. Squires  
Helped them into their armor,

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And then the relics were brought. 4970  
Mélégant came forward,  
And Lancelot right beside him;  
Both of them fell to their knees;  
And Mélégant stretched out  
His hand above the holy 4975  
Objects, and swore, loud  
And clear: "In the name of God  
And these relics, Sir Kay slept  
With the queen last night, in her bed,  
And took his pleasure." "And I 4980  
Swear you're lying," said Lancelot.  
"He never came to her bed.  
May Our Lord be willing to take  
His vengeance on whoever's lying,  
And let the truth be known. 4985  
But let me swear another  
Oath, which is this: no matter  
Who it may hurt, or how much,  
If I defeat this man  
Again, with only the help 4990  
Of God and these holy relics  
Lying here before us,  
I'll offer him no mercy."  
And hearing this oath as the knight  
Swore it, the king was not happy. 4995  
Once their oaths had been sworn,  
Squires led out their horses,  
Both of them beautiful beasts,  
And each of them mounted, and then  
Dashed straight at the other  
As fast as their horses could gallop.

The huge beasts collided  
With such immense force  
That all the knights had left  
Of their lances were the handles in their hands  
And both were swept to the ground,  
But not like a pair of corpses,  
For they jumped quickly to their feet  
And began doing as much  
Damage as they could with their swords.  
Fiery sparks leaped  
Toward the sky, from both their helmets.  
They pressed their attacks fiercely,  
Bare blades clashing, both knights  
Constantly moving forward  
And back, wielding their swords  
As quickly as they could, neither  
Taking a quiet breath  
Or resting. The sorrowful king  
Called up to the queen,  
Who'd climbed to a balcony high  
In the tower, where she sat and watched,  
And asked her, in the name of God,  
To stop the combat. "Do  
Whatever seems to you best,"  
Replied the queen, in good faith.  
"I will oppose you in nothing."  
Hearing the king's request  
Perfectly well, and the answer  
Given by the queen, Lancelot  
Had no desire to continue;  
His furious sword was still.  
But Méléagant kept

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Attacking, not wanting to be stopped,  
So the king stepped between them 5035  
And took hold of his son, who swore  
That peace was the furthest thing  
From his mind: "Let me go on  
Fighting!" "Have sense enough  
To be quiet and listen," said the king. 5040  
"Taking my advice  
Will neither shame you nor hurt you.  
Things can be done the right way  
Or the wrong! Don't you remember  
Challenging him to combat 5045  
At King Arthur's court? Fighting  
There will bring you greater honor,  
If you win, than combat anywhere  
Else in the world!" The king's  
Words were meant to calm him, 5050  
If anything could. And at last  
He succeeded, and drew them apart.  
    Now Lancelot, sorely pressed  
To finally find Sir Gawain,  
Sought first the king's 5055  
Permission to leave, and then  
The queen's. Permission granted,  
He galloped toward the Sunken Bridge,  
Followed by a large troop  
Of knights—many of whom, 5060  
In truth, he'd rather have seen  
Stay where they were. The trip  
Was long, and took many days,  
But at last they drew near the bridge,  
Though still some miles away. 5065

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They'd barely come close enough  
To see the bridge in the distance,  
When a dwarf rode out to meet them,  
Mounted on a huge horse  
Which he spurred on with blows  
From a fierce-looking whip. And as  
He approached them, he called out  
(According to instructions he'd been given):  
"Which of you is Lancelot?  
Don't conceal him: I'm on  
Your side. Just tell me the truth:  
What I need to ask him concerns  
You all." Lancelot answered  
For himself: "I am the man  
You wish to see and speak to." 5080  
"Ah Lancelot, noble knight!  
Leave these people, if you please.  
Come with me, alone,  
For I've someplace special to take you.  
Let no one follow behind us. 5085  
Wait right here. It won't  
Be long before we're back!"  
Suspecting nothing, the knight  
Ordered his men to wait,  
And followed after the dwarf— 5090  
And those who waited would go on  
Waiting, and waiting, and waiting  
For the knight's return, for the dwarf  
Was not his guide, but his captor.  
How sad and confused they were going 5095  
To be, waiting in vain,  
Not knowing what to do.

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They began to believe that the dwarf  
Had tricked them—and need you ask  
If that knowledge made them happy?  
Heavy at heart, they hunted  
For the knight, not knowing where  
He'd been taken, or how to find him.  
They took counsel together, and the wisest  
Among them, the story tells us,  
Agreed that the sensible thing  
Would be to continue on  
To the Sunken Bridge, close by,  
And then, if they found Sir Gawain  
Anywhere in sight, take counsel  
With him before they went further.  
All agreed on this plan,  
Without dissent, and off  
They rode toward the Sunken Bridge  
And soon reached it, and in fact  
Found Gawain, who had fallen  
From the bridge into the deep  
Water, having lost his balance.  
His head kept going under,  
Then bobbing back to the surface.  
They hurried toward him, and using  
Sticks, and branches, and boat hooks,  
Brought him ashore, still wearing  
His mail shirt, his helmet (worth  
Any ten of its kind)  
On his head, his iron leggings  
Rusty and stained with sweat,  
For he'd struggled hard to get there,  
And overcome a host

Of dangers and murderous assaults. 5130  
His lance, his shield, and his horse  
Were waiting on the other bank.  
Quickly pulling him out,  
They couldn't believe he was still  
Alive, but after vomiting 5135  
Up the water he'd swallowed,  
And lying on the ground, silent,  
He began to breathe again  
And recovered his voice, and words  
They could hear and understand 5140  
Were able to flow from his heart,  
And he seized the moment, and spoke—  
And his very first question for those  
Who stood in front of him was whether  
There was any news of the queen. 5145  
They told him she'd never for a minute  
Left King Bademagu's  
Protection, for he honored her deeply  
And served her well. "Has no one  
Come to look for her here?" 5150  
Demanded Gawain. To which  
They answered, "Oh yes, indeed!"  
"Who?" "Lancelot of the Lake,  
Who crossed the Bridge of Swords;  
And claimed her freedom, and won it, 5155  
And for all of us, as well.  
But a dwarf has tricked and betrayed us,  
A hump-backed, grinning monster,  
Sly as a fox, who deceived us  
All and carried Lancelot  
Off, we don't know where."

"When did this happen?" asked Gawain.  
"My lord, it happened today,  
Not far from here, as Lancelot  
Was leading us to meet you." 5165  
"And how did he behave,  
After he reached this country?"  
So they began to tell him,  
And told it all, every  
Detail, omitting nothing. 5170  
And they told him, too, that the queen  
Was awaiting him, and would not  
Leave for any reason  
In the world, before she'd seen him  
Or at least learned where he was. 5175  
Then Sir Gawain declared,  
"When we leave this bridge, shall we try  
To find Lancelot?" But every  
One of them thought it better  
To return to the queen, for she 5180  
Could inquire of the king. They were all  
Convinced that Méléagant,  
Who hated Sir Lancelot,  
Had betrayed and captured the knight.  
But wherever the king's son 5185  
Held him, once the king  
Found out, the knight would be freed:  
That was certain. Sir Gawain agreed,  
And they set off at once, and rode  
So swiftly that soon they approached 5190  
The court, where they found the queen  
And the king, as well as Sir Kay,  
But also the treacherous prince,



---

Plotter of the vicious deceits  
That had caused them all such concern  
For Lancelot, and such sorrow.  
Victims of foul betrayal,  
They arrived in obvious grief.  
Nor was the queen delighted  
By the news they bore, though she tried  
Not to display her sadness,  
Behaving as well as she could.  
Rejoicing at the sight of Sir Gawain  
Was required, and she did her best,  
But no matter how well she hid  
Her grief, it was not hard  
To see. She was torn between sorrow  
And relief: her heart hurt  
For Lancelot, but in Gawain's presence  
All she showed was delight.  
Whoever heard that Lancelot  
Was gone, betrayed, lost,  
Was overwhelmed by sadness.  
The king would have known great joy,  
Making Sir Gawain welcome  
At his court, and coming to know him,  
But was so oppressed and sorrowful  
At Lancelot's betrayal  
That he could not pretend to be cheerful.  
And the queen begged and implored him  
To search both mountains and valleys  
All over his land, from end  
To end and border to border,  
And so, too, Sir Gawain and Sir Kay.  
Indeed, there was no one at court

---

Who did not urge him to action.  
"Allow me to settle this  
As I will," said the king. "I need  
No urging. I could not be more  
Concerned. Your prayers and complaints 5230  
Can't move me more than my own  
Desires." They bowed, and were silent.  
The king's messengers rode  
Like the wind, all over his realm,  
Wise men, well known and experienced, 5235  
Crossing the whole country  
In search of some clues, some word.  
They cast their net as wide  
As they could, but found nothing.  
And so they returned, empty- 5240  
Handed, to where the knights  
Were waiting—Gawain, Kay,  
And all the others—who said  
That, armed and armored, lances  
Ready hut at rest, they would hunt him 5245  
For themselves. After dinner,  
One day, as they gathered in the hall,  
Preparing to put on their armor,  
Take up their weapons and set off  
On their quest, a boy came in 5250  
And passed among them, walking  
Straight to the queen, whose face  
No longer bore the color  
Of a rose, pale with grief  
For Lancelot, not knowing 5255  
How or even where  
He was. The boy greeted

---

Her, and the king beside her,  
Then each of the others, including  
Kay and my lord Gawain.

5260

He held a letter in his hand,  
And gave it to the king, who took it  
And ordered a man he trusted  
To read it out, for all

To hear—a man who could read  
Whatever he saw in front of him.

5265

And he read that Lancelot greeted  
The noble king, expressing  
His thanks for the favors done him  
At the court, and the honor shown him,  
And announcing himself forever  
Ready to repay what he owed.

And then he declared that his path  
Had taken him back to King Arthur's  
Court, and that Arthur requested  
The queen to return, when she wished,  
And also Kay and Sir Gawain.

This letter carried his seal,  
And commanded belief, and received it.

And how happy everyone was!

The entire court rejoiced.

And the knights said that the next  
Dawn would see them riding  
Back to their homes. Which was how  
It happened: when morning came  
They readied themselves, mounted  
Their horses, and rode away.

