



W&M ScholarWorks

Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects

Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects

1990

Steinbeck the Writer-Knight

William Scott Simkins

College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd>

 Part of the [American Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Simkins, William Scott, "Steinbeck the Writer-Knight" (1990). *Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects*. Paper 1539625595.

<https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-fa3r-2g19>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.

STEINBECK THE WRITER-KNIGHT

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

William Scott Simkins

1990

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

William Scott Simkins

William Scott Simkins

Approved, December 1990

John W. Conlee

John W. Conlee, Chair

Scott Donaldson

Scott Donaldson

David C. Jenkins

David C. Jenkins

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	v
INTRODUCTION.....	2
I.....	3
II.....	8
III.....	10
IV.....	14
V.....	17
VI.....	21
VII.....	26
VIII.....	28
NOTES.....	32
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	35
VITA.....	38

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writer expresses his appreciation for the guidance and encouragement of Professor John Conlee throughout the final stages of this thesis. The writer is also indebted to Professors Scott Donaldson and David Jenkins for their careful reading and criticism of the manuscript.

ABSTRACT

This thesis proposes to demonstrate that John Steinbeck's The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights represents the combination of his creative sources and his style to produce Steinbeck's unique and multi-faceted philosophy as a writer, which may be characterized as a modern chivalric code.

Considering Steinbeck's earliest literary influences, particularly Thomas Malory's Morte d'Arthur, and the subsequent evolution of his style, this thesis first examines various aspects of Steinbeck's writing: his inspiration, his attraction for nature and nature as metaphor, his fascination with Malory as a writer, his passion for the chimeric and the mythic qualities of the English language, his preference for mythic subjects and for allegory, and his belief in an authorial character or characters. Then this thesis suggests that Acts reveals Steinbeck's beliefs about the social and moral responsibilities of a writer.

STEINBECK THE WRITER-KNIGHT

INTRODUCTION

"A novel may be said to be the man who writes it," John Steinbeck wrote while composing his Arthurian saga.¹ If the author consciously chooses his material, style and a hundred other variables and his choices have many influences, then the novel may define the author once these factors are revealed. The accuracy of the novel's definition of the author depends on the extent to which the text may be analyzed and reassembled. This approach may indicate that man is his own muse, released through the artificial structure of fiction. Steinbeck's The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights (1976) is the product of the author's fantasizing, a work combining the inspiration of Steinbeck's youth with the impetus of his adult concerns to create a vision for the future of society and for himself personally. More than any of his other works, perhaps, Acts illuminates Steinbeck, the writer. Published unfinished, along with letters to his editor and his agent, Steinbeck's Acts illustrates the essence of his creativity through stylistic evolution and character development. Reflecting the influence of early literary encounters and the technical characteristics developed during the evolution of his corpus, it shows more clearly than his other fiction the marriage of his creative sources and his style.

I

Among the major sources of Steinbeck's creativity are his childhood reading and play, which may help explain the emergence of a peculiar literary style that both aided and later hindered his career. Steinbeck drew inspiration, and occasionally method and design, from such early mythic influences as the tales of Hans Christian Andersen, the Greek myths, the Bible, and Don Quixote. But the most consistent and significant of his early influences was Thomas Malory's Morte d'Arthur², which always had a magical quality for Steinbeck, who wrote that "two-thirds of it is the vain dreaming of children talking in the dark."³ All of these influential materials retain vestiges of the collective fantasies of ancient peoples: as Sigmund Freud theorized in his "Creative Writers and Daydreaming," they portray humanity moving from its childhood to its fantasizing adolescence. Steinbeck sensed this too, having written that "the Arthurian cycle and practically all lasting and deep-seated folklore is a mixture of profundity and childish nonsense."⁴ He believed that removing the "childish nonsense" would remove the essence of the myth, the child's capacity to believe the unbelievable.

An adult Steinbeck recalled that a large part of his youth was made of dreams and fantasies.⁵ The Arthurian tales provided substance for his childhood play. With his sister Mary and his pony Jill, he acted them out. In his dedication to Acts Steinbeck writes, "It chanced that squire-like duties fell to my sister of six years, who for gentle prowess had no peer living.--It sometimes

happens in sadness and pity that faithful service is not appreciated, so my fair and loyal sister remained unrecognized as squire.--Wherefore this day I make amends within my power and raise her to knighthood and give her praise."⁶ By the time he had reached his late teens, Steinbeck had replaced such play with literary fantasizing, spending hours in his room writing stories and sending them under pseudonyms to magazines. Just as Steinbeck the child had shaped his fantasies through play, so Steinbeck the emerging adult was learning to shape his fantasies with his tiny scrawl, and thus his literary career may be seen as an extension of his childhood activities and his adolescent dreaming. If so, unknown to him, these things may have been a source, or perhaps even a catalyst, for his mature creativity.

The transition from the romantic fantasies of Steinbeck's youth to the more successful realistic work of his adult career in the later half of the 1930s was engendered in part by the critical and financial reception of his early work. Critics of Steinbeck's first novel, Cup of Gold (1929), described it as over-romantic and superficial. Charmed by ancient history, legends, and weapons, Steinbeck allowed these and other romantic devices to saturate Cup of Gold to its detriment, but since his skills were as yet developing, a more realistic work might have been just as flawed, with strained metaphors, stilted poetic language, and one-dimensional characters drawn more from mythic sources than real life. Three years later, a maturation of style, evident in an increased depth of characterization, brought favorable criticism to Steinbeck's first volume of short

stories, Pastures of Heaven. By 1933 Steinbeck had finished the first two parts of The Red Pony, which ranks among his best short fiction, and he had published his second novel, To A God Unknown, which produced a mixed critical reaction. While more favorably received than his first novel, To A God Unknown still seemed overambitious to most of the critics. It had begun as an aborted attempt at playwriting by Webster Street, a friend of Steinbeck's. The play piqued Steinbeck's interest, and he began to convert it into novel form, changing the characters and adding allegorical overtones to his friend's family drama. Some readers criticized the awkward movement of characters as if staged. One or two characters would be present at a time, grand entrances were made and the main characters gave monologues. Not for the first time, Steinbeck was having difficulty casting his allegorical thoughts in a realistic mold. This was symptomatic of Steinbeck's early struggle with realism.

