

from LE MORTE D'ARTHUR

Sir Launcelot du Lake

Sir Thomas Malory

When King Arthur returned from Rome, he settled his court at Camelot, and there gathered about him his knights of the Round Table, who diverted themselves with jousting²² and tournaments. Of all his knights one was supreme, both in **proWess** at arms and in nobility of bearing, and this was Sir Launcelot, who was also the favorite of Queen Gwynevere, to whom he had sworn oaths of **fideliTy**.

One day Sir Launcelot, feeling weary of his life at the court, and of only playing at arms,²³ decided to set forth in search of adventure. He asked his nephew Sir Lyonel to accompany him, and when both were suitably armed
10 and mounted, they rode off together through the forest. **G**

At noon they started across a plain, but the intensity of the sun made Sir Launcelot feel sleepy, so Sir Lyonel suggested that they should rest beneath the shade of an apple tree that grew by a hedge not far from the road. They dismounted, tethered their horses, and settled down.

“Not for seven years have I felt so sleepy,” said Sir Launcelot, and with that fell fast asleep, while Sir Lyonel watched over him.

Soon three knights came galloping past, and Sir Lyonel noticed that they were being pursued by a fourth knight, who was one of the most powerful he had yet seen. The pursuing knight overtook each of the others in turn and,
20 as he did so, knocked each off his horse with a thrust of his spear. When all three lay stunned, he dismounted, bound them securely to their horses with the reins, and led them away.

Without waking Sir Launcelot, Sir Lyonel mounted his horse and rode after the knight and, as soon as he had drawn close enough, shouted his challenge. The knight turned about, and they charged at each other, with the result that Sir Lyonel was likewise flung from his horse, bound, and led away a prisoner.

proWess (prou'is) *n.*
superior skill, strength,
or courage, especially
in battle

fideliTy (fī-dēl'ī-tē) *n.*
faithfulness to duties,
loyalty and devotion

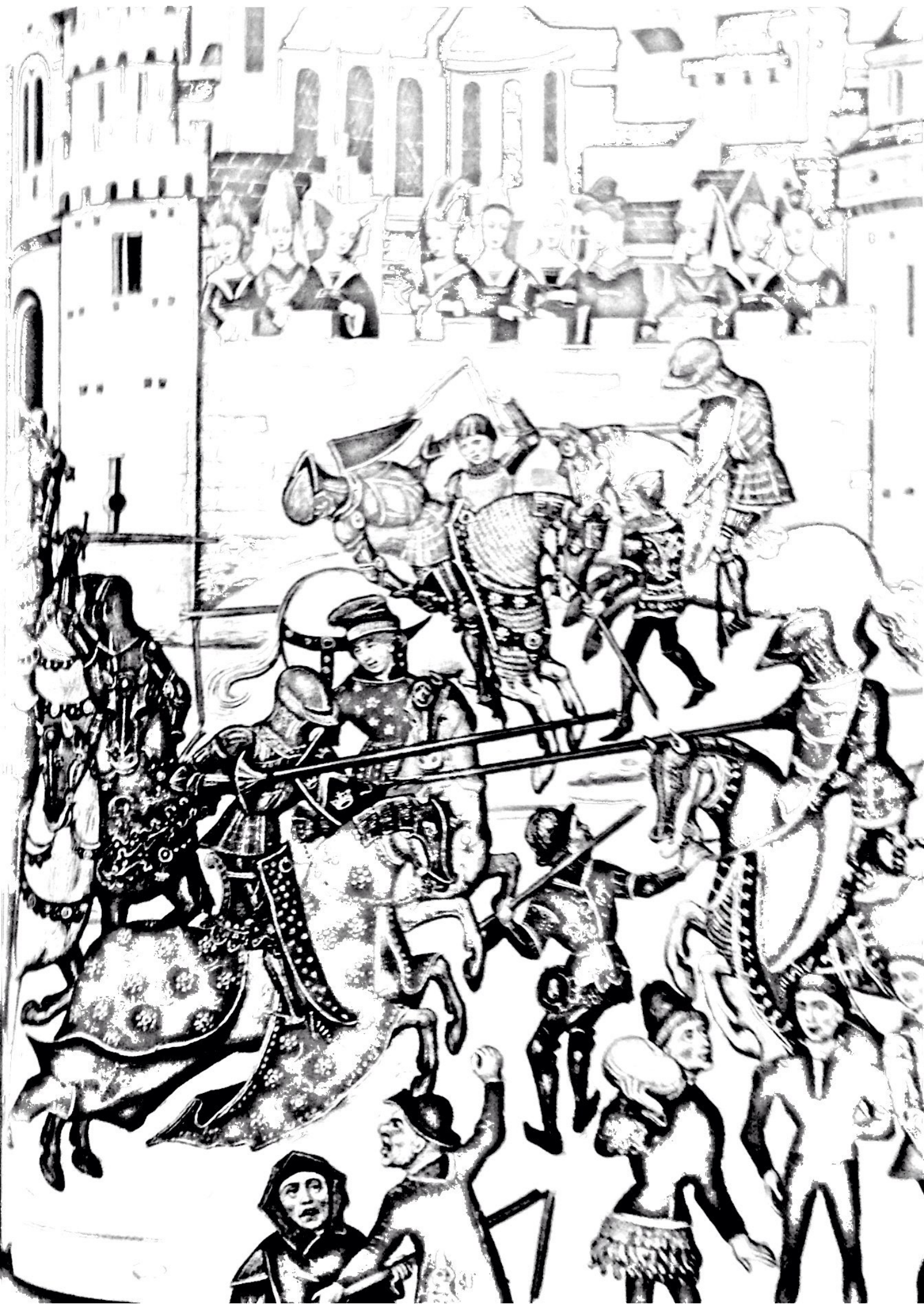
G **MEDIEVAL ROMANCE**
Reread lines 7–10. What
motivates Sir Launcelot to
begin his quest?

