2024-04-25

Arthur is Only Sleeping: A Reawakening of John Steinbeck's The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights

Caroline J. Raines
Brigham Young University

Arthur is Only Sleeping: A Reawakening of John Steinbeck's *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*

Caroline J. Raines

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Dr. Juliana Chapman, Chair
Dr. Edward Cutler
Dr. Dennis Cutchins

Department of English

Brigham Young University

ABSTRACT

Arthur is Only Sleeping: A Reawakening of John Steinbeck's *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*

Caroline J. Raines
Department of English, BYU
Master of Arts

John Steinbeck, known for his descriptions of the American West, maintained a fascination with the Arthurian legend throughout his life and literary career. Through comparative analysis of *Cup of Gold, Tortilla Flat,* and *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights,* we can see Steinbeck's recurring interest in the Arthurian legend which is often overlooked by scholars. Steinbeck's initial interest in strict translation which evolved into adaptation over the course of his work on *The Acts* shows his developing interest in Arthurian themes which he enhanced with his own creative abilities as a world-renowned author. By highlighting the gap between Steinbeck's view of America and his known Arthurian interest, we can challenge current interpretations of Steinbeck's literary corpus, and create new meaning which has been overlooked. Despite limited scholarship on *The Acts,* this thesis explores Steinbeck's connection to King Arthur and underscores the significance of his contribution to the Arthurian tradition.

Keywords: Steinbeck, Arthurian legend, posthumous publication, translation, adaptation

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The list of individuals I could thank are endless, and this project could not have been completed without the collective effort of many personal noble knights. First, I would like to especially thank my parents for always helping me to remember who I am, and for encouraging me on this project from ideation to completion. To Dr. Chapman, I would like to express deep appreciation for her guidance in helping this thesis, through many drafts, become what it is. I am also grateful for her sincere enthusiasm for medieval English literature and for her kindness and encouragement. To Dr. Cutler, I would like to express a cosmic-sized thanks for changing the way I think about and appreciate both literary theory and the world around me. To Dr. Cutchins, I would like to express gratitude for his sincere interest and clear and instructive feedback through this project. To my committee collectively, I cannot express how grateful I am for your mentorship. You have each taught me how to be a scholar and have shown me what it is to value knowledge. Thank you to each of you for your unending patience and support as I have worked to finish this quest.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I - From Boyhood to Beyond: Steinbeck and His Interest in King Arthur

"So many scholars have spent so much time trying to establish whether Arthur existed at all that they have lost track of the single truth that he exists over and over."

Steinbeck, Letter to Elizabeth Otis, 1957

The Salinas Valley, tucked comfortably between the Gabilan and Saint Lucia mountains, is one of the most fertile places in the state of California. The valley, spilling out into the Pacific Ocean, was the perfect home for the boy John Steinbeck to grow ideas. He often spent hours of the day with his sister, playing knights and imagining castles and fearsome beasts (Souder 16). Though Steinbeck's more famous writings were filled with the American West, his life was bookended with the quest for King Arthur, reading and devouring *The Boy's King Arthur*[1] as a child and later, as an adult, attempting to translate Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* into modern American English. In 1958 Steinbeck started out on this quest to translate the medieval text by traveling to the United Kingdom with his wife, Elaine, where he produced *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*.[2] The text functioned both as a translation but also as a fulfillment of his lifelong interest in King Arthur. His translation–never completed–was published posthumously in 1976 by Elaine.

Steinbeck's boyhood fascination with the Arthurian legend began when his aunt gifted him a copy of *The Boy's King Arthur*. It was this book that enchanted Steinbeck, helping him fall in love with reading and the English language. He once stated that he loved "the old spelling of the words" (*The Acts 2*). Steinbeck went on to study literature and languages at Stanford University, where he "read a good deal of" Old and Middle English and prided himself on his

[1] *The Boy's King Arthur* was an abridgment of the William Caxton print of the Arthurian legend meant for young boy readers.
[2] From here forward referred to as *The Acts*.

abilities in the field of English literature (*The Acts* 319; Souder). After several valiant attempts to study seriously, Steinbeck left Stanford and pursued a career as a novelist.

As a novice novelist, young Steinbeck was coming out of his adolescent fascination with pirates, magic, and high adventure. His first book, *Cup of Gold*, published in 1929, was unsuccessful. Subsequent published novels were also mostly unsuccessful, and it wasn't until 1935, when he published *Tortilla Flat,* that his career began to gain traction. Not long after, his best-selling works were published—*Of Mice and Men* (1937)*, The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)*,* and later, *East of Eden* (1952). Steinbeck's most popular novels are American in theme and nearly always focus on the Salinas Valley in California. It is curious that Steinbeck did not abandon his love for the Arthurian legend in the wake of his success in a career that seemed mostly interested in modern America.

Despite his success depicting the gritty, vivid lives of the people of Salinas Valley, his interest in Arthur was rekindled with the discovery of the Winchester Manuscript of *Le Morte D'Arthur* in 1934. According to the British Library, the Winchester Manuscript was rediscovered by "accident" and proved to be an earlier version of the William Caxton print (Wade). At the finale of his career, Steinbeck became concerned that the manuscript be translated into a modern "American" English (*The Acts 352*). The translation would serve the common people of America by becoming more accessible and readable (Paolini vii). Steinbeck, knowledgeable in medieval English literary traditions, and a successful author, felt uniquely qualified to be able to use his skills to bring the Winchester manuscript to life again in the American context in which he lived. No longer a boy, and with a solid career and funding behind his endeavors, Steinbeck set off to translate the manuscript. The result was *The Acts.* While contemporaries were creating adaptations of the Arthurian legend (T.H. White's *The Once and Future King,* for example)

Steinbeck hoped that his translation of Malory would have much the same effect of inspiration and amazement on new young readers as the Arthurian legend had had on him as a child (Souder 17).

Unfortunately, much as the Winchester manuscript was left forgotten for centuries, Steinbeck's *The Acts* has also been shelved in the shadows of his more acclaimed works. Even though Steinbeck himself wanted *The Acts* to be one of his greatest works, and his interest in the translation of Malory was, according to Chase Horton, "great and genuine," there is very little scholarship dedicated to Steinbeck's translation (*The Acts* 317). There has been a recent interest through student-scholars like Terry Earle and Timothy Luft, who have written papers on the subject, but tenured academics do not seem to be nearly as interested. One scholar, Laura Hodges, is a regular contributor to scholarship on Steinbeck, and is genuinely interested in Steinbeck's relationship with King Arthur. She has written several articles on *The Acts* but seems to be an anomaly.

Steinbeck scholars like Scott Pugh incorporate Steinbeck's *The Acts* in their criticism as little more than a biographical adventure for Steinbeck. David Laws goes so far as to say that "ultimately Steinbeck failed in his quest" to make something of *The Acts*, hinting at his failure to complete his translation and finish a full, editable manuscript of his version of the Arthurian Legend (128). Journals like *The Steinbeck Review* or *Steinbeck Quarterly,* which are centered on Steinbeck's whole body of written work, often neglect to give Steinbeck's fascination with the Arthurian legend, his translation of Malory, and *The Acts* manuscript adequate study.

When *The Acts* was first published, several popular newspapers including *The Chicago Tribune* and *The New York Times* offered sentimental reviews on it*,* with one critic going so far as to say that *The Acts* was "unfortunately not Steinbeck's greatest book, but … it was getting

there" (Gardner). Steinbeck's hopes for his translation project were extremely high, as recorded in various letters to his friend, Chase Horton, and his literary agent, Elizabeth Otis. He said of *The Acts* that it "is destined to be the largest and I hope the most important work I have ever undertaken" (*The Acts* 334). The reception, from readers and scholars alike, has certainly not yet lived up to Steinbeck's expectations. His own agents were confused by his translation and were not pleased with his first drafts (Souder 345). But Steinbeck's assertion that "these stories are alive even in those of us who have not read them," asks us to question the scholarly hesitation against his translation (*The Acts* 3). From his earliest writings, we see Arthurian themes and influence, and it lasted his entire career as a writer. Though some question whether Steinbeck's translation of Malory was necessary, it is indicative of the influence of the Arthurian legend on Steinbeck and deserves a fairer consideration among his works. It also deserves to be counted as a serious addition to the ongoing Arthurian literary tradition. Steinbeck scholars and Arthurian scholars alike have mostly rejected it as serious work, but it is well documented that Steinbeck's fascinaion with the Arthurian legend influences most of his writing.

