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The Fisher King in Gotham: New Age Spiritualism Meets the Grail Legend

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Set against the backdrop of New York City as a contemporary Wasteland,¹ a desolate terrain inhabited by eccentric vagrants, sadistic street thugs, mass murderers, and radio “shock jocks,” *The Fisher King* (1991, Tri-Star Pictures)² weaves a cinematic tale of “love, understanding, and redemption” (Grenier 50).³ Reflecting an updating of the Grail legend,⁴ *The Fisher King* focuses on two central mythic figures—Perceval (Parry),⁵ “the ‘Great Fool’ ... the forthright, simple, uncorrupted, noble son of nature, without guile, strong in the purity of the yearning of his heart” (Campbell, *Occidental Mythology* 508), and the maimed Fisher King (Jack Lucas).

In the course of this cinematic narrative, a bizarre symbiotic bond develops between Parry, a schizophrenic derelict and former medievalist whose journey into a dark hallucinatory world has been triggered by the death of his wife, and Lucas, a spiritually barren talk show host. On one occasion, however, the broadcaster goads a deranged caller (Edwin Malnick) into socioeconomic cleansing. After Lucas urges Edwin, “They [yuppies] must be stopped before it’s too late! It’s us or them!” the alienated fan then kills seven people, including Parry’s wife, at Babbitt’s (“one of those chic yuppie watering holes”). Some three years later, when we next see Lucas (Jeff Bridges), the arrogant disk jockey is paralyzed with guilt and self-loathing. Unable to function because of his psychic wound, his unwitting participation in Edwin’s mass murder, the unemployed Lucas now wastes away in an alcoholic stupor and trifles with the affections of

Anne (Mercedes Ruehl), a sympathetic owner of a video store (the Video Spot).

Clutching a Pinocchio doll⁶ one night as he contemplates suicide ("You ever get the feeling sometimes that you're being punished for your sins?"), Lucas stumbles drunkenly into New York's waterfront area. Accosted by two punks who want to douse him in gasoline, Lucas is rescued suddenly by the chivalrous Parry (Robin Williams) and a band of merry bums-errant. Thus energized by their unexpected meeting, Parry (Perceval) and Lucas (Fisher King) will embark upon their interlocked Grail quest, a quest for love, forgiveness, and spiritual renewal.

While Parry must trek through nightmarish visions of the bloody death of his wife to an acceptance of her loss, Jack must travel from egotism and self-pity ("I'm self-centered; I'm weak") into uncharted territory, the world of compassion and true camaraderie. In effect, then, *The Fisher King* highlights the interdependence of Parry and Jack, for spiritual revitalization and release from the stifling Gotham wasteland demand the total interaction of the two Grail figures.⁷

While the mythic roles of the film's two central characters seem clearly defined, both *The Fisher King's* screenwriter (Richard LaGravenese) and director (Terry Gilliam) consciously blur the lines between fool and wounded king. In "The Search for the Holy Reel," for instance, LaGravenese maintains that Parry and Jack embody two essential selves, "fool and wounded king" (LaGravenese 125). Similarly, in an interview (June 1990) with David Morgan, Gilliam claims that "both of them [Parry and Lucas] is a Fisher King and both of them is a Fool" (LaGravenese 156). That the blurring of mythic roles is deliberate is noted further by Gilliam: "I love the fact that there is this ambivalence.... All myths, if they're dealt with properly, are never as clean-cut as we tend to see them. One side, if you twist it enough, becomes the other" (Drucker 50). Finally, in his laser disc commentary, Gilliam contends that the fool and the king are interchangeable figures: "They both have been scarred in different ways, and both need an innocent to come and show them the way" (Criterion). Of the two film characters, however, Lucas is more closely aligned with the Fisher King, who "has lost the ability to love [while] Parry still clearly can love. The Fisher King, because he can't love, his kingdom and the world around him become meaningless and barren" (Criterion).

Such a cinematic shape-shifting process may be fueled, in part, by New Age spiritualism,⁸ a fusion of the humanistic mythology of Joseph Campbell and the neo-Jungian theories of Robert A. Johnson, a popular psychologist. With these concepts in mind, then, I will explore both the general Campbellian ethos of *The Fisher King* and the impact of Jungian

archetypes, as expounded by Johnson, upon the characters and themes of the film. Following this discussion, a key section of the article, I will investigate a possible Reagan agenda for *The Fisher King* as well as important medieval elements in the film, including the Red Knight fantasy sequence.