ANALYZE VISUALS
How does the use of
color and active figures
affect the **mood** of this
illustration? Contrast the
mood with that of the
illustration on page 1013.

22. **jousting**: combat between two knights who charge each other with lances while riding horses.

23. **playing at arms**: fighting with weapons as sport.

Tournament jousting at the court
of Caerleon (1468). *Les chroniques
de Hainaut*. MS 9243, fol. 45.
Bibliothèque Royale Albert I.
Brussels, Belgium. Photo © Art
Resource, New York.



The victorious knight, whose name was Sir Tarquine,²⁴ led his prisoners to his castle and there threw them on the ground, stripped them naked, and beat them with thorn twigs. After that he locked them in a dungeon where many
30 other prisoners, who had received like treatment, were complaining dismally.

Meanwhile, Sir Ector de Marys,²⁵ who liked to accompany Sir Launcelot on his adventures, and finding him gone, decided to ride after him. Before long he came upon a forester.

“My good fellow, if you know the forest hereabouts, could you tell me in which direction I am most likely to meet with adventure?”

“Sir, I can tell you: less than a mile from here stands a well-moated castle. On the left of the entrance you will find a ford where you can water your horse, and across from the ford a large tree from which hang the shields of many famous knights. Below the shields hangs a caldron, of copper and
40 brass: strike it three times with your spear, and then surely you will meet with adventure—such, indeed, that if you survive it, you will prove yourself the foremost knight in these parts for many years.”

“May God reward you!” Sir Ector replied.

The castle was exactly as the forester had described it, and among the shields Sir Ector recognized several as belonging to knights of the Round Table. After watering his horse, he knocked on the caldron, and Sir Tarquine, whose castle it was, appeared. **H**

They joust, and at the first encounter Sir Ector sent his opponent’s horse spinning twice about before he could recover.

50 “That was a fine stroke; now let us try again,” said Sir Tarquine.

This time Sir Tarquine caught Sir Ector just below the right arm and, having impaled him on his spear, lifted him clean out of the saddle and rode with him into the castle, where he threw him on the ground.