Despite speculation over whether *The Acts* should be considered as seriously as Steinbeck's other works, scholar Gregory Robinson suggested that "although an unfinished manuscript, *The Acts* remains a complete world . . . Numerous Arthurian tales, as well as other significant literature, including Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales,* are also critically accepted as unfinished yet completed examples that are worthy of critical acclaim and study" (47-8). The flaw in the scholarship surrounding *The Acts* is the misinterpretation of the work as "unfinished" or incomplete. The Arthurian legend, "alive" as Steinbeck asserts, is alive in partial manuscripts, in manifold retellings, in children's literature and adult literature alike. The story is infused in Western culture in whole and in part, which makes Steinbeck's *The Acts* just as worthy of critical

analysis as any other version of the story—not to mention, many may find it to be much easier to read than the original Malory.

Scholarly hesitation with *The Acts* may be partially because it is apparently unfinished and was published posthumously. Although Steinbeck had no say in what happened with *The Acts* after his death, the posthumous publication of his work landed it in a pile of other forgotten or less-important works which has ultimately been detrimental to its serious study. Like Steinbeck, other authors have been critiqued posthumously. Joan Didion, a writer for *The New Yorker*, wrote a scathing article about the posthumous publication of Ernest Hemingway's works, and writer Francesca Peacock illustrated issues surrounding posthumous publications for authors like Hemingway, Nabokov, and others. The bolded quote that highlights Peacock's editorial review online states "Readers should remember that many works published after a beloved writer's death are the product of speculative—and often controversial—editorial processes."

By comparing and contrasting Steinbeck's literary works with his manuscript of *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights,* a clear line of Arthurian themes through his career gives weight to his interest in King Arthur. By also comparing Steinbeck's *The Acts* against the original Winchester manuscript and the Caxton print, we can see clearly that Steinbeck chose to make subtle moves from a strict translation into a sort of adaptation. A study of *The Acts* shows a clear development of Steinbeck's ideas regarding characterization, narrative structure, and how his translation fits seamlessly into the Arthurian legend and its manifold iterations. Steinbeck's work is yet another iteration worth considering. Steinbeck's development of the original Malorian text shows not only his interest in a translation, but a deep commitment to the legend which indicates an extensive knowledge of it. *The Acts* allows us to read Steinbeck's immersion in Arthuriana retroactively and discover the author's extensive inclusion of Arthurian themes.

II - An Analysis of Steinbeck's Use of The Arthurian Legend in His Works

> *"The myth of King Arthur continues even into the present day and is an inherent part of the so-called "Western" with which television is filled at the present time ... you have exactly the same story."*
>
> Steinbeck, Letter to Elizabeth Otis, 1958

Steinbeck's works, though mostly consisting of American people, places, and themes, are uniquely influenced by his study of, and interest in the Arthurian legend. With a closer study of texts across the timeline of his corpus, we begin to see how even his Western texts are infused with Arthuriana. Steinbeck's literary interest in Arthur is apparent from his first published work *Cup of Gold,* with some obvious and literal applications of the legend appearing in this work. Merlin, Welsh culture and attitudes, and even a sly mention of Morgan le Fay work their way into the text. From there, *Tortilla Flat,* which has been more widely analyzed and is familiarly understood to carry Arthurian tropes, was the first novel Steinbeck wrote that really catapulted his career into an international success. Both his first novel, and his first well-sold novel carry Arthuriana through them. From the start all the way to the finish of his career, Steinbeck was interested in Arthur. *The Acts*, one of Steinbeck's last projects, shows his consistent interest in the Arthurian legend. Steinbeck's additions to the Arthurian legend include his own sophisticated characterization of certain Arthurian characters including Merlin, Morgan le Fay, and Lancelot, among others. Steinbeck's use of Arthurian characters in his own writing makes his interest in Arthuriana obvious.

Cup Of Gold

Although some of Steinbeck's references to the Arthurian legend are subtle, *Cup of Gold,* first published in 1929, is Arthurian in two overt ways. The first is the addition of Merlin as a

main character and plot device which moves the narrative along from the first chapter to the last chapter. The second is the grail quest – the main protagonist, Henry Morgan searching for the cup of gold. These two additions to the plot are supplemented by the inclusion of several other allusions to the Arthurian legend throughout the book. *Cup of Gold* was not a particular success for Steinbeck, as he earned only $180 dollars[3] from the sales (Souder 76). It has rarely been picked up and analyzed as an important part of his career beyond it being nostalgically his first novel. However, the value of *Cup of Gold* should be marked not for its monetary value in sales, but for what it does to help us understand Steinbeck's interest in Arthur from the start. By understanding the connections between *Cup of Gold* and Steinbeck's interest in Arthur, we can more fully appreciate the value the novel has as part of his greater corpus of work.

Cup of Gold is a pirate's tale, charting the history of the famous buccaneer Henry Morgan who, in real life, plundered and pirated much of the Caribbean. From a description of the book, Arthurian themes are not apparent, but they become so as you read the story. The most apparent use of Arthurian themes is Merlin in *Cup of Gold,* who appears four times in the novel, creating a continuous presence from the first chapter to the last page. First, in the beginning of the novel, Henry's father, Robert, asks Henry to go visit Merlin before becoming a buccaneer. Second, Robert visits Merlin himself before he dies. The third mention of Merlin is more oblique and occurs while Henry is out buccaneering and being a successful leader of pirates, having obtained everything he could have dreamed of, including sacking Panama and finding La Santa Roja, a beautiful woman of legend. Despite these successes, Henry says, "I am drawn to sit in a deep veranda and to hear the talk of an old man I used to know" (153). We can assume he "old man" is Merlin, since there is no other mention of old men from his past. Fourth, as Henry is dying, he

[3] This would be equivalent to about $3200 in 2024 according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics inflation calculator. It is certainly not much to earn for a book that you had sky-high hopes for as a starting writer.

thinks of Merlin. The very last thing that Henry Morgan says is, "But Merlin, then–Where is Merlin? If I could only find him" (187). Henry's dying breath is a regret at not being able to find Merlin one last time, even though he found everything else he had wanted. Across these four appearances, Merlin remains a mysterious character, serving as a wise sage for Henry to first speak with and later reflect on throughout his life.

The addition of Merlin seems strange in a pirate story, but it highlights Steinbeck's desire to include elements of the Arthurian legend in his work in an overt and obvious way. As others have noticed, "the inclusion of Merlin in the plot is intriguing: are we supposed to believe that he is really the legendary magician, alive in the 17th century, or is he just an eccentric old man who believes he is Merlin? Either way, Arthurian legend is obviously something that interested Steinbeck" (Helen).

Cup of Gold is rich with other interesting Arthurian inclusions that bolster the idea that we are meant to take Steinbeck's Merlin seriously. During Henry Morgan and Merlin's first conversation, Merlin refers to the legends of Arthur, and Henry calls it the "Red Book," which most likely refers to the *Red Book of Hergest*[4] (*Cup* 18). This is an intriguing inclusion because it allows us a broader view of Steinbeck's interest in the Arthurian legend which included traditional Welsh tales in *The Mabinogion.* He mentioned in a letter in 1957[5] that he "read the Mabinogion thirty years ago" (*The Acts* 323). This would indicate that he had read it around 1927, or exactly at the time when he was writing *Cup of Gold.* Steinbeck also includes other accounts of the Arthurian tales, including a reference to Geoffrey of Monmouth. Henry Morgan questions Merlin's sanity by stating that he is simply named after a "figment of the mad brain of

[4] The *Red Book of Hergest* (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Jesus College 111) is part of a manuscript collection of 11 medieval Welsh tales which are currently called *The Mabinogion* (Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Peniarth 4-5). They include Celtic mythology, Arthuriana romance, and other tales of medieval Wales (Davies ix).
[5] The letter was written to Chase Horton on March 14, 1957.