And the king, as happy as the rest,  
Followed them down their road

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A long and joyous way. 5290  
Indeed, he took them to the borders  
Of his land, and safely across,  
Then said farewell to the queen,  
And afterwards all the others.  
And as she left, the wise 5295  
And courteous queen graciously  
Thanked him for all he'd done,  
And warmly embraced him, promising  
Honor and affection from both  
Herself and her royal husband. 5300  
Nothing could have pleased him better.  
And Sir Gawain, too, declared him  
His friend and his lord, and so did  
Sir Kay, and all the others.  
And then they rode down the road, 5305  
And the king commended them all  
To God, and saluted these three,  
And then all the rest, and went home.  
The queen rode without stopping,  
Allowing nothing to delay her, 5310  
Nor any of those who rode with her.  
And then the news of her coming  
Reached King Arthur's court,  
And Arthur was delighted, his heart  
Happy, rejoicing quite 5315  
As much for his nephew's sake,  
Convinced that Gawain's courage  
Had won back the queen, as well  
As Sir Kay, and all the rest.  
But it wasn't at all what he thought. 5320  
The whole town came out

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To greet them, welcome them home;  
Noble or peasant, everyone  
Shouted the same words:  
"Welcome, my lord Gawain,  
Who brought us back our queen,  
And freed a host of ladies  
And crowds of other captives!"  
But Gawain answered them all:  
"I don't deserve this praise.  
Don't waste these words on me,  
For I've done nothing to earn them.  
Indeed, this honor shames me,  
For I came to that country too late,  
And lost my chance. But Lancelot  
Came in time, and earned  
More honor than any knight  
Alive." "But where has he gone to,  
My lord, for he hasn't come back  
With you?" "Where?" said Gawain,  
Completely astonished. "To our lord,  
King Arthur's court. Isn't he  
Here?" "No, by God,  
Nowhere in all this land!  
Nothing's been heard of him  
Since our lady the queen left."  
And Gawain suddenly saw  
That the letter had not been true,  
But false, and a lie, deceiving  
And betraying them all. And sorrow  
Overwhelmed them again,  
As slowly they made their way  
To court. As soon as he saw them

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Arthur asked what had happened.  
And those who knew were quick  
To tell him what Lancelot had done,  
Freeing the queen, and the others,  
And how the dwarf had tricked him,  
Led him off and betrayed him  
Into chains. The telling  
Of this tale angered Arthur,  
F i e d his heart with heaviness,  
But the flooding joy he felt  
On the queen's account silenced  
Sorrow in the name of happiness:  
Having what he wanted most  
In the world, the rest hardly mattered.

5355

Now while the queen had been  
Away (as I've heard it said),  
The ladies of Arthur's court  
Remaining unmarried and without  
Protection assembled in council  
And decided, one and **all**,  
They'd like to be married as soon  
As possible. And so they decided  
To stage a tournament challenge,  
The lady of Noauz against  
The lady of Pomelegoi.  
Nothing would be said of knights  
Who lost their battles, hut those  
Who won, and won well, would be promptly  
Chosen as husbands and lovers.  
The ladies made sure this news  
Was known and heard in neighboring  
Lands, and even further,

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And they set a far-off day  
For the start of this challenge, so as many  
Men as possible would come.  
Now the queen was due home  
Before this distant day  
Arrived. And as soon as they knew  
She'd come, most of these ladies  
Flocked to the court, as fast  
As they could, presenting themselves  
Before the king, begging 5395  
And pleading to he granted the right  
To ask for something they wanted.  
And he agreed in advance  
To give them whatever it was,  
Not knowing what they might ask. 5400  
And then they told him: they wanted  
His permission for the queen  
To sit and watch their games.  
Never liking to say no,  
He said she could, if she wished. 5405  
Delighted, they hurried off  
To find the queen and put  
The question to her: "My lady,"  
They said, "Please: don't  
Take back what the king just gave us." 5410  
The queen immediately answered,  
"And what was that? Tell me!"  
And they said, "If you'd like to watch  
Our tournament, he won't  
Forbid it or interfere 5415  
In any way." And so  
She said she would surely take part,

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Since he'd given his permission.  
And then the ladies sent word  
All across the kingdom 5420  
That the day the tournament opened  
The queen herself would make  
Her appearance and watch their games.  
This news was sent in every  
Direction, far and near, 5425  
Traveling to such distant places  
That it reached even that kingdom  
From which, once, no one  
Returned, though now whoever  
Chose to could enter and leave 5430  
Exactly as they pleased. Traveling  
So far abroad, told  
And retold, the news reached  
One of Méléagant's stewards —  
Méléagant, that traitor! 5435  
May he burn in the fires of Hell!  
This steward was Lancelot's jailer:  
Hating the knight with a bitter  
Passion, Méléagant  
Held him there, locked away. 5440  
And hearing the day when those games  
Would begin, Lancelot's eyes  
Overflowed with tears,  
And his heart was filled with sadness.  
Seeing the knight's immense 5445  
Sorrow, the steward's wife  
Arranged to ask him, in secret:  
"My lord, in the name of God,"  
Said the lady, "tell me the truth.

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What could have made you so miserable?  
You refuse to drink, or to eat;  
You never smile, or laugh.  
Trust me, please. Tell me  
What could torment you like this?"  
"Oh, lady! How can you be  
Surprised, seeing my sadness?  
I'm sick at heart—indeed!—  
For the best people in the world  
Are assembling, and I won't be there.  
And I know they'll come from far  
And wide for this tournament challenge.  
Still, if you could find it  
In your heart—if God gave you  
So noble a soul—if you'd let me  
Go there—I tell you, you  
Can be sure I'll come right back  
And be your prisoner again!"  
"Indeed," she said, "I'd certainly  
Do it, if it didn't ensure  
My ruin and then my death.  
I live in such fear of my evil  
Lord, Méléagant,  
That I don't dare. He'd certainly  
Kill my husband, too.  
Who wouldn't be afraid?  
You know how savage he is!"  
"Lady, if you have the slightest  
Doubt of my coming back  
As soon as the tournament's over.  
I'll swear you an oath so solemn  
That I couldn't possibly break it:

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Nothing in all the world  
Will keep me from coming back  
The moment the tournament's done!"  
"By God!" she said. "On one  
Condition, I'll do it." "And that  
Condition, lady?" "My lord,  
Only if you swear just  
As solemn an oath that when  
You return I will have your love."  
"Lady, I swear I'll give you  
Whatever is mine to give."  
The lady burst into laughter:  
"Which means I get nothing at all!  
Someone whose word I trust  
Tells me you've long since given  
Away all the love  
You've got. Still, I won't  
Be hard, I'll take whatever  
I can, and he glad to have it.  
I'll accept the pledge you're willing  
To give me, so swear you'll return  
And be my prisoner again."

He did exactly as she asked,  
Swearing in the name of our Holy  
Church he'd come back without fail.  
And the lady brought him her husband's  
Arms and armor, all red,  
And a marvelous horse, as beautiful,  
Stout, and strong as could be.  
Up he climbed, and rode off,  
Resplendent, his weapons and armor  
Brilliant, gleaming bright.

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The road to Noauz was a long one,  
But he arrived, at last,  
And took lodgings outside  
The town, where no one so noble  
Had ever stayed. It was small  
And cramped, but he couldn't let himself  
Go where he might be known.  
Fine and famous knights  
Had flocked to the castle, more  
Than even a castle could hold:  
So many came on the queen's  
Account that it couldn't have lodged  
A fifth part of them all.  
Seven of every eight  
Who had made the journey came  
Because of the queen! They took  
What shelter they could find, for miles  
Around in every direction —  
In tents and cabins and huts.  
No one had ever seen  
So many noble ladies  
And girls. Lancelot set  
His shield outside the door  
Of his lodgings, and then, to rest  
From his ride, removed his armor  
And lay on the narrow, meager  
Bed, with its hard mattress  
Covered by heavy canvas.  
Not wearing his armor, no weapons  
In his hands, he lay on his side.  
And as he rested in this wretched  
Room, a rascally herald

Came by, dressed in a shirt,  
His shoes and coat pledged  
Against his drinking debts  
At the tavern. Barefoot in the bitter  
Wind, he came running along, 5550  
And saw the shield and stopped,  
Studying it hard, but couldn't  
Tell who owned it or might  
Have put it in that place. The door  
Stood unlocked, so in 5555  
He went, and saw Lancelot  
Lying on the bed, and knew him  
At once, and quickly crossed  
Himself. And Lancelot told him  
He'd better hold his tongue 5560  
And let no one know who had come  
Or else he'd be better off  
With his eyes ripped out and his neck  
Broken. "My lord, you've always  
Had my respect," said the herald, 5565  
"And you do so now. As long  
As I live, I'll never ever  
Be guilty of anything likely  
To make your lordship angry."  
But as soon as he left the house 5570  
He ran down the street, crying:  
"He'll cut them down to size!  
He'll cut them down to size!"  
He carried his news all over  
The town, and people came running 5575  
Out, anxious to know  
Who he meant, but he didn't dare tell them,

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And went on shouting, over  
And over—and he was the first  
Ever to use the expression: 5580  
"He'll cut them down to size!"  
He deserves to be called our teacher,  
For we learned how to say this from him.

And now they began to assemble—  
The queen, and all the ladies, 5585  
And the knights, and all the others—  
And armed men were on every  
Hand, wherever you looked.  
The tournament site was surrounded  
With newly built platforms and benches,  
Meant for the queen and the ladies,  
And all the young girls. No one  
Had ever seen such handsome  
Viewing stands, so large  
And well made. All the women  
Would be there, the next day, along  
With the queen, to watch and judge  
Who fought well, and who  
Did not. The knights assembled  
In groups of ten, and twenty,  
And twenty more, then thirty,  
And eighty, and ninety, and a hundred,  
And another hundred, then two hundred  
More—so many armed  
And unarmed knights, that the combat  
Might have started on the spot.  
So many spears had been brought  
For so many eager knights  
There seemed an entire forest

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Of lances — and not only lances, 5610  
But banners and fluttering pennants.  
Every knight was ready  
For combat, and none needed  
To hunt for willing opponents.  
And those who came as horsemen 5615  
Were equally anxious to perform.  
Meadows and plains, fields  
Both ploughed and fallow, were crowded  
So full of knights that no one  
Could possibly have counted them all. 5620  
But as yet the tournament's first  
Assembly did not include  
Lancelot — though when he came,  
And the herald saw him, he could not  
Keep himself from shouting, 5625  
"Here's the one who'll cut them  
Down to size! He's here!"  
But when they asked him, "Who is he?"  
He refused to tell them a thing.  
Yet once **Lancelot** was there, 5630  
And fighting, he was worth twenty  
Of the best of them: performing as well  
As he did, no one could bother  
Watching anyone else.  
The Pomelegoi camp included 5635  
A bold, courageous knight,  
Mounted on a horse that could leap  
And run faster than a deer.  
He was the king of Ireland's  
Son, and fought with grace 5640  
And skill. But the unknown knight

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Was easily four times more  
Appreciated. "Who  
Can he be, who's fighting so well?"  
Then the queen took aside  
A quick-witted, sensible girl,  
And said, "Young lady, I have  
A message for you to deliver,  
In as few words as possible.  
Step down from this platform and find  
That knight for me—the one  
Who's carrying a red shield.  
Let no one hear you, and say  
I order him to fight badly."  
Quickly and quietly, the girl  
Did as the queen commanded.  
She worked her way to the knight's  
Side, and stood as close  
As she could, then carefully spoke  
So softly that no one nearby  
Could hear, "Sir, my lady  
The queen sent me to give you  
Her order: 'Fight badly.'" Hearing  
These words, he said he'd gladly  
Obey, for he was entirely  
Hers. And then he went chasing  
A knight as fast as his horse  
Could gallop, and swung, and missed.  
And from then till dusk fell  
He went on fighting badly,  
Purely to please the queen.  
And now the knights who came after  
Him could catch him. and strike him

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Heavy blows, and instead  
Of responding he ran away.  
The whole rest of that day  
He never faced an opponent  
Head-on; to save his life  
He worked at earning only  
Shame, and disgrace, and dishonor,  
Acting as if the other  
Knights filled him with terror.  
And those who'd admired him  
At first, began to make him  
The butt of laughter and jokes.  
And the herald who kept insisting  
"He's going to beat them all!"  
Sat with a long face,  
Listening to insults and jokes:  
"Friend, you'd better be quiet:  
He won't be cutting anyone  
To size. You're wasting your boasts  
On him, he isn't worth it."  
And some people said, "What happened?  
He started out so brave,  
And now he's a clumsy coward,  
Afraid to attack anyone.  
Maybe he did so well,  
At first, for sheer lack  
Of experience. He swung so hard,  
At the start, that no one could stand  
Against him. He fought like a madman.  
But now he's learned so much  
About combat he'll probably leave it  
Alone for the rest of his life!