“Sir,” said Sir Tarquine, “you have fought better than any knight I have encountered in the last twelve years; therefore, if you wish, I will demand no more of you than your parole²⁶ as my prisoner.”

“Sir, that I will never give.”

“Then I am sorry for you,” said Sir Tarquine, and with that he stripped and beat him and locked him in the dungeon with the other prisoners. There Sir
60 Ector saw Sir Lyonel. **I**

“Alas, Sir Lyonel, we are in a sorry plight. But tell me, what has happened to Sir Launcelot? for he surely is the one knight who could save us.”

“I left him sleeping beneath an apple tree, and what has befallen him since I do not know,” Sir Lyonel replied; and then all the unhappy prisoners once more bewailed their lot.

H MEDIEVAL ROMANCE

Reread lines 31–47, and think about the **setting** in which Sir Ector de Marys finds himself. What details suggest that this is an unusual or exotic place?

I EVALUATE

Consider Sir Tarquine’s behavior up to this point. Does he treat his opponents fairly both on and off the battlefield? Explain.

24. **Tarquine** (tār’kwīn)

25. **Sir Ector de Marys** (mār’əs): the brother of Launcelot.

26. **parole**: the promise of a prisoner to abide by certain conditions in exchange for full or partial freedom.

While Sir Launcelot still slept beneath the apple tree, four queens started across the plain. They were riding white mules and accompanied by four knights who held above them, at the tips of their spears, a green silk canopy, to protect them from the sun. The party was startled by the neighing of Sir Launcelot's horse and, changing direction, rode up to the apple tree, where they discovered the sleeping knight. And as each of the queens gazed at the handsome Sir Launcelot, so each wanted him for her own.

"Let us not quarrel," said Morgan le Fay. "Instead, I will cast a spell over him so that he remains asleep while we take him to my castle and make him our prisoner. We can then oblige him to choose one of us for his paramour."

Sir Launcelot was laid on his shield and borne by two of the knights to the Castle Charyot, which was Morgan le Fay's stronghold. He awoke to find himself in a cold cell, where a young noblewoman was serving him supper.

"What cheer?"²⁷ she asked.

"My lady, I hardly know, except that I must have been brought here by means of an enchantment."

"Sir, if you are the knight you appear to be, you will learn your fate at dawn tomorrow." And with that the young noblewoman left him. Sir Launcelot spent an uncomfortable night, but at dawn the four queens presented themselves and Morgan le Fay spoke to him:

"Sir Launcelot, I know that Queen Gwynevere loves you, and you her. But now you are my prisoner, and you will have to choose: either to take one of us for your paramour, or to die miserably in this cell—just as you please. Now I will tell you who we are: I am Morgan le Fay, Queen of Gore; my companions are the queens of North Galys, of Estelonde, and of the Outer Isles. So make your choice."

"A hard choice! Understand that I choose none of you, lewd sorceresses that you are; rather will I die in this cell. But were I free, I would take pleasure in proving it against any who would champion you that Queen Gwynevere is the finest lady of this land."

"So, you refuse us?" asked Morgan le Fay.

"On my life, I do," Sir Launcelot said finally, and so the queens departed. **J**

Sometime later, the young noblewoman who had served Sir Launcelot's supper reappeared.

"What news?" she asked.

"It is the end," Sir Launcelot replied.

"Sir Launcelot, I know that you have refused the four queens, and that they wish to kill you out of spite. But if you will be ruled by me, I can save you. I ask that you will champion my father at a tournament next Tuesday, when he has to combat the King of North Galys, and three knights of the Round Table, who last Tuesday defeated him **ignominiously**."

"My lady, pray tell me, what is your father's name?"

J EVALUATE

Reread lines 87–98. What does Launcelot's response to the ultimatum of the four queens reveal about his character?

ignominiously

(ig'nə-mīn'ē-əs-lē) *adv.*
shamefully

27. What cheer?: How are you?

“King Bagdemagus.”²⁸

110 “Excellent, my lady; I know him for a good king and a true knight, so I shall be happy to serve him.”