Geoffrey of Monmouth," to which Merlin responds, "'Oh the fool!' cried Merlin in disgust. 'The fool to be breaking these things!'" (*Cup* 18).

Almost as obvious as Steinbeck's usage of Merlin in *Cup of Gold* as an Arthurian theme is his use of the grail quest. Michael Sundermeier, in *Steinbeck Review,* stated that Steinbeck's "first novel, *Cup of Gold,* contains overt references to the grail legend" (Sundermeier 34). Not only is the "cup" a reference to the holy grail, which was a cup also, but the search for the cup also mirrors the quest for the grail. Peter Lisca agrees that, "the legends of the Holy Grail . . . give symbolic structure to *Cup of Gold*" (Lisca 6). The search for the holy grail certainly is a theme which Steinbeck took from Arthur's legend and inserted into his *Cup of Gold.*

The questing and testing that leads Henry Morgan to La Santa Roja is like the questing Arthur took to find the Holy Grail. The difference is that Arthur never finds his grail. Henry Morgan does. Michael Meyer suggests that Henry's attained wealth is what makes his quest worth it, even though he tosses an actual cup of gold aside. Meyer states that, "after confronting a literal cup of gold decorated with lambs (a symbol of innocence) and a naked girl (a symbol of experience), he rejects it, tossing it into a pile of diamonds" (Meyer 9). What Henry Morgan finds that Arthur never found was a contentedness with being incredibly wealthy over fulfilling the quest. Though Meyer does agree that, "like Arthur, [Henry] has discovered his fallibility" (9).

If the Arthurian connections of Merlin and the grail quest in *Cup of Gold* are not recognizable enough, Steinbeck also includes some subtle allusions to Morgan le Fay in his character, Gwenliana Morgan, the grandmother of Henry Morgan. Gwenliana is a known witch who practices necromancy. Her name, "Gwenliana," suggests a connection to *The Mabinogion* which includes names like "Gwern," Gwydion," and Gwenhwyfar," and are reminiscent of traditional Welsh names. Gwenliana also has a connection to the legends of King Arthur through

her last name, "Morgan," not only as a family name, but also as a connection to Malory's Morgan le Fay. In *Cup of Gold*, Merlin states that he "taught old Gwenliana many things which had to do with magic; she was very apt at reading signs–and faces" (104). This version differs from the original Malorian text in which The Winchester Manuscript states that Morgan le Fay was "put to school in a nunnery, and there she learned so much that she was a great clerk of necromancy" (Oxford Winchester 6). Although Steinbeck is using a bit of freedom as to how Gwenliana Morgan received her magic, the connection between her and Morgan le Fay is hard to ignore and seems quite deliberate considering the careful construction that Steinbeck used to include Arthurian elements throughout the novel.

Tortilla Flat

Steinbeck's first true success, *Tortilla Flat* is, like *Cup of Gold*, deliberately Arthurian in nature. In the introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of the novel, Thomas Fensch acknowledges that it was because of a "chance meeting in Chicago between two old friends" that *Tortilla Flat* was published and had the success that it did (viii). The average reader of the time was interested in *Tortilla Flat* because, "who, during the years of the Great Depression, couldn't be enchanted by reading" the book? The novelty of the story provided an "escape from worrying" which helped the book become popular. Although critics have discussed *Tortilla Flat* as being a sentimental joke on King Arthur, and reduced it to "pure escapism and entertainment," Steinbeck maintained that his intentions to include elements of the Arthurian legend in *Tortilla Flat* were all serious (viii-ix). He wrote in 1934 to his literary agent, Mavis McIntosh, that,

> The book has a very definite theme. I thought it was clear enough. I have expected that the plan of the Arthurian cycle would be recognized, that my Gawaine and my Lancelot, and my Arthur and Galahad would be recognized. Even the incident of the Sangreal in

> the search of the forest is not clear enough I guess. The form is that of the Malory version, the coming of Arthur . . . the forming of the round table, the adventures of the knights and finally, the mystic translation of Danny. However, I seem to not have made any of this clear. (*A Life* 96-7)

Steinbeck himself lays out for us the themes that he was hoping would translate over from the Arthurian legend to his Californian-paisano-version of the tale. Not only was he intent on characters being a likeness of those in Malory, but he also carefully constructed themes and forms to reflect the Malorian tale. Still, Steinbeck frustratedly acknowledged the lingering misinterpretation of his version of the Arthurian legend in *Tortilla Flat*. Steinbeck creatively took his childhood Arthur out of a British context to see how a similar story would play out among the Californian paisanos.[6] Steinbeck said that he wanted "simply to show that a cycle is there," meaning that he wanted to show that the Arthurian cycle is present in his new characters (*A Life* 97). His characters of Danny and his friends are meant to be parallels to the original Arthur and his knights of the round table.

Though many still believed that Steinbeck was poking fun at the story by having his Arthur become Danny, a slightly incompetent and weathered man, biographer William Souder refutes this by stating that "readers, having no knowledge of Steinbeck's obsession with the story of King Arthur, no doubt mistook the comparison as a joke, a clever way of suggesting the nobility of an ignoble band of misfits," (151). If we look at *Tortilla Flat* as a serious endeavor on Steinbeck's part, however, taking Danny to be Arthur, Pilon, Pablo, Jesus Maria, Big Joe, and the Pirate to be his knights and fellowship, then Steinbeck's intentions with his characters as real

[6] Steinbeck defines "paisano" in this passage: "What is a paisano? He is a mixture of Spanish, Indian, Mexican and assorted Caucasian bloods. His ancestors have lived in California for a hundred or two years . . . and he lives in that uphill district above the town of Monterey called Tortilla Flat, although it isn't a flat at all" (*Tortilla* 2).

and meaningful does become clearer. Misunderstanding *Tortilla Flat* can lead to a misunderstanding of Steinbeck's overall interest in the Arthurian legend cycle and his work on *The Acts*.

Despite Steinbeck's own insistence that his characters living in Tortilla Flat are truly Arthurian, scholars still debate whether Danny is meant to represent King Arthur. The debate revolves around Steinbeck's inclusion of a character named Arthur Morales, who Danny thinks of while he and Pilon are drinking. Danny remembers that Arthur Morales is "Dead in France," and "Dead for his country. Dead in a foreign land. Strangers walk near his grave and they do not know Arthur Morales lies there" (*Tortilla* 9-10). Scholars question whether this "Arthur" is an allusion to King Arthur. Thomas Fensch interprets this to mean that "In Steinbeck's version of the Round Table, there is no King Arthur" (xx). Though Fensch's interpretation is mainstream, it misses the depth with which Steinbeck cared for his characters to be representative of the Arthurian legend. Arthur Morales may be dead in France, but Danny is alive and well and having his own Arthurian adventures on Tortilla Flat. The parallels between Danny and his friends and King Arthur and his noble knights are too many and too concrete. Other evidence against the idea that Arthur Morales is King Arthur is that Danny and his friends, including Arthur Morales, have been recently involved in World War I,[7] and it may be that Arthur Morales is dead because of the war, rather than a commentary on the death of King Arthur himself in a foreign, untouchable place. If Arthur Morales is meant to represent King Arthur, then the commentary may have been a way for Steinbeck to feel that he had permission to bring King Arthur to America. If King Arthur is dead in France, or dead in foreign places, then he can be alive in

[7] We know it is WWI because of this quote: "Now when Danny was twenty-five years old, the war with Germany was declared" (*Tortilla Flat* 2). Also, because *Tortilla Flat* was published in 1935, we know he is not referring to WWII which was not officially declared until 1939.

America through Danny. The similarities between Danny and King Arthur become clear when compared side-by-side. Joseph Fontenrose created a list of similarities between Danny and Arthur which we can consider. Three that stand out[8] in his list are that Danny inherits a house, has trouble getting rent paid by Pilon and Pablo, and dies in battle.