Steinbeck's realism came from what he read, not from what he sensed in the physical world; he saw life in his literature more like literature than life.⁷ While working on his third novel, Tortilla Flat (1935), Steinbeck wrote to his friend Carl Wilhelmson, "I never had much ability for nor faith in realism. It is just a form of fantasy as nearly as I could figure."⁸ Tortilla Flat, Steinbeck's first critical and financial success was loosely modeled after the Morte. Following this achievement, Steinbeck produced in succession In Dubious Battle (1936), Of Mice and Men (1937), The Long Valley (1938), a completed Red Pony (1938), and finally in 1939, The Grapes of Wrath. His career climbed. Earning familiar

status with the public and the publishing industry decreased the pressure on Steinbeck to curb the anachronistic tendencies in his writing. It was not so much that the old words, old arrangements, repetition, parallelism and adjectival embellishment became increasingly common in his writing, but rather that romantic notions about the perfectibility of man, the reassertion of imagination and sentiment, and the emphasis on individual thought and expression did become common. When Steinbeck finally turned directly to Arthurian matter as a project, his adaptation served his interest in nature, language and the human spirit.

"When a writer starts in very young," Steinbeck wrote to his agent, Elizabeth Otis, in 1954, his problems "are those of technique, of words, of rhythms, of story methods, of transition, of characterization, of ways of creating effects."⁹ Struggling with these elements at the beginning of his career, Steinbeck had looked to his childhood reading for help. The material that fostered his creativity was then called on to help refine it. But sometime after Grapes of Wrath, Steinbeck became disconnected from his source. Where once he was too reliant on his early inspiration, during the 1940s he became too distant from it. Exhausted from the intensity of his work on Grapes of Wrath, Steinbeck deliberately turned to work that was less emotionally draining, which critics perceived as a betrayal of the serious writer in him. Criticism of his political stances, not his artistic achievement, predominated. Conservative critics complained that The Moon is Down (1942), Steinbeck's novel about a European

village invaded by Nazis and its later underground movement, went too easy on the Nazis. On the other hand, liberal critics complained that Cannery Row (1945), Steinbeck's novel about some of Monterey's outsiders was too light-hearted, and they accused Steinbeck of abandoning the cause of the downtrodden. But Steinbeck had been experimenting in these works. He feared being trapped in one style, and he complained that critics wanted him to write Grapes of Wrath over and over. Steinbeck wrote that "style or technique may be a strait jacket which is the destroyer of a writer."¹⁰ In that decade and the next, Steinbeck rejected this strait jacket, trying his hand at writing plays, musicals, screenplays, scientific speculation, journalistic essays and then, in 1952, the highly autobiographical East of Eden, seeking rebirth as a writer. Following this period of restless experimentation, Steinbeck returned to his early source of inspiration and began working on his Arthur in 1957, returning to Camelot in an attempt to rekindle his creativity.

While in England working on his Arthurian project in the spring of 1959, Steinbeck wrote to his friend Elia Kazan explaining his desire to break from what he earlier had described as his strait jacket:

Two years ago, as you will remember, I discovered that writing had become a habit with me and more than that, a pattern. I had lost the flavor of trial, of discovery, of excitement. My life had become dusty in my mouth. What I did was not worth doing because it gave me no delight. And you remember that I stopped writing.¹¹

II

Part of the attraction of the Arthur matter for Steinbeck was the chance to use the elements of nature. As a boy, Steinbeck had discovered a connection between nature and language. Later, landscape, plants, animals and weather became important, though not always prominent, features in his fiction: for example, the stone and scrub hill as final recourse for the fugitive Pepé Torres in "Flight;" the sudden storm chasing young Aron and Cal Trask in from their rabbit hunt in East of Eden; and the rain storm that briefly alters the course of the lives of the passengers of The Wayward Bus. The living elements of nature were integral to Steinbeck's daily life and his writing. Always a dog owner, Steinbeck frequently depicts dogs in his fiction, and in his non-fiction travelogue, Travels with Charley, his wife's poodle gives the book internal consistency. Steinbeck had always tried to keep a garden also, whether he was living in Pacific Grove, Los Angeles, Paris or New York City. Jackson Benson, Steinbeck's biographer, believes that "his connection to earth and growing things became crucial elements in both his personality and his art."¹² The connection appears often in his work: the barrenness of Dust Bowl Oklahoma and the fruitfulness of the Salinas Valley in Grapes of Wrath; the rejected gift of Elisa's chrysanthemums and the risky venture of Peter Randall's sweet peas in stories from The Long Valley; the willow tree that sheltered the prepubescent curiosity of Cal and Abra in East of Eden. Throughout his fiction, and occasionally in his nonfiction, Steinbeck was preoccupied with the picturesque and suggestive

aspects of nature. He used nature to create a mood, to characterize a person, or to propel the drama, and always with subtlety.¹³

In his early work, Steinbeck relied on the familiar California settings of his youth, and when he finally turned to his Arthurian project, he wished to be familiar with those settings too. He and third wife Elaine spent several years off and on touring southern England, and they spent most of 1959 living at Discover Cottage, Somerset, to know the Arthurian terrain at first hand. This familiarity gave the work authority and gave him assurance with the landscape. In Acts, Steinbeck used nature to beget a sense of the unreal, to form convincingly a magical world of wonder and possibility, as seen for example when Lancelot and his nephew Lyonel set forth on a quest:

They were far away from discovery before the dawn broke, disclosing the world of errantry--a forest deep and green picked out in tapestry against the morning. It was day which arranged itself for the color and form of chivalry. A great stag raised his antlered head and watched them pass, fearless in the knowledge they were not hunting. A peacock in a sunshafted glade spread his great fan and glittered like a jewel, while the arching blue iridescence of his neck and throat screamed like a giant cat. The unfrightened rabbits rose on their haunches, ears erect and front paws tight against their breasts. And the forest rang with carillons of birds.¹⁴

The scene symbolizes some of the characteristics of chivalry. By idealized descriptions like "tapestry against the morning," "peacock in sunshafted glade, glittering like a jewel," and birds singing like bells Steinbeck denotes the beauty

of chivalry, and with the unfrightened stag and rabbits, he portrays its peace. He creates an otherworldly effect.

III

Knighthood and chivalry were real to Steinbeck in the traits they symbolized and the goals they sought. The knight's actions in attempting to bring order and meaning to a morally ambiguous world suggest the similar role of the writer. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Steinbeck avowed that "the ancient commission of the writer has not changed. He is charged with exposing our many grievous faults and failures, with dredging up to the light our dark and dangerous dreams for the purpose of improvement."¹⁵ This ideal, knightlike quest of the writer epitomizes the optimistic, macroscopic vision of most of Steinbeck's work. It attests to the responsibility Steinbeck felt belonged to the writer. This morality, this world view, most likely forms in childhood, and for Steinbeck it may owe to the work that had inspired his fancies and more.

Like many writers, as he matured Steinbeck wrote with greater introspection and wrote on subjects peculiar to his interests. He put more sentiment into his writing, and it took on greater personal significance. As East of Eden was conceived as a dramatized family record for his sons Thom and John, Acts was conceived as their gift. In the introduction prepared for the book Steinbeck wrote, "for a long time I have wanted to bring to present-day

usage the stories of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table...to set down in plain, present-day speech for my own young sons and for other sons not so young--to set the stories down in meaning, leaving out nothing and adding nothing....¹⁶ He wanted to translate the Morte into modern American, while keeping where possible the rhythm, structure and meaning of Malory's version.¹⁷ Steinbeck worked with a more detailed, developed volume of the Morte, the Winchester manuscript, as well as with the Caxton-edited version. He tried to update archaic words and remove repetitive passages, but despite his effort, he could not find a style for the effect he wanted. Under pressure from the complex material and the effects created by archaisms and destroyed by currencies, the "present-day" speech lost appeal for Steinbeck.

With the aid of the Malory scholar Eugene Vinaver, Steinbeck studied the medieval period to learn about the era that produced Malory. Steinbeck hoped that understanding how and why Malory adapted his source material would help in his own quest. In a letter to Chase Horton, his editor, Steinbeck wrote that Malory "was not a scholar. He was a realist."¹⁸ Rereading the Morte, Steinbeck became even more enamored of Malory. In a letter to Elizabeth Otis he wrote, "Malory learned to write as he went along. The straggling sentences, the confused characters and events of the early parts smooth out as he goes along so that his sentences become more fluid and his dialogue gets a sting of truth and his characters become more human than symbolic."¹⁹ Was this Malory superseding his model? Steinbeck believed so. He believed that since Malory

had meager sources in prison, he relied heavily on his memories of Arthurian tales. Malory had to improvise, and so he gave mythic heroes human foibles. After explaining to Horton how he felt persecuted by Salinas residents because of The Grapes Of Wrath, and then later because of East of Eden, Steinbeck believed that Malory might have been similarly treated after humanizing these heroes.²⁰ He felt a great affinity to Malory.

Steinbeck's translation of Malory in his "Merlin," "The Knight With Two Swords," "The Wedding of King Arthur" and "The Death of Merlin" was seen as serviceable, even laudable as a literal translation, but it was, as Horton and Otis warned him, dull and boring.²¹ So Steinbeck reworked it, deleting extraneous passages, adding explanatory passages to create a logical progression, eventually re-submitting the manuscript to Horton and Otis. After reading the revised manuscript, and fearing that Steinbeck was wasting his time, Otis wrote to him, hoping to change his approach: "It lacks life, interest. It is too fragmented. Rather than taking this approach of sticking so close to the original, you need to take over and make the material your own. You must tell the story in your own way, but above all, tell a story."²²

This early reaction from friends whose opinions he trusted distressed and disappointed Steinbeck, but he followed Otis's advice and began to write more in his own style, adding his own invention, and with more of the psychological insight characteristic of his own novels. Those close to him, including his wife Elaine and Elizabeth Otis, his agent, agreed that the new chapters were better.²³

He had released his fantasy from the restriction of following Malory's version with striking results. Steinbeck had superseded his model, Malory. He had found his style: standard, economical English; diction within the scope of the average reader; repetition and archaisms eliminated; Malory redone as once Malory had redone his "French books;" and material added, contrary to Steinbeck's original intention, for a more unified, understandable dramatic structure.²⁴ Just as Steinbeck had written of Malory--"He became a master and you can see it happening,"--so too had Steinbeck evolved.²⁵