“May God reward you! And tomorrow at dawn I will release you and direct you to an abbey²⁹ which is ten miles from here, and where the good monks will care for you while I fetch my father.”

“I am at your service, my lady.”

As promised, the young noblewoman released Sir Launcelot at dawn. When she had led him through the twelve doors to the castle entrance, she gave him his horse and armor, and directions for finding the abbey.

120 “God bless you, my lady; and when the time comes, I promise I shall not fail you.” **K**

Sir Launcelot rode through the forest in search of the abbey but at dusk had still failed to find it and, coming upon a red silk pavilion, apparently unoccupied, decided to rest there overnight and continue his search in the morning.

He had not been asleep for more than an hour, however, when the knight who owned the pavilion returned and got straight into bed with him. Having made an assignation³⁰ with his paramour, the knight supposed at first that Sir Launcelot was she and, taking him into his arms, started kissing him. Sir Launcelot awoke with a start and, seizing his sword, leaped out of bed and out
130 of the pavilion, pursued closely by the other knight. Once in the open they set to with their swords, and before long Sir Launcelot had wounded his unknown **adversary** so seriously that he was obliged to yield.

The knight, whose name was Sir Belleus, now asked Sir Launcelot how he came to be sleeping in his bed and then explained how he had an assignation with his lover, adding:

“But now I am so sorely wounded that I shall consider myself fortunate to escape with my life.”

140 “Sir, please forgive me for wounding you; but lately I escaped from an enchantment, and I was afraid that once more I had been betrayed. Let us go into the pavilion, and I will staunch your wound.” **L**

Sir Launcelot had just finished binding the wound when the young noblewoman who was Sir Belleus’s paramour arrived and, seeing the wound, at once rounded in fury on Sir Launcelot.

“Peace, my love,” said Sir Belleus. “This is a noble knight, and as soon as I yielded to him, he treated my wound with the greatest care.” Sir Belleus then described the events which had led up to the duel.

“Sir, pray tell me your name, and whose knight you are,” the young noblewoman asked Sir Launcelot.

“My lady, I am called Sir Launcelot du Lake.”

K **MEDIEVAL ROMANCE**
Review the exchange between Sir Launcelot and the noblewoman in lines 99–120. Why might they be considered idealized characters?

adversary (ăd'vər-sēr'ē)
n. an opponent; enemy

L **MEDIEVAL ROMANCE**
Hidden identity is a common element in romances. Compare the scene in lines 121–140 with the scene in lines 40–56 on page 1014. What different effects do these scenes create?

28. **Bagdemagus** (băg'də-măg'əs).

29. **abbey**: a place where monks or nuns live.

30. **assignation** (ăs'īg-nă'shən): an appointment for a meeting between lovers.



Combat between Lancelot and Gawain (1400s) from the *Cycle de Lancelot*. MS Fr. 120, f. 590v.107a. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris. Photo © Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

150 “As I guessed, both from your appearance and from your speech; and indeed I know you better than you realize. But I ask you, in **recompense** for the injury you have done my lord, and out of the courtesy for which you are famous, to recommend Sir Belleus to King Arthur, and suggest that he be made one of the knights of the Round Table. I can assure you that my lord deserves it, being only less than yourself as a man-at-arms, and sovereign of many of the Outer Isles.”

“My lady, let Sir Belleus come to Arthur’s court at the next Pentecost.³¹ Make sure that you come with him, and I promise I will do what I can for him; and if he is as good a man-at-arms as you say he is, I am sure Arthur will accept him.”

160 As soon as it was daylight, Sir Launcelot armed, mounted, and rode away in search of the abbey, which he found in less than two hours. King Bagdemagus’s daughter was waiting for him and, as soon as she heard his horse’s footsteps in the yard, ran to the window and, seeing that it was Sir Launcelot, herself ordered the servants to stable his horse. She then led him to her chamber, disarmed him, and gave him a long gown to wear, welcoming him warmly as she did so.

recompense
(rĕk’əm-pĕns’) *n.* amends
for damage or payment
for service

31. **Pentecost:** In Arthurian legend, Pentecost is one of the times at which the knights meet at Camelot to renew their oaths and receive new missions.