Fontenrose states this about Danny inheriting a house: "Arthur [Danny] after an obscure boyhood unexpectedly inherited a kingdom [house] and was transformed from ordinary manhood to heaven's viceroy as lord of the land [a landlord who experienced 'the mystic quality of owning a house']" (36). Danny, like Arthur, is thrust into sudden power when he comes home from a long war and is then responsible for that power and station. Danny's power comes from his gaining property, namely, two houses that were previously owned by his grandfather (*Tortilla* 5). The comparison is quite clear as Danny and Arthur both grew up not knowing of their potential good fortune. In both cases, Danny and Arthur were also trained in subjects of war, and it comes as a shock to each when they understand their future is going to change because of an inheritance. King Arthur inherits a kingdom, and Danny inherits the houses. King Arthur's inheritance of Camelot was an issue for the people because they were unsure of his parentage. However, because he proved himself as the rightful inheritor to the sword Excalibur "by miracle," and by proving through battle that he was the rightful heir to the throne, they finally accepted him as their king (Oxford Winchester 14). Danny's inheritance is simpler in that his grandfather died and left him the two houses, and Danny "was a little weighed down with the responsibility of ownership" (*Tortilla* 5). Steinbeck is playing with this parallel idea of becoming an heir to the throne or a homeowner and what kind of responsibility it would be for someone who had nothing from the start.

[8] For a full list of Fontenrose's comparisons between Danny and Arthur, see his book *John Steinbeck: An Introduction and Interpretation,* pages 36-38.

Another similarity between Danny and King Arthur that Fontenrose identifies is that both King Arthur and Danny are, at first, refused homage, or payment from those living on their land (36). In the Oxford edition of the Winchester Manuscript, it states that when Arthur is first announced as king and landlord, the kings, and barons "rebuked the messengers shamefully" who had come to tell them the news of the new King Arthur, and his rule, and his demand for them to come pay tribute to him. The barons and kings said, "they had no joy to receive no gifts of a beardless boy that was come of low blood; and sent him word they would . . . come to give him gifts with hard swords betwixt the neck and shoulders" (12). The major difference between King Arthur's story and Danny's is that Danny was already friends with Pilon and Pablo, whereas King Arthur had to earn the barons' trust. Although Danny may be Pilon and Pablo's friend, they do not view Danny as their landlord and take measures to avoid paying him respect and in a literal sense, rent.

On one occasion, Pilon gains a dollar to use to pay rent to Danny. "[Pilon] took the dollar up the road to give to Danny, but on the way, he bought a gallon of wine . . . there was a really fine fight" (*Tortilla* 16-17). Danny finds out that Pilon traded the dollar for wine and is rightfully upset that Pilon did not use the dollar to pay for the rent that they agreed upon. Like King Arthur and his knights, Danny and his friends resort to fighting to resolve a lot of their issues. And yet, despite Danny's anger, Pilon does this again. After their initial fight, "Pilon began to worry about the rent. And as time went by, the worry grew intolerable," so he made two dollars and of course "started up the hill to pay Danny the two dollars on account. But on the way he bought two gallons of wine" (*Tortilla* 17). Unlike the barons that King Arthur must deal with, Pilon understands his debt to Danny, and would also like the protection that Danny's house and Danny's friendship gives to him. But, like the barons, he refuses to see the benefit in paying rent

(or paying tribute) to Danny. Steinbeck plays with the issues of power and who has the right to require homage by making it a bit more literal in the case of Danny and Pilon. The literalization of the payment of rent makes the story easier to imagine and grasp for a Western American audience who is particularly concerned about money and being paid what they deserve. For Arthur, it's a matter of honor, respect, and kingship; for Danny, it's a matter of pride, obligation, and justice. Arthur and Danny become more similar as we think through their motivations and the stories that Steinbeck decides to tell.

The final, and maybe most crucial example of the similarities between Danny and King Arthur is the final battle they both engage in and ultimately perish from. Fontenrose puts it this way, "Arthur . . . in a great last battle defeated his enemies . . . but mortally wounded, went off over a lake to Avalon with supernatural companions [Danny, going outside to fight The Enemy, met him and fell into a gulch to his death]" (38). The parallels between the two ending scenes of each character, Arthur and Danny, are similar in that they both utter a battle cry and then, after fighting, perish. The Oxford Winchester says that "The King got his spear in both his hands and ran toward Sir Mordred, crying and saying, 'traitor, now is thy death-day come!'" (Winchester 513). This is Arthur's battle cry that Steinbeck must have been thinking of when he wrote of Danny that, "outside the house they heard his roaring challenge" (*Tortilla 164).* The Winchester manuscript describes King Arthur rushing at Sir Mordred who he kills. Arthur is also fatally wounded in the fight. In comparison, Danny, "charge[s] to the fray" against the enemy–who is unknown–shouting a "last shrill cry of defiance" (*Tortilla* 164). Arthur's death is given some space and time where he can give some parting words, but Danny is later found in the gulch, having fallen in. It is hard to ignore the close relationship these two deaths have, however, and Steinbeck sets up *Tortilla Flat* in a clever way to show the link that Danny has to King Arthur.

Although Danny is a less-than-ideal type of hero, he is the hero of Tortilla Flat and he is Steinbeck's paisano version of King Arthur. It is easy to see how, with all the drinking, banter, and mistakes that the paisanos make, that an American audience would find this retelling humorous. Steinbeck may have even intended for it to be a bit humorous, but he also intended for it to be a serious attempt at taking the Arthurian legend and transferring it over into an American context. The context he chose may make the story seem as if it is casting King Arthur in low humor, but his intentions were not to create a parody and instead focused on seeing how, in a realistic way, Arthur and his house would play out in a new place among new people. It may be humorous, but Steinbeck's intentions were serious and so scholars should take the adaptation seriously.

Not only are the characters and their quests parallels of the stories of King Arthur, but *Tortilla Flat* uses a formatting that is reminiscent of the Arthurian legend in its own unique way. The scholarship on Arthurian legend form is far too vast to sufficiently capture here, but it is important to look at as part of Steinbeck's journey in the Arthurian world, especially regarding *Tortilla Flat*.

The addition of the chapter headings in *Tortilla Flat* came from a decision that Steinbeck made to include an "interlocutor, who between each incident interprets the incident, morally, esthetically, historically" (*A Life* 96). Steinbeck's idea was to give his audience an understanding of the chapter headings as guideposts to the episodes in the lives of his paisanos. He even related these headings to those "of the Gesta Romanorum . . . or of the Song of Solomon in the King James version" of the Bible. Several scholars agree that Steinbeck's addition of the headings is reminiscent of the Caxton version of the Arthurian text. Fontenrose says that, "when the book appeared in 1935 Steinbeck had provided it with chapter headings in the style of Caxton's

Malory" (36). Although Fontenrose does not provide evidence for this claim, it seems to be a popular assumption made by scholars. Even the Bangor University webpage on *Tortilla Flat* states that to make the link between his paisanos and the Arthurian legend, Steinbeck "added chapter headings that imitated those in the Caxton edition of Malory."

