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LANCELOT, OR THE CELTIC ACHILLES

A literary review of Giles Kristian's *Lancelot* (2018), which offers a re-imagined origin story for King Arthur's greatest knight.

Charalambos Papoutsis

Criticism, Historical Fiction, Novel



February 19, 2024

An Arthurian Novel

Lancelot, written by Giles Kristian.

Corgi Press

Rome is burning. In Britain, Uther Pendragon is dying. Enemies stalk his land. Into this uncertain world a boy is cast – an outsider, plagued by memories of those he’s lost. Under the watchful eye of Merlin, the boy begins his journey to manhood. He meets another outcast, Guinevere – wild, proud and beautiful. And he is dazzled by Arthur – a warrior who carries the hopes of the people like a flaming torch in the dark. But these are treacherous times, and the fate of Britain rests on a sword’s edge. This young man becomes a lord of war: loved, hated, admired and feared. He is a man forsaken but not forgotten. He is Lancelot.

If these words do not inspire you to take up a sword and shield against Saxon invaders, then perhaps Britain is truly lost. Giles Kristian has done what Thomas Malory once did; he has modified Arthurian mythology and crafted a tale for the ages. Thomas Malory, for those of us who lack the penchant for Medieval literature, was a 15th century writer best known for *Le Morte d’Arthur*. Malory completed the entirety of *Le Morte d’Arthur* (c. 1485) while he was serving a prison sentence and awaiting an indefinite trial, so he was certainly dedicated to his craft. I stumbled onto Giles Kristian’s *Lancelot* (2018) by accidental happenstance; this is to say, after a google search. I was immediately drawn to *Lancelot* because he is my favourite Arthurian character; he is, in my eyes, the epitome of the male power fantasy. My first exposure to Lancelot, though, was after reading Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot, Or The Knight of the Cart* (c. 1135-81). Therefore, after reading “Lancelot” on the front cover of Giles Kristian’s first Arthurian work, I was enraptured. His debut into the world of Arthuriana has spawned glowing reviews, among them praise for surpassing Bernard Cornwell’s tales: “Kristian is one of the finest storytellers in the genre . . . this is a novel that you feel as much as you read. What we end

up with is utterly staggering . . . Giles has surpassed the Cornwell trilogy in a single title.”

(Robin Carter, Parmenion Books) Kristian’s *Lancelot* follows the titular protagonist from his boyhood to the moment he becomes a lord of war. The book is written, and presented, as though it would be Lancelot’s autobiography, thus: “I still remember my father’s smell...” (5) provides the opening narration. In the Medieval Arthurian stories, the characters are Christian— such as Lancelot, Guinevere, Arthur, Gawain, and Merlin. In *Lancelot*, Christianity is an emerging albeit threatening religion that risks blotting out the Celtic ways. However, the Pagan tones of Giles’s Arthuriana resonates well with how Lancelot is exemplified as a warrior: “After my first session, Pelleas admitted he had never known someone to whom weapon craft came so easily. ‘You’re gifted Lancelot,’ [Pelleas] said.” (228) Lancelot’s thunderous persona is likewise compared to Taranis, the Celtic god of thunder, who is ensnared in warfare; basically, Lancelot is the Celtic Achilles. “Those men in the rear ranks hoist their spears skyward in time with the chorus, which rises to the grey sky now in a rhythm like the heartbeat of Taranis, god of war.” (631)

The honour and exaltation of the characters is what you would expect from a Pagan world. Lancelot’s proclivity to the art of war does not stop at sheer talent – especially when he meets Arthur, becoming his sword-sworn brother-in-arms. They fight together, bleed together, and ultimately pine away for the same woman: Guinevere. Lancelot, however, is childhood friends with Guinevere, and this is why the often-overlooked subtitle *The Betrayal* irks me – Lancelot and Guinevere were already in love well before they ever met Arthur. Lancelot first meets Arthur at King Uther’s deathbed, where he is sworn to fealty for Arthur’s ill-fated ascension to the throne of Britain. This is when Kristian’s *Lancelot* truly shines because Lancelot transforms into a noble warrior, becoming a whirlwind of deadly skill against the Saxons. Traditionally, Arthur’s rise to prominence is tethered to Excalibur, which symbolizes his kingship