Even before receiving the negative reactions from his friends, Steinbeck realized that some kind of artistic evolution was occurring. While reworking "Merlin," he wrote, "I've learned so much about my own method that the early parts are kind of outmoded already."²⁶ The last three chapters, written after Otis's advice to make the book more his own, make up two thirds of the uncompleted novel and are more characteristic of Steinbeck, outdistancing the initial chapters artistically. Because he never returned to serious work on his Arthurian project after 1960, the book was left unfinished and even unedited by Steinbeck. Consequently, he never unified his approach throughout the book, and there is a disparity between these two sets of chapters. As a result, Acts is a model of a novelist's work in progress. The change from the first set of chapters to the second is not abrupt, but clearly by the time "The Noble Tale of Sir Lancelot" arrives, he has taken rein of the material, cutting pages of Malory, adding pages of his own, making authorial comments on the setting, the

psychology of characters and even the economics of living in a giant's neighborhood. All the while Steinbeck controls, but does not sacrifice the linguistic elements that initially attracted him. The following excerpt from Acts explores the psychology of Lancelot with a directness like Malory's:

Like most great fighting men, Lancelot was generous and kindly. When it was necessary to kill men he did it quickly, without anger and without fear. And since cruelty, unless it be a disease, grows only out of fear, he was not cruel. Only one thing could make him blindly cruel. He did not understand treachery, having none in himself. Thus, when he was confronted with this mysterious impulse, Lancelot grew frightened, and only then could he be cruel.²⁷

IV

In a letter written to Peter Benchley in 1956, Steinbeck wrote, "The discipline of the written word punishes both stupidity and dishonesty. A writer lives in awe of words for they can change their meanings right in front of you. They pick up flavors and odors like butter in a refrigerator."²⁸ Words were Steinbeck's passion and nemesis, and the simplicity and ease of his prose were hard wrought. At the heart of it was his appetite for the flavors and odors of words, an appetite sated by the Morte, which fueled Steinbeck's interest in language. "I loved the spelling of the words--and the words no longer used," he explained. "Perhaps a passionate love for the English language opened to me

from this one book.... For a long time I had a secret language."²⁹ The evocative, incantory power of words, their sight on the page, their sound read aloud bewitched him. In Cup of Gold Steinbeck had indulged this secret language. Jackson Benson describes the style of Cup of Gold as "infused with figurative language, archaisms, and lush descriptions...combined with recurring symbolism and constant allusion to mythical themes."³⁰ The narrative and dialogue are clearly poetic, as is apparent in Merlin's chastisement of young Henry Morgan for leaving his home early in Cup of Gold:

"I will plead for you this dear Cambria where time is piled mountain high and crumbling, ancient days about its base," he cried passionately. "Have you lost your love of wild Cambria that you would leave it when the blood of your thousand ancestors has gone soaking into the soil to keep it Cambria for always? Have you forgotten that you are of the Trojan race? Ah, but they wandered too, didn't they, when Pergamus fell in?"³¹

But Cup of Gold achieved neither critical nor financial success. Even before its publication, Steinbeck confessed his disappointment with its worthlessness in his estimation, writing, "I wonder if I shall ever be drunken with rhythms any more?"³² Steinbeck began using his secret language more discreetly in his following writings. His secret language made his early work seem artificial and unconvincing, a problem occurring to a lesser extent in his later work. "His problem," according to Benson, "was that he was too damn literary."³³ However, when used with restraint, his secret language enriched his work. Grapes of

Wrath, for example, evoked Biblical imagery and tone with simple sentences, parallelism, and polysyndeton, as in this excerpt from chapter twenty-five:

There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success. The fertile earth, the straight tree rows, the sturdy trunks, and the ripe fruit. And children dying of pellagra must die because a profit cannot be taken from an orange. And coroners must fill in the certificate--died of malnutrition--because the food must rot, must be forced to rot.³⁴

The use of many *and*'s, polysyndeton, creates a tone of simplicity and emotional impact. The parallel sentence structure heightens the insistence of the emotions. In Acts Steinbeck used similar devices to describe the disquiet of Lancelot when peace has come to Camelot:

It came about that the best knight in the world was without opponent in the court, and he felt his fighting skill rusting, and he grew despondent, for he could find no opposing sword to keep his sword sharp, no competing arm to muscle and advise his arm.³⁵

In his best fiction Steinbeck is a true story teller. Considering himself heir to ancient campfire story tellers, his prose has the rhythm of speech while sustaining the visual flow of words for readers.³⁶ Describing life in the migrant camps in chapter twenty-three of Grapes of Wrath, Steinbeck defined this role: "The story tellers, gathering attention into their tales, spoke in great rhythms, spoke in great words because their tales were great, and the listeners became great through them."³⁷ This concern not only for the cathartic effects of story

telling for the writer, an egocentrism, but for the benefits of hearing the story for the listeners, characterizes Steinbeck. He used the magnetic power of words in the right arrangement to draw the reader in, while avoiding needless complexity or obscurity which might block the reader out. By this credo, his understatement empowers his most evocative chapters beyond the effects of sentiment or sociological dogma. With simple words and phrases he achieved the effect of spontaneity and added significance to their meaning.³⁸ Consider his description of the hateful and duplicitous Morgan le Fay:

Morgan le Fay, King Arthur's half-sister, was a dark, passionate woman, and cruel and ambitious. In a nunnery she studied necromancy and become proficient in the dark and destructive magic which is the weapon of the jealous. She joyed in bending and warping men to her will through beauty and enchantment, and when these failed, she used the blacker arts of treason and murder.³⁹

V

Steinbeck's interest in fantasy literature and lore combined with his developing interest in the natural world to create an effective dramatic tension in his best work. In Acts, the conflict of a natural world with a scientific reality and a supernatural world with a magical reality becomes a conflict between a world of chivalry, symbolizing honor, loyalty and the pursuit of good, and a world of encroaching technology in which moral values have eroded. Acts

allegorizes, like most of its predecessors in Arthurian literature, the struggle of good and evil, with all the ambiguities of real life to challenge the characters. The nature of this mythic material has allowed modern writers such as Mark Twain, E.A. Robinson, and T.H. White to allegorize from Arthurian tales and this was also part of its appeal to Steinbeck. Critic Harry Morris, examining Steinbeck's The Pearl, wrote that Steinbeck "has never been very far away from the allegorical method. Some of his earliest work--and among that, his best--shows involvement with elements of allegory."⁴⁰ Steinbeck was forthright on the subject in an interview: "A story is a parable; putting in terms of human action the morals--the immorals--that society needs at the time.... Needs of beauty, courage, reform--sometimes just pure pride."⁴¹ What needs did Steinbeck think existed requiring the resurrection of Camelot?