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We won't see him again.  
He hasn't got the courage:  
A fraud, that's what he is."  
None of this bothered the queen:  
Indeed, she was delighted,  
For she knew quite well, though she said  
Nothing, this had to be Lancelot.  
The rest of that day he played  
The role of a coward, till night  
Fell, and the combat ended.  
When the fighting was done, they began  
To discuss the day's results.  
The king of Ireland's son  
Was sure they had to conclude  
His was the best performance, 5720  
But he fooled only himself,  
For many had done as well.  
And still the red knight  
Had so caught the attention  
Of the noblest and loveliest ladies 5725  
And girls that throughout the day  
They'd only had eyes for him:  
They'd seen bow well he did,  
At first, as if he were truly  
Courageous and strong, and then 5730  
Become so rank a coward  
He couldn't fight at all—  
Someone even the worst  
Knight could easily beat.  
But everyone agreed to come back 5735  
Tomorrow and continue the challenge,  
So the girls could see who won

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Highest honors, and choose  
Those noble knights for their husbands.  
And then they disbanded for the day, 5740  
And returned to their lodgings, and once  
They were there, some began  
To chatter and gossip among  
Themselves, rehearsing what had happened:  
"Where has he gone to, that worst 5745  
And most despicable of knights?  
He's gone into hiding, but where?  
Does anyone know how to find him?  
Maybe we'll never see him  
Again—so deeply in love 5750  
With Cowardice that the world  
Has never seen such a weakling!  
But he's hardly a fool: a coward's  
Life is a hundred thousand  
Times as easy as a brave man's. 5755  
He lives in absolute comfort  
And peace, having kissed Cowardice  
And accepted all its rewards.  
No one will ever see Courage  
Stoop so low as to sit 5760  
Beside him at his table. Only  
Cowardice comes anywhere near him,  
For it finds flowing love  
In his heart, always ready  
To serve it, delighted to offer it 5765  
Honor in return for being  
Dishonored." And so they gossiped  
Away the night; often  
Those who pour their scorn

On others, saying whatever 5770  
They please, are worse than those  
They despise. But at dawn, the next day,  
Every knight took up  
The challenge once more, ready  
For combat. The queen returned 5775  
To her place, and the ladies and girls,  
Along with a number of knights  
Who carried no weapons—captured  
Prisoners, and knights who had taken  
The cross—but gave the ladies 5780  
Helpful hints about  
The battle. They'd say, for example:  
"Do you see that shield with a golden  
Band? That's Governal  
De Roberdic. And the knight 5785  
Just behind him, who's blazoned  
An eagle and a dragon across  
His shield? That's the king  
Of Aragon's son, who's come  
To win himself as much 5790  
Fame and honor as he can.  
And the knight fighting nearby,  
And fighting extremely well—  
With his shield partly green  
And partly a deep blue, 5795  
With a leopard lying on the green?  
That's Ignauré the Greedy,  
Who loves ladies, and leaves them.  
And that knight with a pair of pheasants,  
Beak to beak, on his shield? 5800  
That's Coguillant de Mautrec.

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And those two—do you see them?—side  
By side on their dappled horses,  
Brown lions on their golden  
Shields? One is Semiramis,  
And the other's his friend and companion:  
They paint their shields exactly  
Alike. And that one, whose shield  
Shows us a gate, and a stag  
Just passing through it? By God,  
That's got to be King Ydier!"  
They tried to explain it all:  
"That shield was made in Limoges;  
That's Piladès who's got it.  
He's always looking for a good  
Fight and the honor he can win.  
That other shield comes  
From Toulouse—the harness, too—  
That's Kay of Estral. And that one,  
Do you see it? It comes from Lyon  
On the Rhone: there's never been  
A better one made. Taulas  
Of the Desert won that reward—  
And just see how well he wields it!  
And that one, over there,  
Is English work, from London:  
That pair of swallows looks  
Ready to fly away.  
But they won't: that shield's taken  
Some hefty whacks from Poitevin  
Steel! Young Thoas has it."  
And on they went, describing  
Weapons and armor, and men

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They knew well. But the knight they'd learned  
To despise was nowhere to be seen, 5835  
And since they couldn't see him, they thought  
He'd fled in disgrace. But the queen  
Was anxious to find him, wherever  
He was, and sent a messenger  
To hunt him down. No one 5840  
Was better suited for the task,  
It seemed to her, than the girl  
Who'd found him once before.  
The queen called her over,  
Quickly: "Hurry, girl! 5845  
Up on your horse! Go find  
The same knight I sent you to  
Yesterday. Find him at once;  
Let nothing get in your way  
Or delay you. And tell him, once 5850  
Again; 'Fight badly.'  
And then I want you to watch  
Him closely, and tell me how  
He responds." The girl went  
Like the wind: she'd watched him leave, 5855  
The day before, carefully  
Noting the direction, sure  
The queen would send her again.  
Up and down the ranks  
She rode, until she spied him. 5860  
And when she'd told him, discreetly,  
To fight badly, once more,  
If he wanted to keep the queen's  
Love, for the queen so ordered,  
He answered, "May it be as she wishes." 5865

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The girl left him at once.  
Then all the squires and men  
At arms began to hoot  
And cry: "Just look at that!  
Wonder of wonders, the red  
Knight's returned— but why?  
What on earth is he up to?  
No knight in all the world  
Is such a disgrace, so worthless.  
Cowardice holds him so close  
To its heart there's nothing he can do."  
The girl hurried back  
To the waiting queen, so anxious  
To hear his response she would scarcely  
Let the messenger catch 5880  
Her breath. And having heard it,  
The queen could hardly contain  
Her joy, for now she knew  
Without doubt he was hers, both body  
And soul. So she ordered the girl 5885  
To hurry back and tell him,  
Instead, that he was to fight  
As well as he could. And the girl  
Agreed to go back at once,  
Not stopping to rest. She hurried 5890  
Down from the platform, heading  
Straight to the groom who held  
Her horse's reins, and into  
The saddle she climbed, and rode  
Back to the knight she'd just left, 5895  
And quickly gave him her message:  
"My lady directs you, sir,

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To fight as well as you can."  
"Tell her," he answered, "that whenever  
I know what she wants, nothing  
Matters to me but her pleasure:  
I feel no pain in pleasing  
Her." She wasted no time  
Bringing this message back  
To her mistress, sure that the queen  
Would be overjoyed to hear it.  
She returned by the shortest possible  
Route, directly to the queen,  
Equally anxious, who rose  
And came toward her, without  
However descending down  
From the platform. The girl was glad  
To climb up, carrying such good  
News. Up the steps  
She went, and when she drew close  
She said, "My lady, I've never  
Known so noble a knight—  
So utterly happy to obey  
Whatever order you give him  
That, to tell you the simple  
Truth, it's **all** the same  
Whether you want him to excel  
Or to play the cowardly fool."  
"Indeed," said the queen. "So it seems."  
And then she walked back where she'd been  
And sat watching the knights.  
And Lancelot seized his shield  
By the straps, overwhelmingly  
Eager, fairly burning

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With desire to show his true  
Courage. Swinging his horse  
Around, he galloped between  
The ranks, astonishing those  
Who'd spent so much of the night  
And the morning mocking and making  
Fun of him. Ah,  
Such great pleasure they'd had  
At his expense! And now  
The king of Ireland's son  
Took up his shield and his spear  
And galloped as fast as he could  
Straight at Lancelot.  
The crashing shock as they came  
Together persuaded the king  
Of Ireland's son he'd had  
Enough, for his spear splintered  
Apart, not having struck  
Dry moss but tempered wood.  
And as they met, Lancelot  
Taught him a little trick,  
Pinning his arm behind  
His shield, and against his body,  
And forcing him out of his saddle.  
And knights came dashing up  
From all directions, ready  
To fight on both sides,  
For and against Lancelot.  
Some fought for their lords,  
And some for themselves, trying  
To win what honor they could,  
But all that long day Gawain,



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Though he was there, never  
Took up arms on either  
Side, delighted simply  
To watch the exploits of the knight  
In red, who seemed to his knowing  
Eyes to eclipse everyone  
Else on the field: next  
To him, they vanished from sight!  
And the rascally herald recovered  
His voice, and shouted out loud:  
"He's cutting them down to size!  
Now you'll see what he'll do!  
Now he'll show you what he's worth!"  
Then Lancelot turned his horse,  
Heading straight for a singularly  
Elegant knight and striking  
So hard that he hurled him to the ground  
At least a hundred feet  
Away. Wielding sword  
And spear alike, he fought  
So well that whoever was not  
Engaged in combat was delighted  
To watch him, and even many  
In the middle of the battle were dazzled,  
Thrilled to see how he tumbled  
Knights to the ground, and their horses  
Falling with them. Hardly  
Anyone stayed in the saddle!  
And having won so many  
Horses, he freely gave them  
Away. And those who had mocked him  
Said, "We're shamed unto death!"