Steinbeck's headings read very much like the Caxton headings do. An example of a Caxton heading is this: "How sir Lancelot cam in to the chapel peryllous & gate there of a dede corps a piece of the cloth & a swerde" (Wade 648). Steinbeck's headings read similarly, like this example: "How Danny, home from the wars, found himself an heir, and how he swore to protect the helpless" (*Tortilla* 5). The headings are both simple and follow a similar form and pattern. Another heading in *Tortilla Flat* reads, "How Danny's Friends threw themselves to the aid of a distressed lady" (119). We can safely conclude that the headings in *Tortilla Flat* are directly influenced by his reading of Caxton as a boy and can therefore be seen as one additional connecting link to the Arthurian legend that he so desperately wanted to make.[9]

The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights

Steinbeck's allusions and parallels to the Arthurian legend in *Cup of Gold* and *Tortilla Flat,* as well as subtle mentions in several of his other works, foreshadow his interest in the Arthurian legend. His interest begins to come full circle when we consider his intent and somewhat obsessive interest in creating a translation of *Le Morte D'Arthur* in his *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights.* When Steinbeck first set out to create what he called a

[9] The debate has much more depth however, as the origins of the Winchester Manuscript and the Caxton print are still hotly contested. James Wade presents the issue of whether Caxton was the primary introducer of the headings in the manuscript or not, claiming that Caxton first printed the *Morte D'Arthur* and "only after . . . he composed and printed his famous prologue and the book and chapter rubrics that are continuous with it" (646). K.S. Whetter's argument supports Wade, stating that the Winchester Manuscript used rubrication to highlight certain names in the text rather than using chapter headings. Caxton's choice to include the chapter headings seems to be a matter of making the text easier to navigate. Wade also claims that the explanation for the addition of Caxton's headings are "what D.Thomas Hanks calls a 'printerly afterthought,' a supplement of his prologue intended to familiarize potential buyers with the specific contents of his product" (647).

translation of the Malorian text, he began to run into common issues regarding which manuscript to use. In a letter in December 1956, he said that he found himself "using the Winchester more than the Caxton" and that there were "lovely nuances in the Winchester which have been removed by Caxton" (*The Acts* 320). Steinbeck's preoccupation with the form of the text itself began to weigh on him and he questioned the "method" he was using (320).

The beginning sections of *The Acts* follow almost verbatim the opening stories we find in both the Winchester and the Caxton print. Scene by scene, we can trace Steinbeck's version, finding only slight changes in language, grammar, and small clarifications. But as Steinbeck continued with the project, he began to struggle with the characters, the missing links, and the form of the text. Almost two years later, in June 1959, he wrote:

> I am working now on Gwaian, Ewain, and Marhalt, having lost a little time over the issues of the boys. It's so full of loose ends, of details without purpose, of promises unkept . . . I think I am breathing some life into it but maybe not enough. As I go along I do grow less afraid of it. But there must be some reverence for the material because if you reject these stories you reject humans. (*The Acts* 383)

Steinbeck's "reverence" for Malory was at first aimed at keeping his story as a word-for-word translation, but over time, Steinbeck found this to be a bit stifling. As his translation grew longer, and as he got further into the process, he realized that he was moving away from translation and into a type of adaptation in which he was adding his own dialogue, characterization, and plot points, though it is reminiscent of the original Malorian text. Linda Hutcheon defines one strategy for adaptation this way: "What is involved in adapting can be a process of appropriation, of taking possession of another's story, and filtering it, in a sense, through one's own sensibility, interests, and talents. Therefore, adapters are first interpreters and then creators" (18). This

definition of adaptation as at first an interpretation and then a creation fits exactly what Steinbeck was trying to do with his translation. His translation shifted from a mere form of equivalence into something more original and creative as the project grew.

Truly, we cannot call *The Acts* a translation or an adaptation, but we should refer to it as a translation-adaptation[10] as it functions as both. The beginning is more of a translation of sorts, and the further into *The Acts* Steinbeck wrote, it morphs into an adaptation. Our understanding of Steinbeck's shift can be traced back to another letter he wrote in March 1957, shortly after he explained the issue of deciding which original text to work with for his translation. He states, "Now Malory was a pretty exact man with words. He does never mention Frensshe books–but only Frensshe *book.* In other words, he did not need a library, and there is little evidence that he used one. He was not a scholar. He was a novelist. Just as Shakespeare was a playwright" (*Acts* 323). From this letter we see inklings of Steinbeck's growing interest in Malory as a writer, and himself as a translator-adapter. If Malory was writing without a library of research, then perhaps Steinbeck began to feel he could do the same in a small way.

In contrast to *Cup of Gold* and *Tortilla Flat* where Steinbeck had complete creative control over his characters, he was feeling perhaps tied down to the existing characters Malory had portrayed. To further the idea that Steinbeck was becoming more and more interested in how he could apply himself as a novelist outside of a strict translation, he said later in April 1957, "oh, don't forget that the novelist may arrange or rearrange events so they are more nearly what he hoped they might have been" (*The Acts* 327). This exchange of letters gives us the insight we

[10] The term "tradaptation" which was coined by Michel Garneau in the 1980s encapsulates the idea of a translation that also functions as an adaptation. Steinbeck's *The Acts,* however, did not originally function as a tradaptation but rather, he moved from working on a translation into work on an adaptation.

need to understand Steinbeck's growing desire to shift from a strict word-for-word translation into a more flexible adaptation. If Malory could do it, then why not Steinbeck.

Though Steinbeck's translation-adaptation starts very closely in theme and plot to the source text, Steinbeck's arrangement of the chapters creates a new flow for the story which is based around characters rather than around events. In the Caxton edition, there are chapter headings, much as Steinbeck had imitated in *Tortilla Flat*. With *The Acts*, however, Steinbeck forgoes most of the headings and instead broke his translation into sections named after individuals. Rather than the book titles being descriptions of the contents like "From the Marriage of King Uther Unto King Arthur," Steinbeck calls this book, "Merlin." Steinbeck's phenomenal characterization in his translation-adaptation makes his characters feel present and knowable, partially because of his emphasis on the characters as the section titles.

It's Steinbeck's section titled "Morgan le Fay" where we really start to see his translation begin to diverge from a straightforward affair to a soulful retelling of the story and something that could connect more broadly to his contemporary American audience. The first books in *The Acts,* "Merlin," "The Knight with The Two Swords," "The Wedding of King Arthur," and "The Death of Merlin," are very close translation of the Winchester Manuscript and Caxton print and uses less adaptation. The section titled "Morgan le Fay," however, is where Steinbeck begins to deviate more widely as a novelist, and into adaptation. It is in this section where the characters begin to have more feeling, more movement, and are more relatable.

Steinbeck's attention to the detailed characterization of Morgan le Fay is what really signals to readers that he is doing something different with the text. The Winchester Manuscript does describe Morgan le Fay's actions as cold and heartless as she "made no semblant of dole" though she was sorrowful when she learned that her lover Accolon was dead (71). Other than

this, outside of describing her actions in a broad way, she does not receive much attention to her characterization. Statements like, “of the falsehood of Morgan le Fay” and “by the means of Morgan le Fay” do not give much insight into her person (73, 64).

In contrast, Steinbeck’s deliberate choice to title the whole section after Morgan, and to start the chapter off by detailing how villainous she is, foreshadowing her treachery against King Arthur, and emphasizing words like “dark,” “cruel,” “destructive,” “blacker,” “weapon,” “bending,” and so forth, creates a picture of Morgan that we do not get in the original Malorian text (*The Acts* 119). Steinbeck adds in lengthy descriptions of Morgan rather than just giving a play-by-play of her outward actions. Steinbeck added the following to develop her character:

> She beguiled Accolon with promises, canceled his conscience with lust, and instructed him in the part he was to play, and when he agreed he though her eyes lighted with love when they were fired with triumph, for Morgan le Fay loved no one. Hatred was her passion and destruction her pleasure. (119)

Rather than being simply a plot device to be put into Arthur’s path, Steinbeck gives Morgan a characterization that shows that she is a cunning, vicious, brutally intelligent, and dangerous woman who has set out to ruin the king and his court. The addition of Steinbeck’s characterization highlights the importance of the scene and builds suspense in the plot between Morgan and Arthur. Steinbeck as translator-adapter can be recognized in this section of *The Acts*. His portrayal of Morgan as a villainous woman is reminiscent of his portrayal of Cathy Trask in *East of Eden,* or the towering and demanding Ma Joad in *Grapes of Wrath.* We also have deceiving women in *Cup of Gold* through La Santa Roja, who turns out to be quite average looking, and in *Tortilla Flat*’s Sweets Ramirez, who catches Danny in her “web” (*Tortilla* 83).

Steinbeck's deliberate portrayal of Morgan as a dangerous woman is one way that we can see his novelist ability to characterize coming into play as *The Acts* began to take shape.