Viewing the Grail quest as a "new mythology of man" (*Occidental Mythology* 507), Campbell points to the search as a purely human endeavor, "an individual adventure in experience" (507-08). Furthermore, Campbell characterizes this secular pursuit of blessedness as an internal quest "for those creative values by which the Wasteland is redeemed" (522). While *The Fisher King* is imbued generally with the ideas and humanistic spirit of Campbell, the film, nevertheless, underscores the significance of a joint quest for contemporary Grail values. As Parry notes to Jack early in the film, "I'm a knight on a special quest, and I need help.... That's why they [little people] sent you [Jack]." Although Parry and Jack cannot cure the malaise of New York City as Wasteland, they must embark on a shared journey to love, trust, forgiveness, and redemption.

Crucial to the film's depiction of an interlaced Grail quest are the neo-Jungian concepts of Johnson, for Johnson's popular study (*He: Understanding Masculine Psychology*) shaped LaGravenese's screenplay for *The Fisher King* (LaGravenese 124). According to LaGravenese's reading of *He*, "the Fisher King, or Grail, myth—when paralleled with the male psyche—becomes the story of every man's psychological and spiritual growth" (124).⁹ Once a boy (Perceval or the fool) starts his journey from innocence to maturity, he briefly "touches' God or the God within—that part of ourselves that is our direct link to the divine; our souls" (124). Since the boy is young and immature, he fails to comprehend his epiphany, thus leaving him with the imprint of "a 'Fisher King' wound" (124). Such a wound represents in the boy's rite of passage the "first touch of consciousness" (Johnson, *He* 4), the beginning stage of spiritual/emotional illumination, and the source of intense pain and psychic disunity.¹⁰ Furthermore, the Fisher King injury—localized in "the male, generative, creative part of a man's being" (Johnson, *Fisher King* 16)¹¹—deadens human feeling and thus creates detachment from other individuals (Johnson, *Fisher King* 4 and 16). Symbolized by a fish, suggestive of Christ, of divine force, or of valuable and creative "inner work" (Johnson, *Fisher King* 22-23, 27),¹² the Fisher King wound is triggered occasionally by a particular event—"an injustice" (Johnson, *He* 5). Because the wound constitutes a spiritual maiming, the afflicted youth or fool must renounce an "I"-centered life and embrace "service for the greater good or even someone [to] love" (LaGravenese 124).

Perhaps the most potent expression of the boy's "divine awakening" (Odom 43) and subsequent wound may be found in two episodes of the

LaGravenese script for *The Fisher King*. After Jack realizes that Parry's wife was murdered by Malnick at the upscale nightclub, the now chastened Jack visits Parry's basement hideaway, a repository for all things medieval. Included among the homemade weapons, pictures of Round Table knights, and renditions of the Holy Grail is Parry's manuscript, *The Fisher King: A Mythic Journey for Modern Man*—a key to the former scholar's world view. Somewhat later in the film, however, the two contemporary Grail figures converse in Central Park at night, for Parry seems compelled to make Jack comprehend the meaning of the Grail legend. This Central Park scene, involving a nude Parry cavorting in the Arcadian greenery, may suggest at once a temporary respite from his Wasteland demons and a symbolic expression of Chrétien's Perceval. At the beginning of *Le Conte du graal*, the inexperienced Perceval—a child of the woods—is depicted as a “natural man,” for he knows nothing about socially learned behavior or the chivalric ideals of knighthood.

Invested with “psychic energy,” the contemporary Perceval then narrates to Jack the tale of the Fisher King as a youth, who receives a mystical vision in fire of “the Holy Grail, the symbol of God's divine grace.” Once the boy feels “like God,” he attempts “to take the Grail” from its fiery covering, and “the Grail vanished,” leaving the youth with a wound.¹³ After the boy assumes the role of mature Fisher King, the wound festers, thereby plummeting the monarch into unrelievable despair. Because the Fisher King “had no faith in any men, not even in himself,” he is incapable of feeling any emotion, especially love, and thus veers inexorably towards death. One day, however, a fool offers the king a cup of water from the monarch's bedstand; suddenly, as the Fisher King drinks the liquid, his wound heals magically, and the cup metamorphoses into the Grail. When the king demands a rational explanation for these marvelous events, the fool replies simply, “I don't know. I only knew you were thirsty.”