---

What a terrible wrong we committed,  
Scorning such a man,  
For surely he's worth a thousand  
Of anyone out on that field!  
No living, breathing knight  
Could possibly be his equal;  
They're worthless, compared to him."  
And all the unmarried ladies  
And girls, amazed at the wonders  
He performed, exclaimed that he'd stop them  
From marrying, for how could they count  
On their wealth, their beauty, their rank  
And status, or their noble breeding,  
To capture so perfect a knight,  
For whom their beauty and wealth  
Would be worth nothing? Just  
The same, many among them  
Silently vowed not  
To accept anyone as their lord  
And master, not this year:  
If they could not have him in marriage,  
They'd settle for no one else!  
And hearing what high honor  
They dreamed of, the queen smiled  
To herself, and mocked them. She knew  
That even if they brought all  
The gold in Arabia, and set it  
Before him, he (for whom  
They all longed) would not  
Take the best, most beautiful,  
Most noble among them. But every  
One of them wanted him,

---

Each as jealous of the other  
As if they already had him,  
For it seemed to them only right:  
There might be men who could please them,  
But no one else, they were sure, 6030  
Could possibly do what they'd seen him  
Doing. When the tournament ended,  
All who had fought on either  
Side could say with conviction  
That no one was a match for the knight 6035  
In red. They were all agreed,  
And were right. But as he rode off  
He let his shield fall  
Where he saw the crowd was thickest,  
And his spear, and his saddlecloth, 6040  
And then he galloped away.  
Stripped of all colors and markings  
He made his escape, no one  
Even aware he was gone.  
And then he hurried along 6045  
The road, heading directly  
Back where he'd come from, determined  
To keep his promise. The tournament  
Over, everyone sought him,  
Wondering where he was, 6050  
But he'd left them without a clue,  
Not waiting to be recognized.  
The remaining knights were deeply  
Upset: they'd happily  
Have showered him with honors. 6055  
But sad as the knights might be,  
Unable to find him, the young

---

Unmarried women, when they heard  
He was gone, were even more  
Unhappy, and swore by Saint John 6060  
There'd be no marriages  
That year: if they couldn't have  
The one they wanted, they'd have  
No one at all. The challenge  
Had been taken, but none of the knights! 6065  
And Lancelot hurried on,  
Returning swiftly to his prison.  
But the lady's husband came back  
Some days before him, and at once  
Asked after the knight. 6070  
And the lady, having given  
Her husband's armor to the knight,  
And his fine sword and spear,  
And his horse, beautifully harnessed,  
Confessed the whole truth, 6075  
Telling her husband she'd let  
The knight go to Noauz,  
To fight in the tournament there.  
"Lady, you couldn't have done worse,"  
Said her husband. "Indeed you couldn't! 6080  
This will bring me terrible  
Trouble, for Méleagant,  
My lord, will treat me more harshly  
Than any shipwrecked sailor.  
As soon as he finds out, 6085  
I'm ruined and as good as dead;  
He'll have no pity on me."  
"Good husband, don't be afraid,"  
Said the lady. "There's nothing to be

---

Afraid of, nothing at all.  
The knight will return as swiftly  
As he can, exactly as he swore  
He would, in the name of the holy  
Saints." But her husband leaped  
On his horse and hurried to his lord,  
And told him the entire story.  
When Méléagant heard  
How Lancelot had sworn  
To the lady he'd return to his prison,  
He felt vastly relieved.  
"He won't break that oath,"  
He said. "I know he won't.  
But all the same I'm exceedingly  
Angry at what your wife  
Has done. I'd infinitely rather  
He hadn't been to the tournament.  
Ride to the road he'll come back on,  
And this time make sure he's locked up  
So tight he can't ever  
Get out. Let him enjoy  
No freedom whatever. Then come  
And tell me it's been done." "Exactly  
As you say," said the steward, and hurried  
Off. He found Lancelot  
Had returned to his house and once  
Again was his prisoner, and quickly  
Sent a messenger to his lord  
By the shortest and most direct  
Of routes, so Méléagant  
Would know the knight had come back.  
And hearing this news, the prince

---

Commanded carpenters and masons—  
The best craftsmen in the land—  
And ordered them, whether they liked it  
Or not, to set to work 6125  
At once, and without the slightest  
Delay build him a tower,  
Not stopping till it was done.  
They carried stones from the seashore,  
For Gorre lay close to a great 6130  
Arm of the sea, and its coast  
Was long. And Méléagant  
Knew of an island in that sea.  
And he ordered timber and stones  
Brought there, and the tower built. 6135  
In fewer than fifty-seven  
Days it was done, a tall  
Tower with thick walls.  
And when it was finished, in the darkness  
Of night he had Lancelot taken 6140  
To the tower and locked in,  
And he ordered the doors walled up,  
And made the masons swear  
That as long as they lived they'd never  
Say that such a tower 6145  
Existed.\* And thus he meant  
To keep his secret, allowing  
No exit or entry but a tiny  
Window. And there Lancelot

\* At approximately this point, for reasons we do not know, Chrétien abandoned the poem, which was finished (as we are told in line 7111) by "Godfroiz de Leigni, li clers" (Godfrey of Lagny, a learned cleric)

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Was forced to live, not fed 6150  
Much, or well, or often,  
And only through the little  
Widow, all according  
To careful instructions given  
By that criminal, *Méléagant*. 6155  
And since whatever the prince  
Wanted had been done, he rode  
Directly to King Arthur's court,  
And the moment he got there came  
Swaggering before the king, 6160  
Drunk with pride and disorder,  
And began to state his case:  
"King, I'm sworn to combat,  
Here in front of you  
And your court. But I can't find 6165  
My opponent, *Lancelot*.  
Never mind: I've come,  
As I must, to make this public  
Announcement, with all of you present  
And if he's here, let him 6170  
Make himself known, and swear  
To meet me a year from today.  
I've no way of knowing if you've  
Been told how this combat  
Came about, but I see, 6175  
Here in your court, a good many  
Knights who were there, and surely  
They can tell you what they know,  
If they're willing to speak the truth.  
But if he denies it, there'll be  
No need for me to hire

---

A champion: I'll fight for myself."  
The queen, who was seated beside  
Her husband, drew herself closer  
And began to speak, but softly: 6185  
"My lord, do you know who this is?  
It's Méléagant, who kidnapped  
Me, when Sir Kay was my escort.  
He's guilty of shameful things."  
And the king answered her, 6190  
"My lady, I understood  
As much, and I also know  
He held many of my people."  
The queen said nothing more,  
And the king addressed himself 6195  
To Méléagant: "As God  
Is my witness, my friend, we know  
Nothing of Lancelot,  
And deeply regret that fact."  
"My lord," said Méléagant, 6200  
"Lancelot told me I would surely  
Find him here. This battle  
Must take place at your court  
And nowhere else. Let all  
Your assembled barons hear 6205  
My words: I summon that knight  
To make his appearance before you,  
According to the terms we agreed on,  
In exactly a year from today."  
And then Sir Gawain rose 6210  
To his feet, pierced to the heart  
By the words he'd heard, and said,  
"My lord, in all this land



---

No one has news of Lancelot.  
But we'll go on looking, and in 6215  
A year, if God is willing,  
We'll have found him, unless  
He's dead or held a prisoner.  
But if he doesn't appear,  
My lord, let me assume 6220  
This challenge, and fight in his name  
On the day that's been set." "Aha!  
By God," said Méléagant,  
"Let him do it, good lord!  
He wants to, and I agree, 6225  
For in all the world there's no one  
I'd rather meet in combat,  
Except for Lancelot himself.  
But understand me well:  
I'll fight one or the other 6230  
But no one else. No one!"  
And the king agreed: either  
Lancelot or Gawain,  
If Lancelot never appeared.  
And then Méléagant left 6235  
King Arthur's court, and rode  
Until he reached the court  
Of King Bademagu, his father.  
And to show his father how very  
Fierce and brave he was, 6240  
He carefully composed his face  
In ways wonderful to behold.  
That day, in his city of Bath,  
The king had held a joyous  
Court, it being his birthday 6245

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And a time for celebration.

And he'd brought to Bath a host  
Of knights, and ladies, and many  
Others: the palace hall  
Was filled to overflowing. 6250  
But among the young ladies was one  
I want to tell you, in advance,  
You'll soon be hearing more of,  
And this was Méléagant's sister.  
But I can't tell you now, 6255  
Or else I'll mix up my story  
And get it all out of order,  
And I don't want to spoil it  
Or bend it out of its path,  
But follow it straight and clear.\* 6260  
So let me tell you simply  
This: Méléagant came  
To the court, and in front of them all,  
Knights and ladies and servants,  
Announced, as loud as he could, 6265  
"Father, may God save you!  
Now tell me truly, if you please,  
How happy and proud one should be,  
What honor one must deserve,  
To have shaken King Arthur's court!" 6270  
Not waiting for the rest of the story,  
The king replied, "My son,  
*All* those who are truly good

"Cette lourde intervention [This heavy-handed intrusion!," as Daniel Poirion observes, may well be a sign of the substitute-poet's anxiety to stay on course

---

Ought to be honored and served  
Exactly as they each deserve,  
And we should seek their company."  
And then, to flatter the prince,  
He asked him not to be silent  
But to say what had happened, where  
He had come from, and what he wanted.  
"My lord," said his son, "by any  
Chance can you recall  
The details of that agreement  
With Sir Lancelot, duly  
Made and recorded, and reached  
With your assistance? I'm sure  
You do remember, of course,  
That in front of a number of knights  
It was agreed we'd meet in combat  
At King Arthur's court, a year  
From that day. I came there, as I should,  
Armed and equipped and ready  
Exactly as agreed: in short,  
Whatever I had to do,  
I did. I called for Lancelot,  
The opponent I'd come to fight,  
But neither saw nor met him.  
He's disappeared, run off.  
Before I left, Gawain  
Pledged that if Lancelot  
Is no longer alive, or for any  
Reason doesn't appear  
In time, there'll be no need  
For another postponement, for he  
Himself will undertake

---

To fight in Lancelot's name.  
No one at King Arthur's court  
Has a better reputation.  
But before the elder trees blossom  
Again, we'll see if he 6310  
Deserves it— and as for me,  
I wish that day were tomorrow."  
"My son," said his father, "right now  
You talk like an utter fool!  
Every word you say 6315  
Reveals what a fool you are:  
Truly, a good heart  
Shows itself humble, but a fool's  
Pride can't be concealed.  
I tell you these things, my son, 6320  
Because your heart is too hard  
And dry for sweetness or friendship;  
It has no room for compassion;  
It burns with raging folly.  
That's what ruins your judgment; 6325  
And that's what causes you trouble.  
If you're brave, those  
Who know it will say so whenever  
It needs to be said. A man  
Of courage won't bother with words 6330  
That make himself look better.  
Facts are enough: praising  
Yourself won't add a feather  
To your glory. Indeed, it makes you  
Worth less. I scold you— and why 6335  
Do I bother? A fool won't listen.  
Trying to lift a fool

---

From his folly is a waste of time  
Surely, one can offer  
The ripest wisdom in the world,  
But it's worthless, unless it's used,  
And floats away with the wind."  
Then Méléagant went out  
Of his head with rage. Let me  
Tell you plainly: no man  
Born of woman has ever  
Been seen so wild, so blazing  
With anger—and in his fury  
He cut away all ties  
With his father, not trying to soften  
Matters, but saying, instead:  
"And are you dreaming—or delirious—  
Saying I'm a fool  
For telling you just what happened?  
I came to you as one comes  
To his lord, to his father, but you  
Apparently see things differently,  
Insulting me in the grossest  
Terms. That's villainous—vile!  
How can you possibly explain  
Taking such a tone with me?"  
"But I can." "And how—how?"  
"All I can see in you,  
My son, is rage and anger.  
I know your furious heart,  
And I know the harm it will do you.  
What kind of fool could believe  
That Lancelot, famous for chivalry,  
Is so afraid of you

6345

6350

6355

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That he'd run away and hide?  
He'd have to be dead— or perhaps  
Shut so tightly in prison,  
Set behind such doors,  
That he has no freedom to leave.  
And if he's dead, or been  
So badly mistreated, no anger  
Will be greater than mine. Ah,  
What a loss it would be  
If such a man, of immense  
Merit, so handsome, so brave,  
So wise, has died so young!  
God keep it from being true.”  
And then the king was silent.  
But everything he'd said  
Had been heard, and understood,  
By one of his daughters, only  
A girl— but precisely the girl  
I spoke of before. She  
Was deeply displeased to hear  
Such news of Lancelot.  
She was sure he'd been hidden away,  
But had no idea where to look.  
"May I lose my place in Heaven,"  
She vowed, "if I let myself rest  
Before I find some way  
To learn for sure just where  
He is." And without a moment's  
Delay, not making a sound,  
She ran and jumped on a mild,  
Sweet-tempered mule— but I have  
To admit that, once she'd left