King Bagdemagus's castle was twelve miles away, and his daughter sent for him as soon as she had settled Sir Launcelot. The king arrived with his retinue³² and embraced Sir Launcelot, who then described his recent enchantment, and the great obligation he was under to his daughter for releasing him.

"Sir, you will fight for me on Tuesday next?"

"Sire, I shall not fail you; but please tell me the names of the three Round Table knights whom I shall be fighting."

"Sir Modred, Sir Madore de la Porte, and Sir Gahalantyne. I must admit that last Tuesday they defeated me and my knights completely."

"Sire, I hear that the tournament is to be fought within three miles of the abbey. Could you send me three of your most trustworthy knights, clad in plain armor, and with no device,³³ and a fourth suit of armor which I myself shall wear? We will take up our position just outside the tournament field and watch while you and the King of North Galys enter into combat with your followers; and then, as soon as you are in difficulties, we will come to your rescue and show your opponents what kind of knights you command."

This was arranged on Sunday, and on the following Tuesday Sir Launcelot and the three knights of King Bagdemagus waited in a copse,³⁴ not far from the pavilion which had been erected for the lords and ladies who were to judge the tournament and award the prizes.

The King of North Galys was the first on the field, with a company of ninescore knights; he was followed by King Bagdemagus with fourscore³⁵ knights, and then by the three knights of the Round Table, who remained apart from both companies. At the first encounter King Bagdemagus lost twelve knights, all killed, and the King of North Galys six.

With that, Sir Launcelot galloped on to the field, and with his first spear unhorsed five of the King of North Galys's knights, breaking the backs of four of them. With his next spear he charged the king and wounded him deeply in the thigh.

"That was a shrewd blow," commented Sir Madore and galloped onto the field to challenge Sir Launcelot. But he too was tumbled from his horse, and with such violence that his shoulder was broken.

Sir Modred was the next to challenge Sir Launcelot, and he was sent spinning over his horse's tail. He landed headfirst, his helmet became buried in the soil, and he nearly broke his neck, and for a long time lay stunned.

Finally Sir Gahalantyne tried; at the first encounter both he and Sir Launcelot broke their spears, so both drew their swords and hacked vehemently at each other. But Sir Launcelot, with mounting wrath, soon struck his opponent a blow on the helmet which brought the blood streaming from eyes, ears, and

32. **retinue** (rèt'n-oo'): attendants.

33. **device**: an emblem or design used as an identifying mark.

34. **copse** (kòps): a thicket of small trees.

35. **ninescore** . . . **fourscore**: A score is a set of 20; thus, ninescore is 180 and fourscore is 80.

mouth. Sir Gahalantyne slumped forward in the saddle, his horse panicked, and he was thrown to the ground, useless for further combat.

Sir Launcelot took another spear and unhorsed sixteen more of the King of North Galys's knights and, with his next, unhorsed another twelve; and in each case with such violence that none of the knights ever fully recovered. The King of North Galys was forced to admit defeat, and the prize was awarded to King Bagdemagus. **M**

That night Sir Launcelot was entertained as the guest of honor by King Bagdemagus and his daughter at their castle and before leaving was loaded with gifts.

"My lady, please, if ever again you should need my services, remember that I shall not fail you."

The next day Sir Launcelot rode once more through the forest and by chance came to the apple tree where he had previously slept. This time he met a young noblewoman riding a white palfrey.³⁶

"My lady, I am riding in search of adventure; pray tell me if you know of any I might find hereabouts."

"Sir, there are adventures hereabouts if you believe that you are equal to them; but please tell me, what is your name?"

"Sir Launcelot du Lake."

"Very well, Sir Launcelot, you appear to be a sturdy enough knight, so I will tell you. Not far away stands the castle of Sir Tarquine, a knight who in fair combat has overcome more than sixty opponents whom he now holds prisoner. Many are from the court of King Arthur, and if you can rescue them, I will then ask you to deliver me and my companions from a knight who distresses us daily, either by robbery or by other kinds of outrage."