That Parry's highly individualized recasting of the Grail legend,¹⁴ buttressed by Johnson's New Age spiritualism, plays a prominent role in *The Fisher King* can be demonstrated easily. From the outset of the film, Parry—the insane former medievalist—can be termed a Perceval figure (fool), for he views New York “through the eyes of a medieval knight” and attempts “to make a medieval world out of what, in fact, is a very modern world” (Criterion). Trusting that he embarks on a divine mission, “to get back something very special [Grail] which He [God] has lost,” Parry's entrance into a hallucinatory Grail world, a dreamlike terrain peopled with Red Knights and Fisher Kings, is the product of both his academic background and his schizoid imagination. Furthermore, Parry's intense suffering, fueled by his wife's death, becomes the hallmark of his “Fisher



Robin Williams (left) as Parry and Jeff Bridges as Jack in Terry Gilliam's 1991 film *The Fisher King*.

King wound,” for “A man suffering in this way is often driven to do idiotic things to cure the wound and ease the desperation he feels” (Johnson, *He 8*).¹⁵

Once Parry interacts with the guiltstricken Jack, the two join forces to heal their respective Fisher King wounds. Parry, first of all, must accept both his wife's death and the glimmerings of friendship raised by Jack. At the same time, Parry must force Jack to enter and to comprehend a visionary Grail world so that both men may experience spiritual and emotional redemption. Jack's psychic injury perhaps demands a total reshaping of character, for the disk jockey is essentially callous, cynical, and narcissistic (“Thank God, I'm me”). Reflecting the youthful Perceval in Chrétien's *Le Conte du graal*, Jack—a glib conversationalist—fails to listen to people and frequently interrupts a talk-show caller's speech. As he sits inside the glass-enclosed sound booth at the studio, a symbolic rendition of his physical and emotional isolation, Jack “seems to be king, but he's trapped” (Criterion). Dimly aware of his barren existence, one that feasts on public

humiliation, he is driven to seek additional fame by starring in a television sitcom (*On the Radio*). While he discusses with his girlfriend Sondra (Lara Harris) his vision of television success, Jack ponders his future biography: "I used to think my biography oughta be Jack Lucas—the Face behind the Voice, but now it can be Jack Lucas, the Face *and* the Voice." Then, still caught up in his reverie of power and riches, he repeats the words from his television script, especially "Forgive me!"—Jack's signature line and "pop mantra" (LaGravenese 132). Once Edwin's mass murder is reported on television and Jack's sitcom contract is canceled, "Forgive me!" underscores both Jack's despair and his need for psychic absolution.

After Parry rescues him from suicide and potential maiming, a penitent Jack makes the first tentative steps from isolation and selfishness to membership in the human community. At first, however, Jack is rankled by his Fisher King wound, an unremitting source of pain and guilt. As Jack explains to Anne, "I really feel cursed.... I feel like a magnet, for I attract shit.... I wish there was some way I could just pay the fine and go home." Jack's inner torment abates somewhat when he contemplates assisting Parry: "I feel indebted to the guy [Parry].... If I can help him in some way ... then maybe things would change for me." Specifically, Jack attempts to comfort Parry by facilitating a relationship between Parry and Lydia (Amanda Plummer), the former medievalist's dream woman. Near the end of *The Fisher King*, however, Parry is knifed by two juvenile thugs and then falls into a catatonic state. Following Jack and Anne's initial visit with Parry at the mental hospital, Jack soon rejects an offer of a second weekly television series, a comedy celebrating the disk jockey's experiences with the homeless. Once again, Jack is drawn to Parry's basement apartment, where he gazes at a book on the Holy Grail. His memory thus jolted by the Grail images, Jack then recalls Parry's magazine photo of a grail, actually a trophy belonging to a billionaire living on Fifth Avenue.¹⁶

In an ensuing scene at Parry's hospital bed, however, redemption is at hand for Jack. At first, Jack protests violently to the speechless Parry, "I'm not responsible, and I don't feel guilty.... It's easy being nuts! Try being me!" Then moved by genuine love and pity for Parry, Jack relents, "If I do this [obtain the Grail],... it's because I want to do this for you ... for you." In order to complete this Grail quest, Jack assumes the role of the fool and must "step into Parry's world in order to save" (LaGravenese 132) the psychically wounded Fisher King. As he scales a wall surrounding the billionaire's townhouse (the 94th Street Armory), eerily reminiscent of a medieval fortress, Jack enters Parry's medieval fantasyland. Viewing a huge Red Knight depicted on a stained glass window and hearing a horse

whinny, Jack notes, "I hear horses.... Parry will be so pleased." After imagining that he has been shot,¹⁷ Jack extracts the trophy (Grail) from its display case,¹⁸ flees from the building, and eventually places the cup in Parry's hands. Once Parry wakes up from his catatonic state, he expresses his love for Lydia, and Jack's selfless concern for Parry—demonstrated by his heroic act at the Castle Perilous—spills over into true devotion to Anne, Jack's long-suffering beloved.¹⁹ With the blighted New York landscape once prosperous again, symbolized by the blaze of fireworks and the glare of skyscrapers, the now redeemed Parry and Jack return to their natural states and frolic nude in Central Park.

