

In the stories of Camelot, Queen Guinevere had a love affair with Lancelot, a knight of the Round Table. Guinevere's husband, King Arthur, sentenced her to death as a result. Read the excerpt and answer the questions that follow.

Wherein Guinevere is brought to trial

from *The Death of King Arthur*

retold by Peter Ackroyd

1 Sir Mordred had escaped, severely wounded, from Lancelot; weak from the loss of blood, he was still able to mount his horse and make his way to the king. He explained what had happened to his sovereign, and described how all the other knights had been killed.

2 'God have mercy on us!' cried the king. 'How can this be? Do you say that you found him in the queen's chamber?'

3 'Yes, sir, in God's name it is the truth. He was not armed but, having dispatched Sir Collgrevaunce, he donned that trusty knight's armour. Then he fell upon us.'

4 The king was disturbed by this news. 'Sir Lancelot is a mighty warrior. He has no rival. I bitterly regret that he has now turned against me, for in becoming my foe he will surely break up the fellowship of the Round Table. He has so many noble kinsmen that our unity will be gone for ever. There is something else. To save my honour, I must also consign my wife to the flames.' Arthur bowed his head in sorrow.

5 A short time later, the proclamation was made about the trial of the queen. The verdict itself was not in doubt. She was led to the Stone of Judgement, in the field of the fifty footsteps, where the evidence was pronounced against her. She stood in silence, with her head bowed, before the great lords of the court.

6 Just as the trial ended, Sir Gawain stood up and addressed the king. 'My lord Arthur,' he said, 'I would advise you not to be too hasty in pronouncing death upon Queen Guinevere. Can you not declare a delay in judgement? There are many reasons for urging this. One of them is simple. It may be that, when Lancelot was found in the lady's chamber, he was there with no malicious intent. You know from your own experience that the Lady Guinevere has many reasons for showing gratitude to Sir Lancelot. He has saved her life on several occasions, and has done battle for her when no other knight was willing to do so. It may well be that she sent for him out of the goodness of her heart, in the wish to reward him for all his generous deeds. If she sent for him secretly, that was because she knows that there are many scandalmongers and gossips at the court who would love to sow mischief. She may have made the wrong decision, but things we do for the best often turn out to be for the worst. That is a law of life. I am sure, sir, that Queen Guinevere is a true and faithful wife. As for Sir Lancelot, I know that he will challenge to the duel any knight who dares to impugn the modesty of the queen or the honour of his own conduct.'

7 'That may well be true. Lancelot trusts so much in his own strength that he fears no man. But I refuse to take your advice, Sir Gawain. The law is the law. The queen must go to the stake and, if I catch Lancelot, I will condemn him also to a shameful death.'

8 'God forbid, sir king, that I should live to see such a thing!'

9 'Why do you say that? You have no reason to love him. He has just slaughtered your brother, Sir Agravain, and he almost killed Mordred. Has he not also murdered two of your sons, Sir Florens and Sir Lovell?'

10 'I know that. I bitterly regret the death of my two sons. But I warned them all—brothers and sons alike—about the outcome of any struggle with Lancelot. They refused my advice. So I will not meddle with him or try to take revenge upon him. They put themselves in the path of perils. They are the cause of their own deaths.'

11 King Arthur listened to him gravely. 'Prepare yourself, Sir Gawain. Put on your finest armour and then, with your brothers Gaheris and Gareth, attend upon the queen. Bring her to the place of judgement and consign her to the fire.'

12 'No, my most noble king. I cannot do it. I will never escort my lady, the queen, to a miserable and dishonourable death. I could not endure to see her tied to the stake, and I will play no part in her death.'

13 'Then see to it that your brothers take your place.'

14 'My lord, they know well enough what shame will fall upon them. But they are too young and inexperienced to refuse you.'

15 Gaheris and Gareth stepped forward from the company of knights, and addressed the king. 'Sir, you may command us to be there,' Gareth said. 'That is your right. But we will attend against our wishes. Will you not excuse us?' The king shook his head.

16 'Very well,' Gaheris said. 'But we will not wear armour or bear arms. We will give the queen the kiss of peace.'

17 'In the name of God, then, prepare yourselves.' The king was very stern. 'She shall be brought to judgement very soon.'

18 Gawain cried out in sorrow. 'Alas that I should live to see this unhappy day!' He turned away, weeping, and rushed out of the hall.

19 Very shortly after, Queen Guinevere was commanded to put on a plain smock, and was escorted from the castle to the place of execution. She made full confession of her sins to the priest in attendance, even as the assembled lords and ladies grieved for her.

20 Sir Lancelot had placed one of his men among the courtiers to give him good warning of the event. As soon as this man saw the queen being led forward, he leaped on to his horse and rode to the wood in order to inform Lancelot. The knights broke from their cover and, with Lancelot in the front rank, they galloped across the field towards the queen. The assault was a fierce one, and Lancelot himself killed a score of worthy knights. By ill fortune he also killed Gawain's two young brothers,

Gareth and Gaheris, who were in fact unarmed. In the alarm and heat of battle, he had failed to recognize them. The French books tell us that he dealt them mighty blows about their heads, so that they fell to the ground with their brains spilling out. Yet Lancelot never saw them. They were found lying in a pile of corpses.

21 When Lancelot had killed or put to flight all of his opponents, he rode up to Guinevere. He gave her a gown and girdle, to put over her plain smock; he asked her to sit behind him on his horse and, when she was safely seated, he told her to be of good cheer. All would be well. As they rode off together, she praised God for her deliverance from death. And, of course, she also thanked her rescuer.

22 They made their way to Lancelot's castle, Joyous Garde, where he entertained her in knightly fashion. Many great lords, and other knights of his affinity, assembled there to pledge their allegiance to the queen. When it was clear that King Arthur and Sir Lancelot had become enemies, there were some who welcomed the news. There were others, however, who prophesied more woe and warfare. They were right.