and God-given right to rule Britain. The average person is likely aware of the “Sword in the Stone” moment, but only the hardcore Arthurian fan knows about the more obscure origin, where Arthur is granted Excalibur by the Lady of the Lake. Kristian has spun a more “human” version of the latter; a moment that is just as powerful and just as poetic as the sword’s usual mystical origins. In *Lancelot*, Excalibur is implied to be the sword once wielded by a Roman warrior named Maximus and is seemingly lost to the fringes of time. So, Lancelot, Arthur, Gawain, and Merlin journey north beyond Hadrian’s Wall, to the land occupied by the savage Picts, in search of the fabled blade. They encounter a beautiful, although seemingly malevolent, priestess and her band of barbarians. Lancelot recollects Arthur’s acquirement of Excalibur in vivid detail:

Holding Excalibur by the grip and the end of the blade, the priestess lowered it into the water and for a short while it was lost from sight as she spoke her sacred words. Arthur stood still, his face solemn, eyes peering into the lake, as expectant and yet patient as an egret in the reed bed waiting to spear a fish or frog with its long beak. Then the priestess lifted the sword out of the water and held it up high, pointing it to the light at the summit of the falls, her thin arm trembling with cold or the sword’s weight. Without another word she gave the sword to Arthur, who took it by the hilt and wrapped his hand round that ivory grip, getting a sense of its balance and perhaps imagining the great general Flavius Magnus Maximus, commander of the legions of Britain, leading his warriors against the first Saxons who drew their boats up onto our shores. (425)

Lancelot’s witnessing of the exchange between Arthur and the pagan priestess is highlighted by Merlin’s prophetic words: “You will take this memory to your grave, Lancelot.” (424)

Merlin, unlike his Medieval counterpart, possesses no supernatural origins – he is not of semi-demonic parentage, and he was not blessed by God to prophesy. Kristian’s Merlin is a

Druid; a detail that is befitting of the character. Paranormal elements are teased in *Lancelot*, however, but they are subtle. When he meets Guinevere, Lancelot learns that she possesses strange gifts, and incidentally, so does Merlin. An important scene, early in Lancelot's life, demonstrates that astral projection may be Guinevere's gift: "They were no longer swaying with the beat of the drum. The feather cloak had fallen away and now lay on the floor beside them, and Merlin clutched Guinevere by her shoulders, his hands like claws digging into her flesh. The druid's eyes were closed but Guinevere's were half open, though they were rolled up into her head so that only the whites showed, and I shuddered to see this because I knew that wherever Guinevere was, she was no longer here in the Lady's chamber with me." (181) This would seem little more than insanity refashioned as wizardry except for Kristian's tendency to switch perspectives, indicated by italics to denote Guinevere's remarkable ability to inhabit the bodies of woodland creatures and birds: "*I fly above wood and meadow, east towards the far-off pale glow which makes a dark and ominous horizon of hill and forest, a black realm where gods could roam unseen by men.*" (180)

The change in narration is so jarring and so disembodied, that I was briefly taken out of the narrative, *who* or *what* is this? Lancelot is so perturbed by these experiences that he intervenes because he cannot bear to see Guinevere lose herself to madness or to the gods; he wants her in the here and now. Merlin is furious, of course, but this is Lancelot. He is fearless. He never loses sight of his passion for Guinevere or his incarnate ability for warfare. So, even when Arthur has forsaken Lancelot for crimes of adultery (as Guinevere had become his wife), Lancelot rides to Arthur one last time simply because Guinevere implored him to. It was an act of love just as much as it was an act of duty. Every soldier allied with Arthur on the battlefield becomes emboldened at the sight of Lancelot, and they all chorus his name with worshipful

intonation. Though he fights a losing battle, he is not weary, “There are too many. But I am Lancelot.” (635)



CHARALAMBOS PAPOUTSIS

Charalambos Papoutsis is a writer and critic with a Master’s degree in Literatures of Modernity based in Toronto. He reviews regularly for the New York Times, The Daily Mail, the Guardian, and the London Review of Books.

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