While the LaGravenese screenplay for *The Fisher King* clearly reflects the imprint of New Age spiritualism, especially Johnson's neo-Jungian concepts and themes, equally important are the film's socioeconomic and sociopolitical underpinnings. Through its careful portrait of contemporary problems and its finely etched dialogue, the movie "mounts a radical assault on the politics of illusions that underlie the Reagan Revolution" (Dowell 47). Beneath the glossy surface of "trickle-down" economics supposedly benefiting the poor, tax equity, and deregulation lies a deep chasm between the rich and powerful and a powerless underclass. While *The Fisher King* does address recurrent social problems—homophobia (the attempted torching of Jack and the beating of the gay cabaret singer in Central Park) and AIDS (Michael Jeter's plaintive comment—"I watched all my friends die"), I will scrutinize the interplay between the affluent and the down-trodden.

Early in the film, as Jack ponders a new script (*On the Radio*), a street person bangs on his limousine window and begs for money. Although Jack has all the trappings of success—power and money—he is completely indifferent to the bum's plight ("A couple of quarters isn't going to make any difference anyway"). After Jack hears of Edwin's massacre, however, he gets drunk and wanders in the rain, his clothes soaked and torn, near the Plaza Hotel. In front of the hotel walks an affluent man, who is accosted suddenly by a desperate vagrant. Although the hotel guest tips the Plaza doorman, the rich man refuses to recognize the bum or to give him money, thereby infuriating the vagrant.

Once Jack assumes the role of a tramp, he begins to comprehend the suffering of the homeless. Energized partly by concern for Parry's welfare and partly by a lingering sense of guilt, Jack offers Parry seventy dollars ("I just would like to help you. I thought ... you could use some money"). Although Parry gives the money to a street person, the former medievalist is touched by Jack's protective gesture: "You're a real human being.... You're a true friend."

Additional evidence which serves to highlight “the obscene schism between wealth and poverty ... during the 1980s” (Criterion: Michael Wilmington’s dust jacket notes) may be found in the bizarre episode of the stockbroker bum. Formerly an affluent stockbroker, this man is now reduced to begging on the street and to engaging in imaginary conversations on a disconnected phone. When this deranged man first appears on the screen, he bellows into the telephone, “Sell, Sell, Sell!” After he receives Jack’s money from Parry, however, the former stockbroker yells into the receiver, “Buy, Buy, Buy!... Fuck ’em all!” As Osberg explains (214), “It is hard to know if his job has driven him mad, or if his job was itself a kind of madness.”

Perhaps the most potent social commentary may be found in an episode involving a crippled Vietnam veteran (Tom Waits), who begs, cup in hand, at Grand Central Station. While Jack and Parry await Lydia’s arrival, most of the frenzied commuters rush by, ignoring the legless veteran. One man, however, tosses a coin that misses the cup, thus prompting Jack to react angrily, “Asshole! Didn’t even look at you [veteran].” Comprehending fully that commuters supply money both to avoid eye contact (humanizing the poor) and to salve their guilty consciences, the veteran answers, “He’s paying so he don’t have to look.”

Such a remark leads the veteran to launch into an incisive analysis of thoroughly disgruntled workers who wish to stab their rich employers. If the workers’ alienation flares into violence, they will be forced to beg for a living:

Say, guy goes to work every day, eight hours a day, seven days a week, and gets his nuts so tied in a vise he starts questioning the very fabric of his existence.... Then one day, about quitting time,... his boss calls him into the office.... “Come into my office and kiss my ass for me.” And Bob [the worker] says,... “I just want ... to see the expression on his face as I jam this pair of scissors into his arm.” ... Then he [worker] thinks of me [crippled vet]. He says, “...It’s not so bad. At least I got two arms and two legs, and I ain’t beggin’ for money.” ... I’m [vet] what you call a kind of moral traffic light. Like I’m saying, “Red—go no further.”