Steinbeck also develops the characterization of Merlin more deeply than the Winchester manuscript. Merlin becomes a fuller, more understandable character through Steinbeck's addition of emotion. The Merlin that Steinbeck creates in *The Acts* is a matured Merlin who, though he is a magician and seer, has feelings and desires, and makes fatal mistakes. Steinbeck's deliberate attempt to make Merlin more likable, or at least believable, in *The Acts* shows again the depth with which he understood the Arthurian legend and its characters.

In *The Acts* we begin to see Steinbeck playing with character emotion when Merlin is talking to Arthur about whom he would like to marry. In the Oxford Winchester Manuscript, Merlin simply warns Arthur about Guinevere's future romance with Lancelot and that is the end of the conversation (50). Steinbeck, however, gives Merlin emotion and adds in some wise advice of his own. In *The Acts*, Merlin does not mention Lancelot by name, instead only calling him "your dearest and most trusted friend," which leaves a bit of ambiguity (85). We can assume it is Lancelot, but Merlin does not point to him directly by name. When Arthur denies that he could believe his friend would cause Guinevere to be unfaithful to him, Merlin responds by saying "every man who has ever lived holds tight to the belief that for him alone the laws of probability are canceled out by love" (85-6). This wisdom feels very reminiscent of the type of advice and reflection that Steinbeck includes in his other works. For example, in *East of Eden,* Sam Hamilton acts as the sage and wizened figure in the story, always giving advice or words of wisdom. In one passage he states, "the ways of sin are curious . . . I guess if man had to shuck off everything he had, inside and out, he'd manage to hide a few little sins somewhere for his own discomfort. They're the last things we'll give up" (*East* 166). The introspection on the nature of

man, and the wisdom to understand men in a way beyond the self is the type of wisdom that characters like Merlin or Sam would proclaim. Steinbeck's sages understand life in a semi-self-deprecating way that helps readers feel a sense of being known. These additions to the dialogue help Steinbeck draw readers in and give the characters the ability to be fallible and yet lovable.

Steinbeck also gives Merlin the ability to reflect sagely on his downfall with Nyneve. In the Winchester manuscript, Merlin simply acknowledges the fact that she will be his undoing. In Steinbeck's *The Acts*, Merlin knows that he cannot change the future, saying, "in the combat between wisdom and feeling, wisdom never wins" (109). Steinbeck's additions to Merlin's character make his actions more believable. To believe that a wise old magician could be fooled by a young girl is unbelievable, but for Steinbeck to put it into perspective saying that wisdom can't win over feelings, even in an old wizard, helps Merlin's choices seem more plausible, and therefore more relatable. Watching an old wizard purposely give himself up to a girl for no reason other than he wants to is not as relatable as the battle that occurs between right and wrong and between feeling and better judgment. Steinbeck not only gives Merlin more personality, but he also helps his audience buy into the narrative being presented.

Characterization was certainly important to Steinbeck as he was translating the manuscript, but the most obvious place in *The Acts* where Steinbeck took adaptive freedom to its height is the last section, "The Noble Tale of Sir Lancelot of the Lake." Gregory Robinson stated that "Steinbeck's reworking of some of the major themes . . . and his modern adaptations to the Lancelot love story . . . produce an ingenious version of the [tale]," and that the adaptation is "a powerful literary account designed to connect the natural, intellectual, and spiritual manifestations of Malory's archetypal legends to modern readers" (51-52). In other words, Steinbeck's Lancelot section is where Steinbeck can shine and bring the medieval work to his

readers as he had wished from the outset. It is in this section that Steinbeck finds his stride and can open the tale in a new way that gives new insight into the original source text.

Characterization is still important here, as Steinbeck seems to take particular care to add emotions to help Lancelot feel more relatable. Lancelot and Guinevere have a love affair in the Malory, but the details are few and far between. Steinbeck adds suspense and questions of morality to create sympathy for Lancelot. After discussing Arthur's love for Guinevere, Lancelot "felt lost and a cold knife of loneliness pressed against his heart" (*The Acts* 315). Here, we get a taste for what Lancelot was feeling when Arthur would speak of his wife. On the last page of this section in *The Acts,* Steinbeck alludes to Lancelot and Guinevere's love affair and ends this way, "Each frantic heartbeat at the walls of ribs trying to get to the other until their held breaths burst out and Lancelot, dizzied, found the door and blundered down the stairs. And he was weeping bitterly" (316). We get a sense of the confusion that Lancelot was feeling at his betrayal of the King. Even though he feels lonely without Guinevere, and he decidedly wants her, he is conflicted in his soul and cries "bitterly" as he thinks of what he has done. These emotions help readers relate to Lancelot in a way that we do not see in the Malory.

Steinbeck had a special love for Lancelot, saying, "He's my boy. I can feel him," and maybe it was Steinbeck's own emotions he was pouring into Lancelot that makes him such a unique character in the story (391). Perhaps it is Steinbeck's connection to Lancelot that drove him to create something different and new with "The Noble Tale of Sir Lancelot of the Lake." Steinbeck said of Lancelot, "he is tested, he fails the test and still remains noble," (*The Acts* 319). Some scholars disagree that Lancelot is noble, but Steinbeck's view on his character is clear and it comes through in his portrayal and characterization of Lancelot's emotion and inner thoughts.

Steinbeck's expansion of certain narrative moment also highlights his desire to create Lancelot into a thinking, living, breathing character that an audience would appreciate and relate to. An example of this is that in the Winchester Manuscript, three lines describe the scene where Lancelot decides to go questing with Lyonel.[11] It states that, "thus Sir Lancelot rested him long with play and game; and then he thought to prove himself in strange adventures, and bade his nephew, Sir Lyonel, for to make him ready, 'for we must go seek adventures.' So they mounted on their horses" (95). Steinbeck's version of this tale involves the forethought and dialogic opinions of Guinevere, the influence of King Arthur on Lancelot's choices, moral commentary on being idle versus being useful, and so forth. Instead of taking three lines to explain the story, he expands the story over fifty pages, and adds context to create a background for Lancelot and his reasoning for going on adventures with Lyonel. Steinbeck creates a reason for Lancelot to take Lyonel out by discussing the idleness of the young. "The young knights, who should have filled the fighting ranks, dissipated their strength in the mires of complaint, confusion, and self-pity, condemning the old time without having created a new one" (*The Acts* 224). Lyonel, thinking of Lancelot as a lame uncle, decides to go questing with him as a joke to his friends. Lyonel quickly finds out, however, that Lancelot wants to teach him a lesson. While on their quest, Lyonel steals away to fight a knight while Lancelot is sleeping, and when Lyonel is captured, he realizes how strong and majestic a knight Lancelot truly is. And it says, "Lyonel remembered the calm, sleeping face and he said softly to himself, 'I must be patient. He will come. Sir Lancelot will come'" (244). Instead of giving a bland account of actions and summarized plot points like we sometimes get in Malory, Steinbeck adds to the story in a way that has not been explored previously. The tension in the relationships between a nephew and an

[11] The Oxford edition of the Winchester Manuscript favors the spelling "Lionel," but we will follow Steinbeck's preferred "Lyonel" for the purposes of clarity across the texts.

uncle, the emotions of jealously, doubt, and envy, and the complicated emotions of Lancelot all come into play giving us a full picture of Steinbeck's Lancelot.

Part of Steinbeck's adaptive addition to the Arthurian legend is his portrayal of Lancelot as more than just a hardened knight, but as a man, imperfect and complicated. For example, when Lancelot and Lyonel first set out on their adventures, Steinbeck adds this detail about Lancelot from the perspective of Lyonel:

> In one man he saw a combat more savage than ever he had seen between two, saw wounds given and received and a heart riven to bursting. And he saw victory, too, the death of rage and the sick triumph of Sir Lancelot, the sweat-ringed, fevered eyes hooded like a hawk's, the right arm leashed and muzzled while the blade crept back to its kennel. (*The Acts* 239)

The Malorian text only gives brief accounts of Sir Lancelot's battles and his doings, never giving the kind of detail that Steinbeck gives here about Lancelot's person. He becomes "savage," and "fevered" about his duties as a knight. Not only is Lancelot "the best knight" but he is also a man with a "heart . . . bursting." Lancelot here has intense emotions, is ready to defend his knighthood at all costs, is deadly in battle, and is frightening to behold.