"My lady, please first lead me to Sir Tarquine; then I will most happily challenge this miscreant knight of yours."

When they arrived at the castle, Sir Launcelot watered his horse at the ford and then beat the caldron until the bottom fell out. However, none came to answer the challenge, so they waited by the castle gate for half an hour or so. Then Sir Tarquine appeared, riding toward the castle with a wounded prisoner slung over his horse, whom Sir Launcelot recognized as Sir Gaheris, Sir Gawain's brother and a knight of the Round Table.

"Good knight," said Sir Launcelot, "it is known to me that you have put to shame many of the knights of the Round Table. Pray allow your prisoner, who I see is wounded, to recover, while I **vindicate** the honor of the knights whom you have defeated."

"I defy you, and all your fellowship of the Round Table," Sir Tarquine replied.

"You boast!" said Sir Launcelot.

At the first charge the backs of the horses were broken and both knights stunned. But they soon recovered and set to with their swords, and both struck so lustily that neither shield nor armor could resist, and within two hours they

M EVALUATE

Reread lines 192–212.

Which aspects of the chivalric code does Sir Launcelot uphold in his performance at the jousting tournament?

vindicate (vīn'dī-kāt')
v. to clear of suspicion,
doubt, or blame

36. **palfrey**: a gentle riding-horse.

were cutting each other's flesh, from which the blood flowed liberally. Finally
250 they paused for a moment, resting on their shields.

"Worthy knight," said Sir Tarquine, "pray hold your hand for a while and, if
you will, answer my question."

"Sir, speak on."

"You are the most powerful knight I have fought yet, but I fear you may be
the one whom in the whole world I most hate. If you are not, for the love of
you I will release all my prisoners and swear eternal friendship."

"What is the name of the knight you hate above all others?"

"Sir Launcelot du Lake; for it was he who slew my brother, Sir Carados
of the Dolorous Tower, and it is because of him that I have killed a hundred
260 knights and maimed as many more, apart from the sixty-four I still hold
prisoner. And so, if you are Sir Launcelot, speak up, for we must then fight
to the death."


"Sir, I see now that I might go in peace and good fellowship or otherwise
fight to the death; but being the knight I am, I must tell you: I am Sir
Launcelot du Lake, son of King Ban of Benwick, of Arthur's court, and a
knight of the Round Table. So defend yourself!"

"Ah! this is most welcome."

Now the two knights hurled themselves at each other like two wild bulls;
swords and shields clashed together, and often their swords drove into the
270 flesh. Then sometimes one, sometimes the other, would stagger and fall, only
to recover immediately and resume the contest. At last, however, Sir Tarquine
grew faint and unwittingly lowered his shield. Sir Launcelot was swift to
follow up his advantage and, dragging the other down to his knees, unlaced his
helmet and beheaded him. **N**

Sir Launcelot then strode over to the young noblewoman: "My lady, now I
am at your service, but first I must find a horse."

Then the wounded Sir Gaheris spoke up: "Sir, please take my horse. Today
you have overcome the most formidable knight, excepting only yourself, and
by so doing have saved us all. But before leaving, please tell me your name."

280 "Sir Launcelot du Lake. Today I have fought to vindicate the honor of the
knights of the Round Table, and I know that among Sir Tarquine's prisoners
are two of my brethren, Sir Lyonel and Sir Ector, also your own brother, Sir
Gawain. According to the shields there are also Sir Brandiles, Sir Galyhuddis,³⁷
Sir Kay, Sir Alydukis,³⁸ Sir Marhaus, and many others. Please release the
prisoners and ask them to help themselves to the castle treasure. Give them all
my greetings and say I will see them at the next Pentecost. And please request
Sir Ector and Sir Lyonel to go straight to the court and await me there." 

N **MEDIEVAL ROMANCE**
Reread lines 246–274.
Which details suggest
that the clash between
Sir Tarquine and Sir
Launcelot is exaggerated
or larger than life?

37. **Galyhuddis** (gäl'í-höö'd'əs).

38. **Alydukis** (äl'í-döö'kəs).