Conjoined with this social commentary, the moral subtext of *The Fisher King* is a rich panoply of medieval elements, part of the vital spiritual landscape of the film. Such elements will include the import of medieval sign theory, especially “image/word theory”; the leitmotif of windblown paper; the Holy Grail symbol; the medievalization of key characters, garb, or setting; the use of “high” diction; and the Red Knight fantasy sequence.

Central to Monica Potkay’s interpretation (173–74) of the film, “an allegory of image/word theory” (174), is the marriage of the rational word

(verbal medium) and the emotional image (visual medium) in medieval semiotics. Noting that Jack, a talk-show host, is heard but never seen, Potkay contends that he cannot perceive “the real power of either words or images” (173), especially the meaning of a Grail *vision*. Jack, however, achieves spiritual peace and wholeness when he finally comprehends “the interrelation of word and image ... his accepting the love of a woman who owns a video rental store” (173).

The visual assumes dramatic form, likewise, in the recurrent motif of “windblown paper” (Osberg 194) in *The Fisher King*. Suggesting the disintegration at the core of the film, “windblown paper” is often linked visually with “archways or doorways marking liminal and transitional narrative junctures” (Osberg 194). In the first example, a “down and out Jack” (Criterion) contemplates suicide as he sits near the statue of a heroic figure, William Tecumseh Sherman. Suddenly, “the wind blows first one, then a second, then a third sheet of paper across the frame” (Osberg 194). After Jack’s attempted suicide, however, Parry and Jack converse in front of Carmichael’s mansion. Expressing his need to obtain the magnate’s “Grail,” Parry notes to Jack, “I have a quest.” Just then, “a sheet of paper sails across the screen between Parry and the camera, linking the idea of quest with fragments of the book, with the history of narrative romance” (Osberg 194). A final “paper” transition in the film narrative occurs when Jack searches desperately for Parry among the destitute street-wanderers. Such a transition—emblematic of Lucas’ new spiritual quest for atonement and love—is highlighted by “a massive granite-block wall with a back-lighted Roman arch toward which Jack walks” (Osberg 195). Once again, sheets of paper fly by: “these fluttering, wind-driven sheets of paper resemble nothing so much as pages torn from books ... the torn and detached pages of apparently once coherent narratives” (Osberg 195).

Occupying a key position both in medieval literature and in *The Fisher King*, the Holy Grail—a multivalent image—naturally invites conflicting interpretations. Although the Grail is portrayed as a “holy thing” (6391) in Kibler’s translation (313) of *Le Conte du graal*, this object—“a kind of covered serving dish found in wealthy households” (Kibler xviii)—is not linked by Chrétien with the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper. Grail romancers after Chrétien, however, invest the Grail with mystical significance. For example, in *The Quest of the Holy Grail*—a thirteenth-century “spiritual fable” (9) and part of the prose *Lancelot*—the Grail vessel represents an emblem of “God’s grace” (15). For twentieth-century writers and filmmakers, however, the Grail symbol reflects humanistic concerns—“understanding or knowledge, wisdom” (Criterion). Accordingly, in *The Fisher King*, Terry Gilliam identifies the Grail with “love, rediscovering

humanity and the ability to love" (Criterion), and the character Anne links this holy object with "Jesus' juice glass." Only the crazed Parry in the movie attempts to place the Grail within an ordering medieval context, "the symbol of God's divine grace."

Inasmuch as Parry views himself as "a medieval knight out rescuing the poor and the downtrodden" (Criterion), he is energized by heroic exploits. In the "underworld" scene near the Manhattan Bridge, for example, Parry saves Lucas from two murderous teenagers. Yet Parry's role of chivalric knight is undercut by his bizarre garb, "a cosmic cross between a street person and a medieval knight" (Criterion). Carrying over his shoulders a Goodwill Industries' version of medieval bow and arrows, he is dressed in tattered clothing, including underclothes that vaguely suggest chain mail. His ragged garments partly hidden by a long overcoat, Parry also wears "a woman's hat with silly sequins on it" (Criterion). Even his weapons, knotted tube socks with softballs at the bottom, are reminiscent of homemade devices used in a street brawl, not of knightly implements of war.