Despite this intense and violent picture of Lancelot, Steinbeck also takes liberty to give Lancelot a soft side, someone who has a "fear of unknown things" and who is "a sensitive and a nervous man" (*The Acts* 249-50). Steinbeck is clear in what he means that "an opponent in the field meeting the cold perfection of [Lancelot's] command of weapons would have thought him nerveless, little knowing his sick wretchedness before the fight began" (250). So, although Lancelot knows how to be a proper knight, and can be a fearsome thing to behold, he also is like every other man–afraid of the outcome if he cannot win. Laura Hodges states that "Steinbeck . . .

characterizes Lancelot as a mature man who has achieved and is isolated by greatness" (69). This portrayal of Lancelot as a man, fallible, but relatable, makes his love affair with Guinevere feel more believable and realistic. A man, soft on the inside, and more human than knight is a believable character, more than a perfect knight who suddenly is no longer perfect regarding Guinevere. These are only a few of the multiple examples that Steinbeck adds to Lancelot's character, and they not only round out Lancelot's character, but also help Steinbeck's work feel more Steinbeck.

Steinbeck additionally includes a dream vision sequence within "The Noble Tale of Lancelot," as pointed out by Hodges.[12] Although the Winchester manuscript has Lancelot falling asleep under an apple tree where he is taken by the four queens, Steinbeck's dream sequence seems to be more intentional and dramatic. Of course, Steinbeck would have been familiar with dream visions in medieval literature, having studied them. Hodges claims that "Steinbeck's entire work is suffused with the dream-like quality that he finds in Malory," which can be coupled with the idea that he would have been interested in playing with the dream vision form in the section on Lancelot (38). Steinbeck himself said "these are dream stories . . . and they have the inconsistency of dreams. Very well, says I–if they are dreams, I will put in some of my own, and I did" (*The Acts* 386). This could be his own admission of adding in more than just a "dream-like quality" but adding in an actual dream vision sequence.

Hodges points out that Steinbeck's dream vision for Lancelot is bookended by his arriving at the apple tree where he falls asleep and returns to a place not "far from the apple tree" to find Lyonel (239, 277). Hodges also highlights the bookending of the sequence with Lancelot being drugged by Morgan le Fay with "lactucarium" (246). When he comes around full circle at

[12] Hodges highlights each aspect of the dream sequence and how it relates or does not relate to the Malorian text, and the context for each example in Steinbeck's *The Acts*.

the end of his dream sequence, he "refuses to participate in the toast drunk with metheglin, underscoring the return to his self-control" (Hodges 45). From the start of this sequence to its end, Steinbeck highlights Lancelot's ability to overcome temptation, but also maintains that he is subject to it. It is a clever way for Steinbeck to set Lancelot up as fallible, though he tries his best to be invincible. The dream sequence highlights several of Lancelot's battles and other mysterious events, but overtly emphasizes Lancelot's humanity and susceptibility to his humanity. Again, this helps the audience move closer to Lancelot through feelings of relatability and gives Lancelot a more plausible reason for betraying King Arthur at the end of the section by going to Guinevere's quarters.

Steinbeck's *The Acts* ends with the tale of Lancelot, having just given in to his passion with Guinevere. Although we do not have more of his version of the translation-adaptation, there is plenty to analyze, and praise. Steinbeck's "reverence" for the Malory, combined with his characterization and his ability to be a "novelist" helped to create a new and exciting version of the Arthurian legend that adds wonderfully to the way that we see and understand the classic characters of the legend. Roy Simmonds said, "it is a tragedy not only for him but for us also that he never completed the project, for according to Professor Vinaver the drafts that Steinbeck showed him were 'by far the best thing of its kind written in English since the fifteenth century" (qtd. in Robinson 43). Robinson said that "what [Steinbeck] did complete is worthy of accolades" (53). Not only is Steinbeck's work on *The Acts* quite unique, but it is also crucial for this study of the Arthurian legend and its possibilities and potential as a legend, and to understand Steinbeck as an author and thinker.

III - Arthur Asleep: Posthumous Publication and The Unfinished Work

"My looking is not for a dead Arthur but for one sleeping. And if sleeping, he is sleeping everywhere, not alone in a cave in Cornwall. Now there, that's said and done and I've been trying to say it for a long time."

Steinbeck, Letter to Elizabeth Otis, 1959

For all his interventions and works on *The Acts*, Steinbeck has left behind a work unfinished, but which points to the possibility that the legend goes on, that it can never be complete. The first indication that we have of Steinbeck's belief is that he never brought himself to finish his translation-adaptation, and therefore never wrote Arthur's death to begin with. The second indication is that Steinbeck made it clear to his editors that he wanted to remove the term "morte" from the title of his work. He wrote to them that, "the Book is much more Acts than Morte," indicating his emphasis on Arthur's life and his actions and adventures rather than on his death which is such a short part of the whole of the legend (*The Acts* 319). Steinbeck does not believe in an Arthurian legend that has an Arthur who has passed on. A legend that never dies, and an Arthur that is sleeping, is the legacy that Steinbeck has left for us to study and consider.

The idea that Arthur never truly died is not a new concept as it forms the basis of the so-called "Breton Hope." Even the Winchester manuscript says, "yet some men say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead, but had by the will of Our Lord Jesu into another place; and men say that he shall come again, and he shall win the Holy Cross" (Oxford Winchester 517). The ambiguity of Arthur's death has left an open legend that keeps Arthur alive, along with his round table. Even though we know Arthur is fatally wounded, he travels to Avalon on the hope that he can be healed, and in Malory and others there is no finality to his death. The

possibility that he survived–even though it is a fictional story–has a lasting impact on the way that we perceive the Arthurian legend.

If Arthur is still alive, then *The Acts* is another retelling, keeping that legend alive. In *The Acts*, Steinbeck adds, "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. King Arthur and his knights quiet and waiting in the great hall at Camelot" (90). Dreams like Lancelot's dream vision become even more important for us to analyze and understand as we take into consideration Steinbeck's view of Arthur as merely asleep, waiting and listening for the next call to adventure. Steinbeck's translation-adaptation certainly plays a role in calling awake Arthur and his noble knights into an American English that is easier to digest. Steinbeck himself said that he was on the search "not for a dead Arthur but for one sleeping. And if sleeping, he is sleeping everywhere" (*The Acts* 355). Perhaps Steinbeck's Arthur as illustrated in *The Acts*, is also only sleeping, not passed on with the author himself, but waiting for someone to awaken the story again.

Steinbeck made it clear that the Arthurian legend is "alive even in those of us who have not read [it]" (*The Acts* 3). While this statement underscores a recognition that the Arthurian legend infuses Western literature and culture in myriad ways, it also indicates a sense of Steinbeck relinquishing a personal hold on or claim to his translation. His translation was to be done "to bring a present-day usage to the stories of King Arthur and the Round Table," meaning that he wanted the every-day person to be able to take hold of Arthur again and shake him awake (3). With each new reader, the story continues pressing forward and Arthur remains asleep rather than in a burial mound. By making Malory alive again through his translation-adaptation, Steinbeck is making Arthur alive again.

Misunderstanding the important work of *The Acts* and Steinbeck's attempt at a translation of *Le Morte D'Arthur* leaves a major gap in understanding Steinbeck's complete oeuvre. Not only does his work on *The Acts* highlight his technical ability in translation work, his expertise in Middle English, and the range of his dedication to scholarly research, it also gives us a grand display of his ability to characterize and bring life to characters that sometimes feel distant. His translation of King Arthur and the typical cast of Arthurian characters, including Merlin, Morgan le Fay, and Lancelot, allows us new insight into their inner thoughts and motivations. Without flourishing embellishment, Steinbeck's astonishing ability to take a character that exists as that character is and turn them into a living, breathing being is an incredible accomplishment that deserves praise beyond what Steinbeck has been given. His introduction of certain emotions and inner thoughts alone bring the Malorian text back to life in a new context, which is exactly what Steinbeck wanted to have happen, even if he did not complete the task.