Steinbeck must have been dissatisfied in certain fundamental ways. If writing replaced his youthful fantasies, then he must have been unhappy to consciously choose to return to those fantasies. Steinbeck was unhappy in his personal relationships. In the late 1950s, ten years after divorcing his second wife Gwendolyn, and sensing an estrangement from his growing sons, Steinbeck became troubled by the moral decay he perceived around him in American society. "We're seeing the breakup of old forms of authority--religious, governmental, even parental--before new ones are established...that's why people are so restless and worried," Steinbeck said. "They don't know what to tie to."⁴²

Using nature metaphorically to represent the chaotic lives of modern man, Steinbeck depicts Lancelot observing the behavior of the forest animals:

As though the unanswered challenge of the chief bird had cleared the air of suspicion, the small and quiet emerged from the wood, but their smallness did not mean that they were meek--only cautious. Each one had war against others and endless difficulties with his fellows: matters of property, treasure trove, violations of respect for size and age and strength.... Government among a single kind was hard enough. Among many kinds it was impossible, and always had been, for the small creatures were not peaceful, or kindly, or cooperative. They were as quarrelsome and as selfish, as greedy and vainglorious, as sneaky and pompous and unpredictable as humans, wherefore it is hard to understand how they get their eating and breeding done at all, let alone increasing, building nests and burrows, preening fur and feathers, sharpening beak and claw, storing food and guarding it, and still having time to quarrel and snap and curse one another, and only occasionally taking time to love and to die.⁴³

By reversing the metaphor, using human behavior to describe animal behavior, Steinbeck outlines his view of human nature, which he sees not as the cause of moral disintegration, but as a condition from which it grows. He compared modern America's societal breakdown to Camelot's, a theme struck in Acts and in his next work, The Winter of Our Discontent. Although he may have been projecting his insecurities onto society, nevertheless his perception was more important than the reality to his work. In Camelot, when this failure created a need for avatars of morality and right, the Round Table was formed. In "The Wedding of King Arthur," the ceremony concludes with a grand feast as Merlin gathers the knights, asking them to remain still:

Then all sat motionless in their places as though frozen and the great hall was silent and waiting. The preparing was over, Arthur was king, the Table Round existed, and its fellowship of courage and courtesy and honor sat each in his place--the king above, rigid and still, and Merlin beside him listening. They might have been asleep as they have been and will be many times over, sleeping but listening for the need, the fear, the distress, or the pure and golden venture that can call them awake.⁴⁴

Thinking of Arthur as a symbol of hope, Steinbeck wanted to use him to remind his readers, particularly the Americans, that hope is there when it is needed. "All people have their Arthur, and need him," Steinbeck said. "He is created out of a need, when they are in trouble. America's Arthur is coming because the people need him."⁴⁵ Talking with Budd Schulberg in the late sixties, Steinbeck explained that the era of Camelot was similar to modern America.

An old order was on the way out. Something new was in the air, but no one knew exactly what lay ahead. The concept of chivalry was essentially a humanistic idea--going forth to do good deeds...but aside from the courtiers there were these individual values. And there were the bad knights who only pretended to fight for chivalric myth but were actually using the thing for their own selfish purposes. Maybe on the street corners today are our own Galahads and Mordreds. But it needed an Arthur, a Round Table to hold it together....⁴⁶

More than childhood influences lay behind Steinbeck's undertaking of the Arthurian legend. Current events somehow convinced him of a decline of American morals. Through medieval allegory, Steinbeck expressed his concern about this decline. Undoubtedly his personal crises, the McCarthy communist hunt and blacklisting of fellow artists, the Cold War, the United States'

involvement in Korea, and the unfavorable critical reception of his current work were factors in that decade leading to his great disillusionment--not the least of which might have been the nagging fear that his muse was gone. And the Round Table was "listening for the need." This disillusionment with his life, with his perceived state of the country, was the occasion of the present that prompted Steinbeck to use a pattern from his past to construct a vision for the future, an elaborate wish fulfillment based on an ideal childhood model. Hope came from sensing one's small part in the larger physical whole, a common theme in Steinbeck's fiction. Guinevere explains this desire to Arthur, proposing that the restless knights of Camelot go questing: "I think that every man wants to be larger than himself and that he can be only if he is part of something immeasurably larger than himself."⁴⁷

VI

His intense interest in Malory led Steinbeck to his conception of the self-character. He felt that all authors, himself included, developed a character in their novels who represented their strengths and weaknesses. Malory's self-character, Steinbeck decided, was Lancelot. "All of the perfections he knew went into this character, all of the things of which he thought himself capable," Steinbeck postulated. "But being an honest man, he found faults in himself, faults of vanity, faults of violence, faults even of disloyalty...."⁴⁸ Given his affinity

for Malory and his acknowledgment of his own limitations, might Steinbeck's self-character also have been Lancelot? Probably, but Freud cautioned that while many writers may put themselves into the hero of their work, some divide themselves among several characters. Also, the writer usually shifts and alters his dreams or fantasies on paper to disguise them. Another problem with defining Steinbeck's self-character was his private nature, which made him stingy with autobiographical insight, self-effacing, and inventively misleading.