This undercutting of the medieval continues when Jack subsequently searches for Parry in the basement "apartment," the "world of Parry's fractured imagination" (Criterion). Along with the medieval collage—pasted sketches of knights, castles, Holy Grails, and symbols of the Crusades—is a grotesque drawing of a red knight with his head scratched out, suggesting, perhaps, "the violence underneath the surface" of Parry (Criterion). Erected in a corner of the basement, away from the furnace, is Parry's "chapel built to his dream girl [Lydia]" (Criterion). Yet even this chapel of love is subverted by its odd mixture of the medieval and the contemporary. Containing a "spooky, strange collection of disparate elements" (Criterion), Parry's *Minnegrotte* includes a portrait of a frail, long-haired medieval maiden, candles, soy sauce, jawbreakers candy, and a cheap romance novel (*A Woman of Substance*).

Apart from Parry's "medievalization" and subsequent undercutting, two other characters in *The Fisher King* receive similar treatment. The Lydia character, for instance, is based on Chrétien's Blanchefleur, "a thin and pale maiden ... [whose] tresses flowed free and the beholder would mistake them ... for fine gold, they were so lustrous" (*Perceval* 36–38). Since Blanchefleur, deeply in love with Perceval, hopes "to inspire him to do battle ... in defense of her land and herself" (*Perceval* 41), she represents the knight's "carrier of inspiration, the very core of heroic action" (Johnson, *He* 28–29). To make this connection between Chrétien's Blanchefleur and the film character of Lydia, however, Gilliam needed "a Lydia who appeared to be from another time—as if what Parry saw in her stemmed

from his own background in medieval history" (LaGravenese 134). Gilliam apparently succeeds in his venture, for Parry develops fully his "fantasy image" of Lydia, a beautiful "medieval maiden" (LaGravenese 161–62).²⁰ While Parry's perception of Lydia is clouded by love, the real Lydia of the movie is an ungainly, self-conscious woman who drops food in her lap and has difficulty making friends or attracting lovers. As Lydia explains to Anne, "It's not easy in this day and age.... Meeting people ... I never really went through a dating period."

A final example of deflating medieval characterization may be found in the Central Park episode shortly after Parry and Jack chase after the Red Knight. Hearing the wails of a wounded man, Parry and Jack rush immediately to his aid. After Jack muses over the gay cabaret singer's (Michael Jeter's) wounds and masochistic behavior, Jack inquires of the man, "Do you want to stay here?" The beaten man then responds sarcastically: "Oh yes, sure. I just love bleeding in horseshit. How very Gandhiesque of you!" This episode is significant because it skewers a conventional motif in medieval romance—the rescue of an imperiled lady, usually in a castle tower. Furthermore, as Gilliam contends, "Jeter's voice is so high, Jeter could almost be a woman, a maiden in distress, a half-maiden in distress" (Criterion).

The spirit of medievalism, likewise, colors the exalted diction used in *The Fisher King*, notably in Parry's speeches. Osberg, for instance, offers the following explanation (206) for Parry's dignified language: "Parry's idiolect ... contains ... a high language of chivalry and idealism (romance)." Although Osberg's analysis may well be on the mark, one cannot dismiss the imprint of "trashy romance novels" on Parry's language. Inasmuch as Parry venerates Lydia as Blanchefleur,²¹ along with the objects that Lydia cherishes (soy sauce, jawbreakers, trashy romances), it is no surprise that Parry offers a spirited justification for cheap romance novels. In the original LaGravenese screenplay, for example, Parry articulates his romance credo: "Romance is romance no matter what kind it is.... As long as there's heart, passion, and a little bit of fantasy, romance is the stuff of dreams.... There's always more to trash than meets the eye."

That contemporary romance novels, not the original medieval romances, are marked by stilted rhetorical flourishes is revealed clearly in two of Parry's speeches. Standing outside the Metropolitan Life building, Parry offers the unseen Lydia an overblown soliloquy, a twentieth-century romance novel equivalent of a courtly lover's suffering:

Sovereign princess of this captive heart, what dire affliction hast thou made me suffer, thus banished from thy presence with reproach, and fettered by thy rigorous command, not to appear again before thy beautiful face. Deign, princess,



Mercedes Ruehl (left) as Anne and Amanda Plummer as Lydia, the fair maiden of Parry's dreams, in Terry Gilliam's 1991 film *The Fisher King*.

to remember this thy faithful servant, who now endures such misery for love of thee. [Original screenplay]

Such pretentious pseudo-medieval diction resonates in another scene, the episode involving Parry's rescue of the bleeding cabaret singer in Central Park: "Heaven be praised in giving me so soon an opportunity to fulfill the duties of my profession. These cries doubtless proceed from some male or female in need of my immediate aid and protection."