Further study of *The Acts* could potentially lead us to new interpretations or understandings of Steinbeck's body of work, both in theme and in form. Just as this essay has explored Steinbeck's use of Arthurian themes and elements in *Cup of Gold* and *Tortilla Flat*, he also employs Arthurian themes throughout his other novels. For instance, for many of his characters, including Adam Trask in *East of Eden,* Salinas (or more broadly, California) could be considered Steinbeck's version of Camelot, a place where people gather and prosper and sometimes fail their quests. Steinbeck's interest in patriarchal lines in both *East of Eden* and *Grapes of Wrath* are reminiscent of King Arthur's unlikely birth, and his line of authority being continually questioned and threatened. Some of Steinbeck's best characters, like *Of Mice and Men*'s George and Lenny, act like knights-errant who must make bold choices about morality and principles of questing and testing amid complicated morals and divergent responsibilities,

much as King Arthur's court was certainly concerned over. Themes of the contrast between life and death, the meaning of honor and truth, issues of class and race, and even questions surrounding masculinity can all be linked between the Arthurian legend and Steinbeck's greatest works. It is remarkable that we have *The Acts* to tie them all together, and to give us a place to begin to make these comparisons.

Although scholars seem to agree that Steinbeck "abandoned" *The Acts,*[13] and he certainly seemed discouraged with it at times, Steinbeck's work was far from done. While writing *The Acts,* Steinbeck stated that "the parallels with our own time are crowding me," which is yet another reason for us to study King Arthur and particularly Steinbeck's version of King Arthur (*The Acts* 324). Students of Steinbeck should read *The Acts* along with his other works, and scholars of the Arthurian legend should take Steinbeck's work into serious account and adopt it as part of the vast legend cycle. The case really is this: Why not study an Arthurian-obsessed Steinbeck? Not only can we see his prowess as an author, a creator of characters, and an academic in the way that he handled the treatment of Arthur, but it also changes the way we study Steinbeck's life and literary works, which can help us recognize him as an even more well-rounded author, scholar, and thinker of literature, of human experience, and of life.

[13] Terry Earle's final dissertation chapter is titled "Acts Left Undone: Steinbeck's Abandonment of the Project."

Works Cited

Davies, Sioned, ed. *The Mabinogion*. Oxford, Oxford UP, 2007.

Didion, Joan. "Last Words." *The New Yorker,* vol. 74, no. 42, 1998, pp. 74-80.

Earle, Terry S. *Steinbeck's Grail: A Modern Vision of Malory*. University of Arkansas Press, 1999.

Fensch, Thomas. "Introduction." *Tortilla Flat*, by John Steinbeck, Penguin Classics, 1997, pp. vii-xxvi.

Fontenrose, Joseph. *John Steinbeck: An Introduction and Interpretation.* Henry Holt, 1963.

Gillen, Katherine, and Kathryn Vomero Santos. "Shakespeare and the Politics of Tradaptation." PMLA, 2023.

Helen. "Cup of Gold by John Steinbeck #1929Club." *She Reads Novels*, 27 Oct 2022, https://shereadsnovels.com/2022/10/27/cup-of-gold-by-john-steinbeck-1929club/.

Hodges, Laura F. "Steinbeck's Adaptation of Malory's Launcelot: A Triumph of Realism Over Supernaturalism." *Quondam et Futurus*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1992, pp. 69–81.

Hodges, Laura F. "Steinbeck's Dream Sequence in The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights." *Arthurian Interpretations*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1990, pp. 35–49.

Gardener, John. "The essential King Arthur, according to John Steinbeck." *New York Times,* Oct. 24, 1976, pp. 231.

Gilmore, Alec. "Steinbeck's Translation of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*: Success or Failure—An End or a New Beginning?" *The Steinbeck Review*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2015, pp. 74–86.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation.* Taylor & Francis Group, 2012.

Kinney, Arthur F. "The Arthurian Cycle in Tortilla Flat." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1965, pp. 11–20.

Kosek, Steven. “John Steinbeck’s Life-Long Desire has, at Last, been Fulfilled: The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights.” *Chicago Tribune*, Nov 07, 1976.

Laws, David. “‘The Time at Discove’: John Steinbeck in Somerset.” *Steinbeck Review*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2006, pp. 127-134.

“Le Morte Darthur.” *British Library.* www.bl.uk/collection-items/thomas-malorys-le-morte-darthur. Accessed 11 Oct 2023.

Lisca, Peter. *The Wide World of John Steinbeck.* Gordian Press, 1958.

---. “Steinbeck’s Image of Man and His Decline as a Writer.” *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1965, pp. 3–10.

Lupack, Alan. *King Arthur in America.* Edited by Barbara T. Lupack. D. S. Brewer, 1999.

Malory, Thomas. *The Boy's King Arthur.* Edited by Sidney Lanier, and Alfred Kappes. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1880.

---. *Le Morte Darthur: The Winchester Manuscript*. Oxford, Oxford UP, 1998.

Meyer, Michael. “1. The Search for King Arthur: John Steinbeck's Continuing Preoccupation with the Grail Legend.” *Modern Myths*. Leiden, Brill, 1993.

Mooney, Joshua A. “Steinbeck at His Quest: Considering Steinbeck’s Attempt at an Edition of the Morte d’Arthur.” *The Steinbeck Review*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2010, pp. 88–103.

---. “A ‘Non-Lanier’ Approach to Arthur: The Influence of Steinbeck’s Childhood Edition of Malory.” *The Steinbeck Review*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2010, pp. 70–75.

Paolini, Christopher. “Introduction.” *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights,* by John Steinbeck, Penguin Books, 2007, pp. viii-x.

Peacock, Francesca. “Posthumous publication is a wicked literary problem.” 22 September 2022. https://engelsbergideas.com/notebook/posthumous-publication-is-a-wicked-literary-problem/.

Pugh, Scott. “Greatness at a Distance: A Commemorative Survey of the Work of John Steinbeck.” *The Steinbeck Review*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2018, pp. 122–35.

Robinson, Gregory. “John Steinbeck’s *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*: A Call for Reappraisal.” *The Steinbeck Review*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2014, pp. 46–54.

“Rubrication, N.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1079421773.

Salda, Michael N. “Caxton’s Print vs. the Winchester Manuscript: An Introduction to the Debate on Editing Malory’s Morte Darthur.” *Arthuriana*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1995, pp. 1–4.

Souder, William. *Mad at the World: A Life of John Steinbeck.* W.W. Norton & Company, 2020.

Steinbeck, John. *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights.* Edited by Chase Horton and Christopher Paolini. Penguin Books, 2008.

---. *Cup of Gold.* Penguin Group, 2008.

---. *East of Eden.* Penguin Random House, 2016.

---. *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters.* Edited by Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten. Penguin Publishing Group, 1989.

---. *Tortilla Flat.* Penguin Group, 1997.

Sundermeier, Michael. “Why John Steinbeck Didn’t Finish His Arthur – The Acts Of King Arthur and His Noble Knights.” *Steinbeck’s Posthumous Work: Essays in Criticism. Steinbeck Monograph Series,* edited by Tetsumaro Hayashi and Thomas J. Moore, No. 14, 1989, pp. 34–42.

"Tortilla Flat." *Bangor University.* http://arthurian-studies.bangor.ac.uk/exhibition/rochester/27.php.

Wade, James. "The Chapter Headings of the *Morte Darthur*: Caxton and de Worde." *Modern Philology*, vol. 111, no. 4, 2014, pp. 645–67.

Whetter, K. S. "The Unusual Nature of Winchester's Rubrication." *The Manuscript and Meaning of Malory's Morte Darthur: Rubrication, Commemoration, Memorialization*, Boydell & Brewer, 2017, pp. 23–53.