Looking for the author in his work is tricky, but Steinbeck's own words are encouraging: "A novelist not only puts down a story but he is the story. He is each one of the characters in a greater or less degree. And because he is usually a moral man in intention and honest in his approach, he sets things down as truly as he can."⁴⁹ Understanding the intimacy between Steinbeck and his early influences, his mythic muses, particularly the Morte, establishing a continuity of style, realizing his weakness for allegory, it may be possible to peel a layer from the text to find bits of Steinbeck scattered among a few characters. This may offer insight into his processes as a writer.

Aspects of Steinbeck's personality appear in the character of Lady Lyne: his philology, his fascination with weapons and his non-teleologism, or "is thinking," as he called it. In the chapter "'Is' Thinking and 'Living Into,'" from Steinbeck's Sea Of Cortez (1941), written in collaboration with his friend Ed Ricketts, Steinbeck defines non-teleologism as the supposition that neither in the

natural world nor, more specifically, in human existence are events directed toward an end or shaped by a purpose.

In her own right as a character, Lady Lyne stands out as better developed than many of the usual Arthurian figures, due in part to her role as Steinbeck's mouthpiece. Denied the joys of knighthood by her sex, Lady Lyne takes in reluctant young knights and trains them secretly to surpass their original standards. In the chapter, "Gawain, Ewain, and Marhalt," she trains not only the body of Ewain, but the mind and spirit too. She challenges his perceived world view by striking at the heart of his existence, his knighthood, calling on her knowledge of words to challenge his definition of a knight.

"Do you know what 'knight' means? It is an old, old word. It means a servant, and that is well thought out, because who would be master must learn his trade by being mastered."⁵⁰

So, it might be argued, Steinbeck had originally begun this adaptation, by letting Malory be master of his style. Sir Thomas took in young Sir John and established standards for Sir John's career, just as Lady Lyne did for Ewain. The ensuing training of Ewain by Lady Lyne allows Steinbeck to play with armor, swords, lances, pikes, crossbows, horses, halberds and like instruments. Also, through Lady Lyne, Steinbeck speculates on the changes wrought by technology upon a society, and by this he can speculate about how, as Tennyson phrased it, "the old order changeth, yielding place to new." Lady Lyne has the peasants in her service demonstrate the effectiveness of the crossbow against

armor, thus foreshadowing the end of knighthood and the gradual rise of the common man.

"What a dreadful thought," Sir Ewain said. "If lowborn men could stand up to those born to rule, religion, government, the whole world would fall to pieces."

"So it would," she said. "So it will."

"I don't believe you," Ewain said. "But for the sake of the discussion, what then, my lady?"

"Why then--then the pieces would have to be put together again."

"By such as these--?"

"Who else? Who else indeed?"⁵¹

Lady Lyne's all too brief speculation on the rise of the peasants is a bit of non-teleologic reasoning. When she explains that the crossbow, representing new technology, will enable any man to resist a knight, she does not suggest that this equalizing is a result of the new technology, but rather an outgrowth of it. Ewain's concern about religion, government and the world falling to pieces would be echoed several years later in Steinbeck's comments to Budd Schulberg, and here in the text of his Arthurian piece is Steinbeck's answer to the question, "What then?" voiced by Lady Lyne: "the pieces would have to be put back together again." Whether or not he was convinced of the simplicity of this eventual outcome following the disintegration of social institutions, it is a possibility, suggesting a cycle of rise and fall--the rise of a civilization, followed by internal corruption, a shift in power from haves to have-nots, a fall and a restoration. Many years before taking up the Arthurian legend, Steinbeck had

written Pascal Covici, his close friend and confidante, that "all the goodness and the heroisms will rise up again, then be cut down again and rise up. It isn't that the evil thing wins--it never will--but that it doesn't die.... It seems fairly obvious that two sides of a mirror are required before one has a mirror, that two forces are necessary in man before he is man."⁵²

Steinbeck characterized the writer as a knight. As a child he played at being a knight. He was moralistic and genuinely concerned with the ethics of his society. He championed individuality, challenging critics by changing his creative directions, undoubtedly at some cost to his art and his reputation. He was aware of his accomplishments but also of his failings, and so he was rarely boastful or vain publicly. So he identified with Lancelot more than any other character in Acts. As Lyonel watches over a sleeping Lancelot and reflects on how other knights and members of the court see him, there is a poignant evocation of a beleaguered Steinbeck in a sea of unfriendly critics, a man out of his time:

He remembered how they said this sleeping knight was too stupid to know he was ridiculous, too innocent to see the life around him, convinced of perfectibility in a heap of evil, romantic and sentimental in a world where reality is overlord, an anachronism before the earth was born.⁵³

Another look at Steinbeck's Nobel Prize acceptance speech reveals the similarity between Lancelot's beliefs in Acts and John Steinbeck's in real life.

...the writer is delegated to declare and to celebrate man's proven capacity for greatness of heart and spirit--for gallantry in defeat, for courage, compassion and love. In the endless war against weakness and despair, these are the bright rally flags of hope and of emulation. I hold that a writer who does not passionately believe in the perfectibility of man has no dedication nor any membership in literature.⁵⁴

VII

With so much invested in his Arthurian project--professionally, financially, emotionally, physically and spiritually--why would Steinbeck leave it behind? Strictly speaking he never did. Not only had this material and these themes been present throughout his career, but his Arthurian project, while seldom occupying his time after 1960, was often in his thoughts until the end of his life. But as a novelist, he ceased serious work on it, and perhaps critic Roy S. Simmonds suggests the most plausible reasons: The Acts of King Arthur was taking too much of Steinbeck's time, exhausting him as Grapes of Wrath had done when he was a younger man, worrying him as he approached his sixtieth birthday; the quantity and complexity of the material overwhelmed him, perhaps because he started the project so late in life; and finally, his mind was too restless, having already spent three years on the project, causing a backlog of other concepts he wanted to get to; after all, his restlessness had originally led him to take up this project.⁵⁵

