Summary of the *Lancelot*

This quotes and summarizes Alison Stones's helpful summary of the text, which is on the excellent Lancelot-Graal Project Website - <http://www.lancelot-project.pitt.edu/LG-web/TheStory-Summary.htm>:

The text recounts the story of Lancelot of the Lake, son of King Ban of Benoic and Queen Elaine. After his father dies, Lancelot is brought up by the Lady of the Lake until he is ready to be made a knight. He then takes his place at King Arthur's Round Table, where he falls in love with Queen Guinevere.  He is endowed, thanks to his love for Guinevere, with supreme prowess. Lancelot becomes the best knight in the world and saves Arthur's kingdom many times.  He must choose between his love for Guinevere and that of his best friend King Galehot. Galehot is responsible for arranging the consummation of Lancelot's affair with Guinevere, but he wants Lancelot to take over his kingdom of Sorelois.  For Guinevere, Lancelot performs great feats like crossing the Sword Bridge, and he triumphs in tournament and battle. However, he is also prepared to ride ignominiously in a cart for her sake. Galehot and Lancelot defend Guinevere against the accusations of the False Guinevere and Arthur's unjust repudiation of her. Lancelot suffers madness when he thinks he has been rejected by Guinevere. He is imprisoned by Arthur's sister, Morgan, unbeknownst to the other knights, who engage in many adventures in their search for him.  Thinking Lancelot is dead, Galehot dies of grief.  Through deception, Lancelot sleeps with the Helizabel, the Grail maiden, who is the daughter of King Pelles, the Grail King. Lancelot thus engenders Galaad, who will triumph in the Grail Quest and displace his father as the best knight in the world.  While he is Morgan's prisoner, Lancelot paints pictures of his affair with Guinevere. These will later (in the *Mort Artu*) be shown to King Arthur by Morgan, who only then will realize that the rumours he heard from his knights are true.  Interlaced with Lancelot's adventures are the deeds and exploits of many other knights: Gauvain, Yvain, Hector, Lionel, Boort and numerous other members of Arthur's Round Table.

Information about the text

Page references in brackets refer to Norris J. Lacy’s ‘Introduction’ in *The Lancelot-Grail Reader*, ed. by Lacy (New York: Garland, 2000).

* The legend of King Arthur dates from c. 5th/6th c. (vii).
* Geoffrey of Monmouth gives a biography for Arthur in his *Historia regum Britanniae* in *c*. 1136 (vii)
* In 1155, Wace writes of the Round Table (vii).
* Between *c*. 1170-90, Chrétien de Troyes composed 5 Arthurian romances. Chrétien introduced the character of Lancelot (vii).
* In the early 13th c., Arthurian ideas were collected in the Vulgate Cycle (viii).
* The 3 core romances in this cycle were composed *c*. 1215-25. They are:
* *Lancelot*
* *Queste del saint Graal*
* *La Mort le roi Artu* (viii-ix).
* 2 more romances were subsequently added to the cycle, although in terms of their narrative material, they’re prequels:
* *L’Estoire del saint Graal*
* *Merlin* (x).
* The *Merlin* then gets its own narrative continuation, entitled the *Vulgate Continuation* or the *Merlin Continuation* – in French, the *Suite-Vulgate* (x).
* It seems improbable that such a huge cycle (the critical edition of the *Lancelot* alone,by Alexandre Micha, is in 9 volumes) could be written by one author. But some scholars have suggested that the cycle may have had what Jean Frappier called an ‘architect’, because of the ‘elaborate system of cross-references, foreshadowings and predictions, and recapitulations and recalls.’ Note, however, that narrative attitudes towards certain key subjects, for example towards courtly love, differ from text to text (x).
* How do these texts maintain clearly the multiple story lines? A ‘sophisticated technique called *entrelacement* or structural interlace. The foreshadowings and recalls already mentioned are an element of this method. It consists, to oversimplify drastically, of the regular suspension of one story line to pick up one or more others; when those are in turn suspended, the text may take up another narrative or return to the original one to elaborate it further, again dropping it one or several times before tying it up with others. Within these multiple and intercut narrative lines, the authors maintain a remarkably precise and consistent chronology.’ (xi)
* The Vulgate Cycle was followed by the Post-Vulgate Cycle, which was composed either as the Vulgate was being completed, or just afterwards. This was probably the work of a single author. It borrows some parts of the Vulgate cycle and rewrites others to lengthen or shorten them. The *Lancelot* is omitted, and there's a concomitant shift in focus: the downfall of the Arthurian world results primarily from Arthur's sin of incest in engendering Mordred (as opposed to Lancelot and Guenevere’s adultery) (xii).
* Tristan, Iseut, and King Mark are included for the first time as Arthurian characters in the Post-Vulgate (xiii).
* There are 3 editions of the *Lancelot*. One, published by H. Oskar Sommer, gives the short cyclic version. Another, published by Elspeth Kennedy, gives the non-cyclic version. The edition completed by Alexandre Micha is used here, because he gives the long cyclic version (but also includes the non-cyclic version and some excerpts from the short version in Vol. III).
* Some manuscripts of the *Lancelot* are beautifully decorated. One such manuscript, now in the British Library, belonged to the royal library, and was autographed by Elizabeth Woodville. Here is a link to its catalogue entry:

<http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Royal_MS_14_e_iii>

* To see the highly decorated first page of the *Lancelot* in this manuscript, use this link:

Fol. 3r: http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=royal\_ms\_14\_e\_iii\_f003r