---

Her father's court, she hadn't  
The faintest idea what direction  
To take. Neither knowing nor asking,  
She headed the mule along 6405  
The very first road she found,  
Riding completely by chance,  
With no servants or knights to help her.  
She rode as fast as she could,  
Desperate to get where she wanted 6410  
To go. For a long time,  
Though she rode hard, she found  
Nothing. But she could not rest,  
Nor stay long in any  
Place, if she ever expected 6415  
To accomplish what she meant to do,  
Which was to free Lancelot—  
If she could find him, and if  
She could free him. But still, I suspect  
She had to hunt in many 6420  
Lands, and hunt, and hunt,  
Before she heard any news.  
But why should I waste your time,  
Telling you all the details?  
For more than a month she rode 6425  
Up hill and down, mounting  
And remounting her mule, and never  
Learning anything more  
Than she'd known before she started.  
All her traveling had taken her 6430  
Nowhere. And then one day  
As she crossed a meadow, sadly,  
Slowly, she saw in the distance,

---

Along the coast, a tower.  
But why a tower, without  
A single house nearby?  
It was, of course, the tower  
Her brother had built as a prison  
For Lancelot, but she didn't know it.  
But the moment she saw it, she couldn't  
Turn her eyes away,  
But stared, and thought, and thought.  
And somehow her heart told her  
That this was what she had searched for:  
Just when she'd given up hope,  
Fortune, which had let her labor  
So long, had shown her the way.

    So the girl rode toward the tower,  
And finally got there. Then she rode  
Around and around it, listening  
As carefully as she possibly could,  
Trying to find some clue  
That would lighten her heart.  
She studied that tower from top  
To bottom, and from side to side,  
Astonished to find a structure  
So large without any doors  
Or windows, with a single, tiny  
Exception. Stoutly built,  
And tall, it had neither stairs  
Nor ladders. It was meant as a prison,  
And Lancelot was surely inside!  
Before she'd let herself eat  
She had to know the truth!  
She thought of calling his name,



---

But before the word could be spoken  
She stopped herself, and stood  
Silent, hearing a voice  
From inside those strange walls  
Crying a loud complaint  
And asking only for death.  
It craved and hungered for death,  
For life was too full of sorrow:  
Enough of living! enough  
Of this body! he cried feebly,  
His voice hoarse and low.  
"Oh Fortune! How cruelly your wheel  
Has turned against me! You've swung me  
Upside down, off  
The heights and into the valley. 6480  
What once went well, goes badly;  
You weep for me, though you used  
To laugh. Ah, miserable wretch!  
How could you trust her, who leaves you  
Like this? How long did it take her 6485  
To tumble you down from glory?  
Oh Fortune, how badly you've tricked me!  
And yet, why should you care?  
What does anything mean  
To you? Oh Holy Cross, 6490  
Oh Holy Spirit! I'm lost  
— Annihilated! — It's the end  
Of everything. But oh,  
You great Gawain! Unmatched  
For your goodness, how can it be 6495  
You haven't come to help me!  
You're taking too long: this

---

Is not what courtliness  
Requires. You were my friend:  
You should have come to my aid. 6500  
I swear, and I know it's true,  
I'd have hunted on every shore  
Of the sea, and in hidden places,  
And I'd have gone on hunting  
For seven years, or ten, 6505  
If I knew you were held in prison,  
Until I finally found you.  
But why do I go on complaining?  
You didn't think enough  
Of me to take the trouble: 6510  
Any peasant will tell you  
It's hard to find a true friend!  
Put a friend to the test  
And then you see who truly  
Cares. Alas! I've been locked 6515  
In this tower for more than a year.  
Oh Gawain, what a mistake—  
How wrong to leave me here!  
But perhaps, perhaps you don't know,  
And maybe I'm wrong to blame you. 6520  
Yes—that's right—I remember:  
What wicked thoughts I think,  
Knowing as I do that nothing  
Anywhere on earth could keep  
You and your people from coming 6525  
To pull me out of this pit,  
This misery, if only  
You'd known the truth. And you'd come  
Driven by love and affection,

---

For haven't we always been comrades?  
How could I see it differently?  
But what's the point? It won't happen.  
May he be cursed by God  
And Saint Sylvester, eternally  
Damned, he who brought this  
On me! This *Méléagant*  
Is the foulest fiend alive,  
Impelled by the blackest hatred."  
And then the calm of exhaustion  
Fell on the sufferer, and he said  
No more. But she who listened  
From down below had heard  
Everything, nor did she stay  
Silent, for she sensed success.  
Choosing her words with care,  
She called, as loud as she could:  
"Lancelot! My friend, you  
Up there, speak to your friend."  
But Lancelot did not hear her.  
So she called out louder still,  
And even enfeebled as he was  
This time he heard, and wondered  
Who it could possibly be.  
He heard a voice, and it called  
His name—but who could it be?  
He thought it must be a ghost.  
Looking all around him  
He saw no one; there was no one  
There. He could see himself,  
And the tower. "Lord: what  
Am I hearing? There's no one—but I hear

---

Someone. It must be a miracle.  
I'm not asleep. I'm awake  
Perhaps I was just sleeping  
And heard this voice in a dream. 6565  
But now I'm awake, and I'm sorry."  
Then he struggled to his feet  
And little by little made  
His way to the tiny window,  
And leaned against the wall, 6570  
And looked in every direction,  
And, peering out as best  
He could, suddenly saw  
The person who'd called his name.  
He didn't know her, but he saw her. 6575  
Yet she knew him at once,  
And said, "Lancelot, I've come  
A long, long way to find you.  
And now, thank God, I've finally  
Succeeded, now I've found you. 6580  
I was the one, as you rode  
Toward the Bridge of Swords, who asked you  
To grant me a wish, and you did,  
Most cheerfully. Recall:  
I asked for the head of the knight 6585  
You conquered, and you cut it off.  
He was not someone I loved.  
I've gone to all this trouble  
Because you granted that wish.  
That's why you see me here." 6590  
"Young lady," the prisoner replied,  
"I thank you most profoundly.  
If I can escape from this place

---

I'll be more than generously rewarded  
For whatever service you were rendered.  
And if you can get me out  
I swear I'll be yours to command  
For all the rest of my life:  
I swear it by the apostle Paul.  
And as I expect to see  
Our Lord, there'll never be a day  
When I won't do what you ask.  
Whatever you ask, if it's in  
My power, will be done—and done  
As quickly as I can do it."  
"Have no doubt, my friend:  
You're about to be freed from your prison  
This day will see your deliverance:  
I wouldn't abandon your rescue  
For a thousand pounds in gold!  
And after you're free, I'll help you  
To a long, comforting rest.  
Whatever you ask of me  
Will be yours, if it gives you pleasure.  
And nothing will make you ill  
At ease. But first I need  
To find, wherever I can,  
A device to widen this tiny  
Window so you can pass through."  
"May God help you find it!"  
Said Lancelot, with great fervor.  
"I have a coil of rope  
Which my keepers gave me to draw up  
My food—chunks of hard  
Barley bread and muddy

---

Water, which sickened me, body  
And soul." Then Bademagu's  
Daughter found a short,  
Sharp, heavy ax  
And brought it to Lancelot,  
Who banged and hammered and smashed  
At the wall until, though it wasn't  
Easy, he'd made himself  
An opening more than wide  
Enough. How overjoyed 6635  
He was, finding himself  
Free of his prison, able  
To leave the cage he'd been locked in!  
He was free—he could go where he pleased!  
And understand me: even 6640  
Had he been offered all  
The gold in the world if only  
He'd go back in—all of it,  
All his, free and clear—  
He'd never turn and go back. 6645  
    So now the knight was free,  
But so exceedingly feeble  
And weak that he tottered when he tried  
To walk. So she gently set him  
Up on the mule, and sat 6650  
Behind him, and they hurried away.  
But she carefully followed a different  
Road, so no one would see them—  
A circuitous, cautious path  
Instead of the open highway. 6655  
She knew they'd be in trouble,  
If anyone saw their faces—

---

Exactly what she did not want!  
And thus, by avoiding dangerous  
Places, she brought them to a favorite  
Retreat, where she often stayed:  
A quiet, lovely spot.  
The house and all its servants  
Were completely hers to command;  
Whatever she could want was there 6665  
In abundance, safe and secluded.  
Lancelot came there with her,  
And as soon as he reached the house  
They removed his filthy clothing  
And the girl put him to sleep 6670  
In a tall, magnificent bed,  
And later gave him a bath  
And such wonderful care that I couldn't  
Tell you half if I tried:  
She treated him as sweetly  
As if he'd been her father.  
She brought him back to life,  
Completely renewed and restored,  
With the grace and beauty of an angel  
Instead of a shaggy tramp.  
He was strong, he was handsome, and he left  
His bed. And the girl gave him  
The finest robes she could find,  
And helped him put them on.  
He wore them, as happy and light  
Of heart as a bird on the wing.  
He hugged and kissed the girl,  
Then said, with great affection:  
"My dear, only you

---

And God deserve to be thanked  
For making me healthy again.  
You led me out of my prison,  
And so my heart, my body,  
My service, and all I own,  
Are yours to do with as you will.  
You've done so much for me  
That I'm yours. And yet, how long  
I've been away from King Arthur's  
Court—my lord, who's freely  
Given me honors. There's much  
I need to do. Sweet noble  
Friend, I beg you in the name  
Of affection to let me go there,  
As I gladly would, if you pleased."  
"Lancelot, my dear,"  
Said the girl, "of course you should go.  
The only things I long for  
Are goodness and honor for you."  
She owned a marvelous horse,  
The best ever seen by man,  
And she gave it as a gift, and he mounted  
At once, not needing the stirrups—  
Up he went, like a flash!  
They freely commended each other  
To God, who deceives no one.

And Lancelot went on his way  
So happy that nothing I could tell you,  
No matter how hard I tried,  
Could express the infinite joy  
He carried in his heart, finally  
Freed from the jail he'd been in.