Both of these passages from *The Fisher King* illustrate cogently the fragmentation of Parry's imagination as he voices genuine medieval concerns (courtly love pain and defense of an endangered human) with an inappropriate means (contemporary romance novel diction). Furthermore, Parry's language echoes, albeit unintentionally, the overly formal diction used by Hollywood filmmakers of the 1940s and 1950s in their cinematic renditions of the Arthurian legend.

Finally, in his quest to recapture the flavor of the Middle Ages, Gilliam employs his visual imagination to depict New York as "a spiritual landscape that Parry allows them [viewers] to see" (James 2.13H). Especially

vital to Gilliam's medievalization of the Manhattan setting are Parry's recurring fantasies of a Red Knight (Chris Howell), "part armored man and part tree,²² riding a red horse" (James 2.13H) that spews fire. Appearing at significant junctures in the film, the Red Knight visions—indebted to Chrétien, Johnson, and Gilliam—highlight Parry's intense terror, despair, and "pain" (Criterion) and establish "the reality of Parry's madness" (Criterion).

With his initial foray into the chivalric world of martial prowess, Perceval kills the menacing Red Knight by hurling a javelin through the knight's eyes and brain (*Le Conte du graal* 1100–71). After assuming only the dead knight's arms, the foolish Perceval is then termed the Red Knight (3927, 3983). Since the Red Knight suggests "the shadow side of masculinity, the negative, potentially destructive power" (Johnson, *He* 24), Perceval's bloody slaying of the Red Knight marks both the boy's violent initiation into manhood and the restoration of Camelot's honor.

In *The Fisher King*, however, Gilliam inverts the roles of winner and loser in the Red Knight battle of the *Le Conte du graal*, thus transforming Parry into a "beaten and defeated shy man" (Johnson, *He* 24). Furthermore, Gilliam selects two details from the Chrétien narrative—bloodshed and violent penetration of the Red Knight's eyes and brain—and shapes them into arresting cinematic forces. The redness of the film's knight, for example, constitutes both a visceral reminder of Perceval's bloody defeat of the Red Knight and a suggestion of Parry's suffering over the murder of his wife. But now that the defeated Red Knight in Chrétien's tale is an aggressive "winner" in the movie, he will transform Parry virtually into a dead man. The spiritually and emotionally dead Parry will thus have to endure both the penetration of his brain (the psychic injury of insanity) and the piercing of his eyes (horrific visual hallucinations of the Red Knight).²³ Since such visions represent "a terrible nightmare that must be confronted" (Criterion), Parry must learn to accept the loss of his wife through murder and to embrace a new love.

Apart from Jack's Red Knight delusion at the billionaire's castellated townhouse, three nightmarish visions of the Red Knight appear in *The Fisher King*. In the first episode, Parry and Jack stand gazing at Carmichael's turreted mansion. Once Jack punctures any notion of a real Grail, he reminds Parry of the former medievalist's life at Hunter College, "I know who you are. You're a teacher." The Red Knight phantasm then suddenly looms up before Parry, thus causing the crazed street person to scream and to cower. Because Jack is present when this apparition reveals itself, Parry's fear subsides. After Parry sees the knight inching away, Parry notes to Jack, "He's [Red Knight] afraid of you." The two Grail figures then chase

the Red Knight into Central Park even though Jack fails to perceive the object of the joint pursuit. Unlike this extended Red Knight incident, the knight's second appearance in the film is very brief. After Parry recounts the Fisher King legend to Jack in a nighttime Central Park setting, the former medievalist informs Jack, "I think I heard that [legend] in a lecture once—some professor at Hunt..." Experiencing momentary panic over the recollection of his former life, Parry looks up suddenly and sees the staring Red Knight astride a fire-breathing red steed.

The final and most devastating vision of the Red Knight takes place outside Lydia's apartment building. After Parry tells her, "I'm in love with you ... not just from tonight. I've known you for a long time," the two lovers kiss, and Lydia runs into her building. Then spying the knight at the end of the street, Parry whimpers plaintively, "Please, let me have this [his new love]." A blinding series of shocking flashbacks are then intercut with the scene of the Red Knight galloping after Parry. Such images include Malnick with a gun as Parry and his smiling wife kiss, blood oozing out of his wife's body as she falls to the floor, and Parry riding off to the mental hospital. When the exhausted Parry arrives at a promenade along the riverfront, he is accosted by two knife-wielding thugs separated from each other by the Red Knight. As the knight points a sword at Parry, one of the thugs slashes Parry.