The last book Steinbeck published before he began his Arthurian research was the slight political satire The Short Reign of Pippin IV (1957), a comic history of the sudden rise of an obscure royal descendant to a quickly reinstated French throne and the path to his abdication. A collection of Steinbeck's war time correspondence, Once There Was A War, was published a year later, but his last novel, the one which had been nudging toward the forefront of Steinbeck's consciousness as he grew frustrated with his Arthurian work, was The Winter of Our Discontent (1961). That book offered insight to a protagonist who felt discontented with his life, his work, his contribution, and in many ways was an expression of the mounting restlessness and general dissatisfaction Steinbeck felt about himself. Apart from his commentary for the pictorial America and Americans, published in 1966, and his travelogue, Travels With Charley, published in 1962, Steinbeck produced no other material for publication. His recurrent heart problems throughout the sixties and his Nobel Prize in 1962, which he feared might ruin him as a writer, were major contributions to his inability to focus his creative energy on completing a project of the caliber of his earlier successes.

Steinbeck's early work and that of his final decades has been pounded by critics who would cast him to the ranks of minor American novelists. Apart from the intellectual left, which accused Steinbeck of betraying his principles after The Grapes of Wrath, and the intellectual right, which condemned him for alleged socialistic overtones in work like In Dubious Battle, the most common,

and perhaps the most valid criticism concerns the tone and technique of his work. Critics have characterized his writing as simple, fuzzy-minded, sentimental, allegorical and superficial. Criticism, however, ages more quickly than art, and future readers may find in Steinbeck's fuzzy-mindedness an unexpected philosophy, in his simplicity eloquent understatement. Future critics may find his allegory and sentiment only out of favor with his time. In Steinbeck's Arthurian piece, the style critics excuse in his earliest work and scorn in his last, manages to succeed because of the nature of the material.

VIII

Knightly virtues and their accompanying conventions inspired the youthful fantasies of John Steinbeck. Belief in human perfectibility, faith in imagination, sentiment, individuality and truth Steinbeck found lacking in modern society, and perhaps the dearth of these in American culture galled him most. Since Steinbeck believed that the writer has a duty to expose society's deficiencies, these qualities, these virtues became the cornerstones of his philosophy as a writer, even though such a philosophical basis was not in vogue with contemporary writers or literary critics. Although in his fiction Steinbeck acknowledged the ambiguities, paradoxes and setbacks of a real life spent pursuing an ideal, nevertheless the nobility of his characters--Lenny and George from Of Mice and Men; Ma and Tom Joad, and Jim Casey from Grapes of

Wrath; Cal Trask, Abra and Lee from East of Eden; and Lady Lyne and Lancelot from Acts of King Arthur--stands out, reflecting the endurance of his youthful admiration for such fictional characters as the Ugly Duckling, Don Quixote, and Malory's knights.

One of the features of the chivalric world, the intimacy between its characters and their environment, especially appealed to Steinbeck. The geography of the Arthurian cycle still suggests magical attributes to modern readers: Stonehenge, Glastonbury Tor, Avalon, Castle Tintagel. Caves, dark forests, lakes, sylvan hermitages, deer, wolves, dragons, and horses--this stuff of Arthurian legend, which provided both settings and symbols, created a wonderful playground for an allegorically-minded writer like Steinbeck. Perhaps more than in any of his other writings, nature in Acts goes beyond dressing: creating the near-magical world of Arthurian England and illustrating human behavior. In romantic literature, natural elements can offer mythic perspectives to otherwise prosaic works. Anthropologists, historians and philosophers recognize the bond between nature and myth, the former giving birth to the latter.

If nature sustains myth, language begets it. Steinbeck saw this close association and tried to realize it in his writing. His initial failure with Acts came from his attempt to translate Malorian English straight into American English, destroying its spoken rhythm and eliminating the charm of its antiquity. But when Steinbeck returned to the secret language he had borrowed from his childhood reading and incorporated it into his own style, he restored that part of

the magic of the Arthurian cycle which comes from its form. The metaphoric richness, panoramic settings, picaresque characters, spoken qualities, and sly humor combined with Steinbeck's borrowed technical peculiarities like polysyndeton, adjectival embellishment, repetition, parallelism and mythic allusion to create a distinctly Steinbeckian style. If this style was Steinbeck's strait jacket, as he had feared, it was roomier than he imagined since it offered him the opportunity to experiment as much as he did with his writing.

With a vehicle like Acts allowing Steinbeck to use his affection for nature and the secret language he developed over his career, the allegorical touches he favored in his earlier works could have greater license. Acts allegorizes the moral decay of America and the loss of individual creativity and responsibility, but simultaneously celebrates the perseverance of the man of ideas and virtues in a moral void, and the solitude of the artist who steps beyond the conventions of his time. In many ways, Lady Lyne and Lancelot, considered as examples of Steinbeck's self-characters, support the allegory of the knight as artist, as writer. Despite sexual stereotypes, Lady Lyne pursues her own course of fulfillment, follows her individual standards and values, and contributes what she thinks best to her society. Despite hypocrisy and apathy, Lancelot pursues his own course of personal excellence, remains faithful to his vows of knighthood, and ignores the barbs of those critical of his pledge. Looking at the development of Steinbeck's writing as an arc swinging from his early extroversion to his later introversion, with Cup of Gold at one extreme and The Winter of Our

Discontent and Travels with Charley at the other, then in terms of both chronology and content, The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights should be placed among the latter works. In Acts, then, Steinbeck likens the role of the writer to the role of the knight, and he portrays himself as a writer-knight, searching for truth in a moral wasteland and within himself.