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But he also said to himself,  
Over and over, that the corrupt  
Traitor who'd tricked him into  
Prison would pay for his treachery: 6725  
"I escaped in spite of him!"  
And he swore on the body and soul  
Of the earth's Creator that even  
All the wealth of the world  
From Babylon to Ghent 6730  
Wouldn't buy Méléagant's life,  
If he beat him in battle once more:  
He'd committed too many crimes.  
And as it happened, Lancelot  
Would soon have the chance to make good 6735  
On the threats he was making, for that  
Same day this Méléagant  
Appeared at King Arthur's court  
Of his own accord, not waiting  
For an invitation. And the moment 6740  
He got there, he insisted on seeing  
Sir Gawain at once. And that evil  
Prince asked about Lancelot,  
Pretending ignorance and calling  
Him a wicked traitor, 6745  
A cowardly rascal no one  
Could find! But in fact he knew  
A good deal less than he thought!  
Gawain told him the truth:  
Lancelot had not been seen. 6750  
"Since you, at least, have appeared,"  
Said Méléagant, "fulfill  
The pledge you gave me. I can't

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Wait any longer." And Gawain  
Answered, "I'll honor it just  
As soon as I can, if God,  
In whom I trust, is willing.  
I expect to come off well  
In this combat, and if the game  
Is won, in the name of God  
And Saint Fides,\* as I think it will be,  
Be warned that I mean to win  
It all. I will not stop."  
And not delaying a moment,  
He ordered a rug unrolled  
On the ground in front of him. And at once,  
In perfect sequence, his squires  
Attended to all his commands,  
Without a grumble or complaint,  
Setting to work with a will.  
They got the rug and unrolled it  
Exactly as he'd ordered. Quickly,  
He settled himself in place  
And instructed the squires (who'd shed  
Their cloaks for the task) to begin  
The process of making him ready  
For combat. There were three of them —  
His cousins, perhaps, or his nephews —  
All experts with arms and armor:  
The work was performed so well,  
With such practiced, knowing hands,  
That no one in all the world  
Could have quarreled with a single thing

\* Fides of Agen, patron saint of the monastery of Conques

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They did, or done it better.  
And when he was ready, two of them  
Brought in a Spanish stallion—  
Faster on level ground,  
In woods, up hills, down valleys,  
Than Bucephalus himself.  
And then the illustrious Gawain,  
Most perfect in chivalry of any  
Christian knight, mounted  
And rode the horse I've described.  
And just as he reached for his shield  
He suddenly saw, right  
In front of him, Lancelot dismounting.  
Gawain thought it miraculous,  
This sudden, unexpected  
Appearance—so strange, indeed,  
That he couldn't have been more astonished  
Had the skies opened and dropped  
Lancelot down in front of him!  
But once he saw it was truly  
His friend, there was nothing in all  
The world that needed doing  
More than climbing right down  
And running to Lancelot, arms  
Extended, hugging and kissing  
His friend. What pleasure, what joy  
To find his long-lost comrade!  
And let me tell you—and you'd better  
Believe me—if they had chosen  
Gawain king, but on condition  
Lancelot be lost again,  
Then Gawain would have said no.

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And then the king learned  
That Lancelot had finally returned  
And was safe and sound, and everyone  
Else heard (though not all  
Were pleased). But Arthur's court  
Rejoiced almost as one,  
For they'd waited a very long time.  
Every courtier, high  
And low, old and young,  
Was delighted. Where sorrow had prevailed, 6825  
Happiness took its place.  
Sadness fled, and pleasure  
And celebration came.  
Was the queen there to share it?  
Indeed she was, most of all. 6830  
And how? My God, where else  
Would she be? Had she ever been happier  
Than his coming made her? Could she keep  
Herself from running to greet him?  
And how she ran! She hugged him 6835  
So hard that her body came dangerously  
Close to risking everything  
And following where her heart led.  
But what did her heart dictate?  
Kisses and other delights. 6840  
Then why did the body hold back?  
Could her joy have been more complete?  
Was there any disgust or dislike?  
Certainly not, not a bit.  
But she had good reason for restraint: 6845  
The king was there, and others,  
Watching with wide-open eyes,

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And she might have given it all  
Away, had she done, in front  
Of them all, what her heart longed for. 6850  
If Reason hadn't restrained  
The wild passion she felt,  
The wodd would have known her feelings,  
Which would have been folly indeed.  
Which was why she held back her heart 6855  
And locked wild passion away:  
Reason led her to wait,  
To reconsider, to watch  
For a better time and place,  
Something a good deal more private, 6860  
When the wind would be blowing clear  
And strong for a better harbor.  
The king showered honors  
On Lancelot, and rejoiced, and then  
He said, "My friend, how long 6865  
It's been since news of any  
Living man pleased me  
So much. But I must inquire:  
Where have you been? What country,  
What place, could have held you so long? 6870  
For one whole winter and summer  
I've looked for you, up and down,  
And never heard a thing."  
"Your majesty," said Lancelot,  
"I can tell you the story in very 6875  
Few words, just as it happened.  
When your people were freed from his prison,  
Méléagant, that foul  
Traitor, shamefully tricked me

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And took me captive, and from that  
Moment on held me prisoner  
In a tower at the edge of the sea.  
He had me sealed inside,  
And I'd be in that misery still  
Except for the help of a friend,  
A girl for whom, once,  
I did some small service.  
I reaped a rich reward,  
High honors and great  
Goodness, for so small a favor!  
But that man for whom I've no  
Affection, who brought me so much  
Evil and misery and shame,  
I'd like to settle accounts  
With him as quickly as I can.  
He's come here, wanting his payment,  
And he'll get it! Why wait to give him  
Exactly what he's owed? And I,  
My lord, am more than ready:  
God forbid he'll enjoy it!"  
Then Gawain said to Lancelot,  
"My friend, since I owe you so much,  
And it's hardly a costly matter,  
Let me make this payment for you.  
I'm already armored, and mounted,  
And ready, as you see. My dear  
Sweet friend, don't deny me  
This favor, which I'd love to perform."  
But Lancelot said he'd give up  
An eye, or even two,  
Before he'd permit it. It could

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Not happen, he swore: this  
Was a debt he owed, and he'd pay it,  
Just as he'd sworn he would.  
And Gawain saw that no matter 6915  
What he said, he couldn't  
Prevail: he pulled the mail shirt  
Off his back and completely  
Disarmed. Quickly, quietly  
Lancelot made himself ready: 6920  
This was a debt he could hardly  
Wait to settle. His heart  
Would be heavy until Méléagant  
Had been paid. And the treacherous prince  
Could scarcely believe his eyes, 6925  
Seeing what he saw: he was almost  
Out of his mind, unable  
To control his thoughts. "What a fool  
I was," he said, "not  
To be sure he was still safely 6930  
Locked in my prison, my tower,  
Before I came here, for now  
He's about to turn on me.  
But why, oh God, should I  
Have gone? What could have made me 6935  
Think he'd ever escape?  
Weren't the walls thick  
And strong, the tower tall?  
Where was there a crack  
He could have gotten through, 6940  
Except with help from outside?  
Did someone reveal the secret?  
Suppose the walls fell down,

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The entire tower collapsed?  
He'd surely have been killed, crushed,  
Cut to pieces. By God,  
Of course he would—completely!  
Without a doubt he'd be dead.  
But before those walls collapsed,  
I think the seas would have dried  
To the very last drop, and the end  
Of the world would have come—unless  
Something broke them down.  
But that wasn't what happened:  
Someone had to have helped him,  
He couldn't have done it alone.  
Someone's plotted against me.  
But however he did it, he escaped.  
I could have kept it from happening,  
Had I been more careful; he'd never  
Have reappeared at this court.  
And now it's too late for regrets.  
The peasants tell the truth,  
In their good old proverb: once  
The horse is out of the stable  
It's too late to lock the door.  
And now I'll have to deal  
With shame, and insults, and pain;  
I'll experience more than enough!  
But why do I need to suffer?  
As long as I'm still alive  
I can give as good as I get,  
If God, in whom I trust,  
So wishes." He took what comfort  
He could, wanting only



To meet his enemy in combat.  
He wouldn't wait long, I think,  
For Lancelot, who fully expected  
To kill him, was anxiously seeking him  
Out. But before the battle, 6980  
The king dispatched them both  
To a valley below his castle—  
Ireland held nothing more beautiful.  
So down they went, as quickly  
As their horses would take them. And the king 6985  
Came, too, and everyone else,  
An immense crowd, all of them  
Hurrying to witness this combat.  
There were knights watching from windows,  
Along with flocks of beautiful, 6990  
Noblewomen and girls.  
    A sycamore towered in that valley,  
As lovely a tree as existed;  
There was plenty of room; in every  
Season of the year, fresh 6995  
And beautiful grass grew  
All around it. This sycamore dated  
From the days of Abel; and at  
Its foot there ran a sparkling,  
Quick-flowing stream, coursing 7000  
Along a bed of gravel  
So clear that it gleamed like silver.  
The water drained away,  
I believe, through a pipe of pure gold,  
Passing across the fields 7005  
And into a valley between  
Two trees. And here the king

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Was pleased to seat himself;  
Nothing could have suited him better.  
He had his people draw back  
Behind him. And Lancelot quickly  
Charged at Méléagant  
Like a man transported by hate.  
But before he struck a single  
Blow, he shouted fiercely,  
"Hear my formal challenge!  
And know that, no matter what comes,  
Nothing will make me spare you!"  
And spurring his horse, he drew back  
About as far as the length  
Of a bow shot, and then they rushed  
At one another as fast  
As horses could carry them, shields  
Clashing so sharply together  
That even well-crafted wood  
Was cut and cracked, though neither  
Man was wounded: not yet.  
They turned, rode back, and charged  
Again, once more clashing  
As hard as they could against  
Their strong and well-made shields,  
Each of them summoning all  
His strength, for each was a valiant  
Knight, full of courage  
And mounted on a strong and quick-footed  
Horse. Each of them smashed  
Mighty blows on the other's  
Shield, for their spears did not break,  
But pierced through the wood, straight

To the bare flesh. Pushing 7040  
With all their strength, each  
Succeeded in knocking the other  
Out of his saddle. In spite of  
Breastplates, saddle girths,  
And spurs, both knights tumbled 7045  
Backwards off their horses  
And fell to the bare earth.  
Freed of their riders, the excited  
Animals galloped off,  
Still biting and kicking at each other, 7050  
Each trying to maim and kill.  
And the fallen knights jumped  
To their feet as fast as they could,  
Quickly drawing their swords,  
The steel engraved with their names. 7055  
Holding the blades high,  
To protect their faces, they slashed  
And probed, hunting some opening  
For sharp steel to push through.  
Lancelot was supremely confident, 7060  
Knowing himself to be twice  
As good a swordsman, having  
Studied the art since childhood.  
They struck huge blows on the shields  
Still hung from their necks, and on 7065  
The hammered gold on their helmets,  
Each of them swinging fiercely,  
But Lancelot, pressing him hard,  
Found an opening under  
His shield and cut so sharp 7070  
And quick that, in spite of the iron

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Protecting the arm, he cut it  
Clean through. Knowing he was lost,  
Méléagant resolved  
To sell his severed right arm 7075  
As dearly as he could, taking  
Any chance he might have.  
Drowning in pain and despair,  
He was nearly out of his head;  
Nothing mattered any more 7080  
But hurting Lancelot in return  
He leaped forward, hoping  
To surprise him, but Lancelot was ready,  
Fetching him such a blow  
With his sharp sword that April 7085  
Would come, and May would go by,  
And Méléagant wouldn't recover:  
He sliced so deep through the nose guard  
That three teeth were shattered.  
And Méléagant was so wild 7090  
With anger he couldn't speak;  
Begging for mercy was the last thing  
He thought of, folly clutching  
His heart far too firmly.  
Lancelot approached, unlaced 7095  
His helmet, and cut off his head.  
He'd never escape again!  
He fell to the ground, dead.  
And let me assure you, no one  
Who was there, watching the battle, 7100  
Felt the slightest pity.  
The king and his courtiers and ladies  
Were fairly jumping for joy.

Then the happiest among them all  
Helped Lancelot out of his armor, 7105  
And led him away in triumph.

Gentlemen: if I tried to tell you  
More, I'd exceed my charge,  
For my task was to finish this tale.  
So here this story stops. 7110

Godfrey of Lagny, a learned  
Cleric, has ended this romance.  
Let no one criticize me  
For completing what Chrétien began,  
For Chrétien himself was willing 7115  
To let me accomplish the task.

I began where the tower walled up  
Lancelot and went on from there  
To the end. Nothing else  
Was added, and nothing was changed, 7120  
To keep from ruining the story.

## Afterword

*Joseph J. Duggan*

Chrétien begins *Lancelot: The Knight of the Cart* in a manner untypical of his earlier romances, with a statement of his indebtedness to a patron, Marie, countess of Champagne. Marie, who was the daughter of King Louis VII of France and Eleanor of Aquitaine,\* had been countess since her marriage to Henry the Liberal in **1164**. When her husband died on March **16, 1181**, Marie became regent of the county of Champagne on behalf of her son, also named Henry.

The date of composition of *Lancelot* is uncertain, but most specialists place it after **1176** and before **1182**, at about the time of *Yvain: The Knight of the Lion*. The court of Champagne had become an active literary center toward which a number of writers and poets gravitated: the lyric poets Conon de Bethune and Gace Brulé (who was Marie's vassal), the spiritual writer Pierre de Celle, Jehan le Venelais, author of the *Vengeance Alexandre*, Evrat, who wrote a long verse translation of Genesis into Old French, Guy of Bazoches, author of a universal his-

"Louis and Eleanor had been divorced in 1152 and by the time of *Lancelot* she had been married to Henry Plantagenet for almost **two** decades. Henry became king of England in 1154.

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tory that is now lost, and an anonymous poet who produced a paraphrase of Psalm 44 of the Vulgate Bible, "Eructavit," for Marie. Count Henry, an educated man, corresponded with John of Salisbury and other scholars. Gautier of Arras dedicated his romance *Eracle* to Marie and two other nobles, and her half-brother King Richard Lion-Heart of England addressed a poem to her during his captivity. By far the most illustrious author associated with the court of Champagne, however, was Chretien himself, and although his first romance, *Erecand Enide*, was probably composed for a noble in the Plantagenet orbit and his second, *Cligès*, may have been as well, Chretien identified himself with Troyes in Champagne and was now clearly writing for the Countess Marie, who held her court in that town. Within the same circle appears to have been Andreas Capellanus (Andrew the Chaplain), author of a treatise known as the *Art of Courtly Love*, who appears to have been attached to the royal court of Philip Augustus, king of France from 1180 and nephew of Count Henry. It is in this literary context that Chretien states his debt to Marie.

But that statement is problematic. First, Chretien declares himself to be entirely at the countess's disposal and, after insisting he has no wish to flatter her, flatters her. Yet he does not seem to want to identify himself wholeheartedly with the task at hand, preferring to give her commands greater weight in the enterprise than his own efforts. She gave him the subject and the meaning to impose on it, whereas he is willing to claim for himself only the toil involved in writing the work. Is this simply more flattery, or is Chretien anticipating the need to defend himself from the accusations of other readers and listeners?

One reason to think that Chretien is calculating how to distance himself from the romance while also carrying out the countess's wishes is that *Lancelot* is in essential ways unlike his

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other romances. This is true above all on the thematic level. The love that Lancelot and Guinevere share is consummated in a scene of adultery that is out of keeping with the depiction of love in Chrétien's other works, including love between a young man and a married woman in the romance that is thought directly to precede this one, *Cligès*. There Fenice, married to the emperor of Constantinople, takes great pains, including allowing herself briefly to be buried alive, to avoid acquiring a reputation like that of the adulteress Iseult, renowned in the literature of the period as the lover of her husband's nephew Tristan. In Lancelot, not only do Guinevere and Lancelot commit adultery, they do it while she is a prisoner of Arthur's enemy Méléagant, leaving themselves all the more vulnerable to the whisperings of *lauzengiers*, courtiers who curry favor by passing on just such gossip to offended husbands. In fact, the woman who allows Lancelot to leave his prison and take part in the tournament of Noauz has it on hearsay that he has already fallen in love (ll. 5495-98), so Chrétien would have us believe that the relationship was known among the courtiers of Gorre. Before her abduction, Guinevere says under her breath, but within earshot of one of Arthur's counts, that an unidentified "you," who can only be Lancelot, would not let her be led off without resistance, an utterance that has no follow-up in the romance and no meaning unless it is that Chrétien wants his audience to realize that Guinevere's attachment was no secret at Arthur's court either. Few crimes were more serious than committing adultery with the wife of one's lord.

In addition, the principal characters in Chrétien's other romances are motivated above all by the desire to avoid being shamed. For the male roles, this entails a determination never to act in a cowardly fashion on the battlefield, whether in war or in the mock warfare of the tournament. But Lancelot willingly



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abases himself in the tournament of Noauz by doing badly at the behest of Guinevere, who uses the command as an identity test. As a result, he misses his blows in the joust, avoids engagements, and attracts the mockery of the crowd. That he finally fights all out after starting the second day's combat poorly at her command is little comfort, since this conduct is also regulated by the queen's whim. Lancelot has thus given himself over entirely into the service of the lady whom he loves, to the detriment of knightly ideals and reputation. Although at first he thinks that Guinevere may be angry at him for climbing into the cart, and logically so, because virtually everyone in Gorre seems to disrespect him for that action, he utters no reproach either when Guinevere initially rejects him or when she finally tells him she was cold to him because he hesitated for two steps before getting into the ignominious vehicle. During that momentary delay, Reason was admonishing him against doing anything that would cause him shame or reproach, while Love asked him to ignore all consideration of shame. In his dealings with the queen, then, Lancelot exhibits fine *amor*, "pure" love, in the sense of being an all-encompassing, exclusive affection, while he continues to remain subject to the restraining effects of shame in his relations with other characters. But Chrétien never openly expresses in *Lancelot* any hesitancy over this deviation from the principles that exemplify praiseworthy conduct in his other works, so where do his true sentiments lie?

An indication of Chrétien's attitude toward the material and its interpretation is found in his treatment of Lancelot's deeds. When Lancelot finally reaches the queen in Gorre after the ordeal of the Sword Bridge, she spurns him because, as he later learns, he hesitated before climbing into the cart. Lancelot, however, is oblivious to this fault early in his quest and single-mindedly pursues his goal of finding her to the point of cutting

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a ridiculous figure. In the Castle of the Perilous Bed, so intent is he on seeing the queen's cortège that he almost falls to his death from a window, but his companion, Gawain, saves him. In the encounter at the ford, he forgets his name, whether he is armed, and where he is going, and in fact loses himself under the influence of his quest, recovering his senses only when, having been unhorsed, he feels the cold water of the ford on his back. At the sight of Guinevere's comb, he almost faints and begins to adore the strands of hair that cling to it. He fights Méléagant in a ridiculous stance, turning from him so that he can keep the queen in his field of view. He ineffectually attempts suicide by tying himself to his horse's neck. In portraying his hero in such ways, bereft of all sense of measure in his obsession for a lover who is also the wife of his lord, Chrétien undercuts both the character and the import of Lancelot's actions. Even the situation through which the queen was jeopardized by Arthur's allowing Kay to defend her is ludicrous, since it is merely a reaction to the seneschal's feigned petulance. Arthur himself, who fails to step forward in response to Méléagant's opening challenge and liberate the captives from Gorre, and who not only allows Kay to put the queen in jeopardy but does not even pursue the two until Gawain urges him to do so, is endowed with a weaker personality than anywhere else in Chrétien's corpus.

Yet another piece of evidence is Chretien's failure to finish the romance, giving it over for completion to a certain Godfrey of Lagny, otherwise unknown to literary history. But how to interpret this clue? Chrétien's final work, *Perceval: The Story of the Grail*, is also unfinished, but in that case the thirteenth-century writer Gerbert de Montreuil informs us that Chrétien died before finishing it. Could it be that Chrétien confided the task of closure to Godfrey because his heart was no longer in it? Did Marie of Champagne disapprove of Lancelot's love being por-

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trayed as a mania? Documentary support for either alternative is, alas, lacking.

Whatever the slant one wishes to put on these aspects of Chrétien's romance, its treatment of the relationship between Lancelot and the queen made it one of the most influential works of the Middle Ages. Guinevere's betrayal of Arthur is the source of the kingdom's decline in the thirteenth-century Lancelot-Grail Cycle of prose romances, also known as the Vulgate Cycle: the *Story of the Holy Grail*, *Merlin*, *Lancelot*, the *Quest for the Holy Grail*, and the *Death of King Arthur*. This cycle in turn became a major source for Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* and eventually for most of the hundreds of other retellings of the Arthurian legend up to the present. The love scene between Lancelot and Guinevere was analyzed in an article that appeared in the French journal *Romania* in 1883 in which Gaston Paris, the most respected French literary medievalist of the period, formulated the concept "courtly love." That term has since taken on so much conceptual baggage as to have outlived its usefulness in the minds of many, but it was for years the focal point of discussions of medieval erotic theory and practice.



Where did Chrétien or his patron get the tale? Arthur himself is treated as a hero in Welsh verse from an early period, perhaps as far back as the sixth century and certainly from the ninth. In the *Gododdin*, a collection of elegies commemorating the Battle of Catraeth in the year 600 but extant only in a thirteenth-century manuscript, a warrior is praised for his prowess in battle "although he was no Arthur." The eleventh-century *Culhwch and Olwen*, a prose tale in Welsh, presents Arthur as the chief

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of a warband. Geoffrey of Monmouth's astonishingly successful *History of the Kings of Britain* (ca. 1136), which carries Arthur's renown beyond the confines of Britain, recounts the rebellion of the king's nephew Mordred, who lives in adultery with Guinevere while attempting to usurp the throne. This episode leads to the climactic Battle of Camblam and Arthur's withdrawal to the Isle of Avalon, where his "mortal" wounds are attended to.

Although Geoffrey of Monmouth nowhere mentions Lancelot, he does refer to the magician Bladud, founder of Bath and father of King Leir (Shakespeare's Lear), who learned to fly on manmade wings but fell to his death. The Norman writer Wace repeats the association of the magician Bladud with Bath in his translation of Geoffrey's *History*, entitled *Le Roman de Brut* (*The Romance of Brutus*, ca. 1155), which is likely to have been the immediate source for Chrétien's Bademagu, whose name signifies, after all, "magician of Bath." The earliest trace of this figure in Welsh is as Baedan, father of Maylwyas (equivalent of Melwas), in *Culhwch and Olwen*, but he may be the avatar of a man mentioned in Irish annals under the name Baitán, father of Máel, who participated in the Battle of Degsastan in 603.