NOTES

1. John Steinbeck, The Acts of King Arthur (New York: Ballentine Books, 1984), p. 363.
2. Roy S. Simmons, "The Unrealized Dream: Steinbeck's Modern Version of Malory," Steinbeck and the Arthurian Theme (Muncie, Indiana: The John Steinbeck Society of America, 1975), p.31.
3. Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten, eds., Steinbeck: A Life in Letters (New York, New York: The Viking Press, 1975), p. 642.
4. Steinbeck, Acts of King Arthur, p. 432.
5. Jackson Benson, The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer (New York, New York: The Viking Press, 1984), p. 29.
6. Steinbeck, Acts of King Arthur, p. iv.
7. Benson, True Adventures, p. 682.
8. E. Steinbeck and Wallsten, p. 87.
9. Ibid., p. 497.
10. Ibid., p. 497.
11. E. Steinbeck and Wallsten, pp. 624-625.
12. Jackson Benson, Looking for Steinbeck's Ghost (Norman, Oklahoma: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), p. 57.
13. James Gray, John Steinbeck (Minneapolis: Pamphlets on American Writers, University of Minnesota Press, 1971), p. 40.
14. Steinbeck, Acts of King Arthur, pp. 259-260.

15. Pascal Covici, Jr., ed., The Portable Steinbeck (New York, New York: The Viking Press, 1971), p. 691.
16. Steinbeck, Acts of King Arthur, pp. 5-6.
17. Ibid., p. 353.
18. Ibid., p. 359.
19. Ibid., p. 357.
20. Ibid., p. 360.
21. Benson, True Adventures, p. 837.
22. Ibid., p. 849.
23. Ibid., p. 849.
24. Ibid., p. 847.
25. Steinbeck, Acts of King Arthur, p. 359.
26. Ibid., p. 410.
27. Ibid., p. 331.
28. E. Steinbeck and Wallsten, p. 523.
29. Benson, True Adventures, p. 21.
30. Ibid., p. 115.
32. John Steinbeck, Cup of Gold (Penguin Books, New York, New York, 1986) pp. 22-23.
32. E. Steinbeck and Wallsten, p. 12.
33. Benson, True Adventures, p. 681.
34. John Steinbeck, Grapes of Wrath (Viking Press, New York, New York, 1940), p. 477.
35. Steinbeck, Acts of King Arthur, pp. 248-249.
36. Simmonds, Steinbeck's Literary Achievement, p. 23.

37. Steinbeck, Grapes of Wrath, pp. 444-445.
38. James Gray, John Steinbeck (Pamphlets on American Writers, No. 94, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1971), p. 39.
39. Steinbeck, Acts of King Arthur, p. 133.
40. Harry Morris, "The Pearl: Realism and Allegory," Steinbeck: A Collection of Critical Essays (Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1972), p. 149.
41. Thomas Fensch, ed., Conversations with John Steinbeck (The University Press of Mississippi, Oxford, Mississippi, 1988). p. 83.
42. Ibid., p. 76.
43. Steinbeck, Acts of King Arthur, p. 334.
44. Ibid., pp. 100-101.
45. Fensch, p. 75.
46. Ibid., p. 110.
47. Steinbeck, Acts of King Arthur, p. 250.
48. Ibid., p. 364.
49. Ibid., p. 363.
50. Ibid., p. 219.
51. Ibid., p. 221.
52. E. Steinbeck and Wallsten, p. 221.
53. Steinbeck, Acts of King Arthur, p. 221.
54. Covici, Jr., ed., Portable Steinbeck, p. 691.
55. Simmonds, "The Unrealized Dream," pp. 40-41.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Benson, Jackson. Looking for Steinbeck's Ghost. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988.

----- The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer. New York: Viking, 1984.

Covici, Pascal, Jr., ed. The Portable Steinbeck. New York: Viking, 1971.

DeMott, Robert, ed. Working Days: The Journal of The Grapes of Wrath 1938-1941. New York: Viking, 1989.

Fensch, Thomas, ed. Conversations with John Steinbeck. Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 1988.

French, Warren. John Steinbeck. New York: Twayne, 1961.

Gray, James. John Steinbeck. Pamphlets on American Writers, No. 94. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971.

Gunton, Sharon R., ed. Contemporary Literary Criticism. Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Company, 1981.

Hodges, Laura F. "Arthur, Lancelot, and the Psychodrama of Steinbeck." Steinbeck and the Arthurian Theme. Ed. Tetsumaro Hayashi. Muncie, Indiana: The John Steinbeck Society of America, 1975.

Magill, Frank N., ed. Magill's Literary Annual 1977. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Salem Press, 1977.

McCarthy, Paul. John Steinbeck. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1980.

Morris, Harry. "The Pearl: Realism and Allegory." Steinbeck: A Collection of Critical Essays. Ed. Robert Murray Davis. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972.

Simmonds, Roy S. "The Unrealized Dream: Steinbeck's Modern Version of Malory." Steinbeck and the Arthurian Theme. Ed. Tetsumaro Hayashi. Muncie, Indiana: The John Steinbeck Society of America, 1975.

----- Steinbeck's Literary Achievement. Steinbeck Monograph Series,
No. 6. Muncie, Indiana: The John Steinbeck Society of America, 1976.

Steinbeck, Elaine and Robert Wallsten, eds. Steinbeck: A Life in Letters. New
York: Viking, 1975.

Steinbeck, John. The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights. New York:
Ballantine, 1976.

----- Cup of Gold. New York: Penguin, 1986.

----- The Grapes of Wrath. New York: Viking, 1940.

Timmerman, John H. John Steinbeck's Fiction. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press,
1986.

VITA

William Scott Simkins

Born in Union, Mississippi, September 6, 1962. Graduated from Hampton High School in Hampton, Virginia, June 1980, B.A. in English with a minor in French, Christopher Newport College, Newport News, Virginia, 1986. M.A. candidate, College of William and Mary, 1987-1990.