The legend of Guinevere's abduction is attested in the lines of "A Conversation Between Arthur and Guinevere," a fragmentary mid-twelfth-century Welsh poem that is difficult to interpret because there is no indication of who is speaking in a given line. What is clear, however, is that Guinevere (in Welsh, Gwenhwyvar, "white phantom") has been abducted by Melwas, lord of the Isle of Glass, and that someone, probably Arthur, who is compared unfavorably to Cei, the Welsh equivalent of Kay, has come to take her back. In the early twelfth-century *Life of Gildas* by Caradog of Llancarfan,

Gildas . . . arrived at Glastonbury, at the time when king Melwas was reigning in the summer country. . . Glastonbury, that is, the glassy city,

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which took its name from glass, is a city that had its name originally in the British tongue. It was besieged by the tyrant Arthur with a countless multitude on account of his wife, Gwenhwyfar, whom the aforesaid wicked king Melwas had violated and carried off, and brought there for protection, owing to the asylum afforded by the city's invulnerable position due to the fortifications of thickets of reed, river, and marsh. The rebellious king, Arthur, had searched for the queen throughout the course of one year, and at last heard that she was staying there. Thereupon he roused the armies of Cornwall and Devon; war was prepared between the enemies. When he saw this, the abbot of Glastonbury, attended by the clergy and Gildas the wise, stepped in between the contending armies, and in a peaceable manner advised his king, Melwas, to restore the ravished lady. Accordingly, she . . . was restored in peace and goodwill. When these things were done, the two kings gave the abbot a gift of many domains.'

The kingdom of Gorre in *Lancelot* represents what Caradog of Llancarfan refers to as the "summer country," Somerset, here the area around Glastonbury (Welsh *Ynys Wydrin*, "Isle of Glass"). Linguistically, "Gorre" is the equivalent of *voirre*, an Old French word that means "glass." Glastonbury was associated with the Arthurian legend, and in fact in 1191, a decade or so after Chrétien composed *Lancelot*, the monks of the abbey of Glastonbury claimed to have discovered there the tomb of Arthur and Guinevere. Caradog's incorporation of the story of Guinevere's abduction in his *Life of Gildas* is obviously a churchman's attempt to appropriate a popular tale for the glory of his subject. His mention of the name of Arthur's queen is the second earliest after a reference in *Culhwch and Olwen*.

Long before this legend became the basis for Chrétien's

\*Translation based on Rachel Bromwich, ed. and trans., *Trioedd Ynys Prydein: Triads of the Isle of Britain* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1978), 381-82.

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*Lancelot*, it was the subject of a set of sculptures executed before 1125, on the archivolt of the north portal of the cathedral of Modena. There a series of figures, identified by inscriptions, is shown progressing toward a fortress: Artus of Bretania, Che (Kay), Galvagin (Gawain), Galvariun, and Isdernus (Ydier). In the fortress are Mardoc and Winlogée (a variation on the Breton form of Guinevere's name), defended by Burmaltus and Carrado (Caradoc). The abductor may be Burmaltus, perhaps a "Melwas" figure, as is Chrétien's "Méléagant." Chrétien had mentioned Melwas, lord of the Isle of Glass, in *Erec and Enide* as one of those invited to the eponymous couple's wedding. Breton storytellers had carried a version of the tale of Guinevere's abduction as far as northern Italy, showing that it was widely disseminated in the period.

Conspicuously lacking in the three sources for knowledge of the old version of Guinevere's abduction, however, as well as in the *History of the Kings of Britain*, is Lancelot, who is absent from Welsh tradition before the thirteenth century but, despite his appearance in *Erec and Enide* and *Cligès*, seems not to be a figure of Chrétien's invention. A new element in the story that does seem to come from Chrétien (or from his patron, Countess Marie) is the adultery between Guinevere and one of her husband's knights, a relationship consistently designated a felony in medieval legal sources. Méléagant is technically correct in making the legal charge of adultery against the queen, but Lancelot is able to defeat him in single combat because Méléagant wrongly identified Kay as her partner. According to the theory underlying medieval trial by combat, God would see to it that the victor would be the person who was in the right according to the exact charge that was brought.

In his *Art of Courtly Love* (ca. 1185), whose original title was *De Arte honeste amandi*, literally *On the Art of Loving Honor-*

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ably, Andreas Capellanus set forth a number of principles that concord with the behavior of Lancelot and Guinevere in *Lancelot*, roughly contemporary with his treatise. Andreas defines love as "a certain inborn suffering derived from the sight of and excessive meditation upon the beauty of the opposite sex."<sup>\*</sup> Among love's rules as set forth by Andreas are that the lover should keep himself chaste for the sake of his beloved, that he should obey the commands of ladies in all matters and devote himself to the service of love, that love cannot exist within the bonds of matrimony (marriage being a contract and thus not a relationship of free giving), and that love is the source of all good. Andreas illustrates his views of love's workings by presenting twenty-one difficult cases, most of which are judged by great ladies, among them Marie of Champagne and Eleanor of Aquitaine. What surprises, then, is not so much that the ideas found in *Lancelot* were current in the milieu in which it was composed, but that they should have been expressed by Chrétien, whose previous works present a favorable portrayal of love within the married state and whose final romance, *Perceval*, is devoid of the theme of adultery.

A romance about Lancelot and the queen that does not derive from Chrétien, although it postdates his work, since it was composed after 1194, is Ulrich von Zatzikoven's German *Lanzelet*, which the author claims is translated from a French book provided to him by the noble Hugh of Morville. The book must have contained a pre-*Lancelot* version of the abduction of Guinevere. Ulrich recounts how Lanzelet was carried off by a water fairy (compare *Lancelot*, ll. 2350–51) when he was younger than two and was brought up among women until

<sup>\*</sup> Andreas is quoted according to the translation of John Jay Parry, *The Art of Courty Love, by Andreas Capellanus* (New York: Ungar, 1941).

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age fifteen. Instructed by a young knight in the arts of chivalry, he thrice comes to castles and kills the lord, only to find that the lord's daughter or niece has fallen in love with him. The third of these women, Iblis, becomes his wife. Told that he is related to Arthur, he goes to the court, where he defends Queen **Ginover** against Valerin, a **Méléagant** figure. Valerin nevertheless abducts **Ginover**, but Arthur recovers her with the assistance of a magician, **Malduc** (the **Mardoc** of the **Modena** archivolt?). After turning a young woman from a dragon back into human form by kissing her, **Lanzelet** returns to Iblis and lives in contentment with her. The French source available to Ulrich thus stood between the old myth of the abduction of a **Guinevere** sought by Arthur and Chretien's version, in which **Lancelot** frees the queen

But **Lancelot's** role in Chretien's romance is not simply to serve as the queen's rescuer, lover, and champion. He is the savior as well of those whom the unrelentingly evil **Méléagant** has taken to **Gorre** from Arthur's kingdom, **Logres** (equivalent of **Lloegr**, the Welsh word for England, still in use today, whose original meaning seems to have been "having a nearby border").<sup>1</sup> Resonances of this role are present in the cemetery scene in which only **Lancelot** is able to raise the tombstone inscribed as destined for the knight who will free the captives from "a prison from which no one returns"—that is, **Gorre** (ll. 1904–15). This aspect of the tale appears to reflect a myth of salvation from the land of the dead, where "No one's denied entrance,/ But once they're here, they must stay" (ll. 2106–7).

**Lancelot** progresses toward **Guinevere** through a series of tests that challenge his fidelity to the queen as well as his cour-

<sup>1</sup>Eric Hamp, "Lloegr: The Welsh Name for England," *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 4 (1982): 85.



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age. Before he reaches the kingdom of Gorre, these tests occur in the presence of a dwarf and of five damsels, mysterious characters who seem already somehow to be aware of the purpose and course of the hero's journey. Both dwarves and solitary damsels are stock guiding and controlling figures of Arthurian narrative. In *Lancelot* two, and perhaps three, of the damsels are one and the same. *Méléagant's* sister reveals that she is the fifth damsel (see ll. 6582–86), who successfully asked Lancelot for the head of a knight whom she hated, as well as the second damsel, who met him on the way to the Sword Bridge and asked for a future favor. The third damsel thinks Lancelot recognizes her (l. 930) and may well be the same woman. The test of the Perilous Bed, in which Lancelot survives the Flaming Lance, plays the same role as the lifting of the tombstone in the cemetery, to identify Lancelot as the savior who will free the captives from Gorre. The battle with the knight at the ford is a test of courage and prowess. The trials with the fourth damsel—the feigned rape and the night spent in her bed—are chastity tests. Once he enters Gorre, Lancelot encounters the good knight and his family, navigates the Stony Path, survives an entrapment through the magic ring his mother gave him, refuses a beheading test reminiscent of the later Middle English romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, crosses the Sword Bridge, and arrives at Bademagu's tower. That his journey has led him into an Otherworld kingdom can hardly be doubted.

To rescue the queen and the other captives, Lancelot must then overcome *Méléagant*, whose methods are not limited to those sanctioned by codes of courtly behavior. Although *Méléagant* is portrayed as a Christian, invoking in conventional ways his faith and trust in God, he treacherously retains Lancelot in prison while purporting to be puzzled over the hero's

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failure to present himself for combat at Arthur's court at the appointed time. *Méléagant* sins less against religious principles than against the obligations of kinship, however, disappointing his benevolent father, *Bademagu*, in his headstrong pursuit of cruelty and injustice. In a society in which kinship ties were one of the major forces regulating conduct, it is significant that *Méléagant's* defeat and death should be rendered possible by the steps his own sister takes to free *Lancelot* from captivity.

Chrktien has constructed a counterexample to the relationship between *Méléagant* and his father in the unnamed son and elderly father whom *Lancelot* meets in a meadow on his way to *Gorre* (ll. 1655–1833). In the case of this pair, the father argues that the son would be foolhardy to risk himself in combat against such an accomplished knight as *Lancelot* over a young woman with whom he is infatuated. The father, who first resorts to physical restraint, eventually wins the argument when the monk who has viewed the incident of the tombstone reveals that *Lancelot* is unequaled as a knight. *Bademagu's* arguments have no such salutary effect on his son, who persists in provoking *Lancelot* until this course of action results in his own destruction. The amount of attention Chrktien gives to this theme makes one wonder if any incident of contemporary social reality now hidden from our view motivated him to fashion these contrasting pairs of exemplary fathers and sons.

On the moral level, a conflict marks *Chrétien's* characterization of *Lancelot*. In the larger social sphere his heroism is unquestioned: he is the liberator of the people of *Logres* and their queen, who in the Celtic context is not just the king's consort but a figure embodying the principle of sovereignty. Yet in feudal society this role depends on *Lancelot's* vassalic relationship with *King Arthur*, a relationship he violates by his adultery with

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the queen. That scene is rich in sacrilegious imagery: Lancelot adores Guinevere as he would a holy relic, feels the pangs of martyrdom as he leaves her, and bows on exiting as if before an altar. The religion of secular love has *taken* precedence over what can only be characterized as a superficial Christianity, just as love service has triumphed over the vassal's fidelity to his lord.



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