Thus psychically crippled and physically maimed by this series of events, Parry desperately needs the salvific Grail cup to make him whole once again. Since Parry had already pointed out to Jack the urgency for an interdependent Grail quest, Jack must now embrace true love and selflessness in order to complete Parry's Grail mission. Once Jack identifies with the fool part of his persona, journeys into Parry's vision world of Red Knights and Grails, and steals the trophy, both Grail figures—Parry and Jack—will achieve redemption. At that point, the Fisher King wound emanating from the Dolórous Stroke will fade away, and prosperity will be restored to the ravaged New York Wasteland.

Notes

1. For the traditional medieval vision of the Wasteland as a place wherein "Ladies will lose their husbands, / lands will be laid waste / and maidens, helpless, / will remain orphans; / many a knight will die" (4644–48), see Kibler's translation (229) of Chrétien de Troyes' *Li Contes del Graal* (as Kibler entitles the work), a seminal twelfth-century French romance.

2. After the release of *The Fisher King* in September of 1991, Terry Gilliam, the film's director, subsequently issued two versions of the film, the conventional video cassette version and the laser disc version. The Criterion Collection laser video contains

Gilliam's analytical remarks (December 13, 1991) on all of the film's episodes, restores six scenes omitted in the movie's final cut, and provides Gilliam's commentary—together with storyboards and screenplay excerpts—on four key scenes. Subsequent citations from Gilliam's running commentary on the film will be listed as "Criterion."

3. Grenier is quoting Gilliam. A number of reviewers, likewise, call attention to the themes of penance, forgiveness, and redemption sounded in the film. See, for example, Maslin C10, Verniere S6, Ansen 57, Dowell 46–47, Corliss 68, *Film Journal* 57–58, James 2.13H, and Brown 43. For Chrétien's depiction of Perceval's suffering, penitence, and need for divine forgiveness, notably in the hermitage episode (6347–52, 6422), see the Kibler translation (311, 315).

For a comprehensive survey of reviews and critiques of *The Fisher King*, see Harty 274–76.

4. Shippey contends that "The sign of a powerful tradition, whether myth, romance or fairy-tale, is that it reinvents itself" (17). In that vein, then, "*The Fisher King* is absolutely traditional as well as completely contemporary" (17).

5. While most reviewers of *The Fisher King* note the linguistic resemblance between Parry and Perceval (Parzival), it would be tempting to suggest that Parry, a former professor of medieval history, evokes the memory of a real Arthurian (John Jay Parry).

6. This doll, given to Lucas by a child at the Plaza Hotel, represents "what Jack is about because Pinocchio is trying to become a real boy and ... Jack is going to try to become a real human being" (Criterion).

7. James argues, however, that Parry and Jack "meet and redeem each other from their empty lives, each playing an updated version of the mythic hero [Perceval] who finds the Grail and saves the king" (2.13H).

8. Some reviewers assail *The Fisher King* for its faddish use of pseudo-spiritual themes and for its secularization of the Grail legend; see, for example, Powers (6) and Grenier (50).

9. Johnson contends both that myths generally, including the Grail myth, exist in one's psyche and that "The Grail myth speaks of masculine psychology" (x).

10. Campbell suggests (*Primitive Mythology* 56) that suffering constitutes "a deception...; for its core is rapture, which is the attribute ... of illumination."

11. In most medieval versions of the Grail legend, the Fisher King's injury may be identified with a type of sexual mutilation. For the king as "struck by a javelin / through both thighs" (3478–79), see the Kibler translation (171) of Chrétien's *Le Conte du graal*. For the Grail king (Anfortas) as "wounded ... pierced through the testicles," see the Mustard-Passage translation (IX.256) of Wolfram's *Parzival*, a thirteenth-century German romance.

12. Johnson notes that such psychic activity ("inner work") includes "work on dreams, meditation, active imagination ... any form of inner work that is rich to one" (*Fisher King* 27).

13. In *The Fisher King*, after the gasoline-soaked Jack is rescued by Parry and other homeless people, Jack's coat sleeve is ignited accidentally by a thoughtless vagrant.

14. As Gilliam notes so cogently, "The myth is strong enough to be pushed around in many directions" (Criterion).

15. Gilliam claims that Parry is "a character who tries to get others to believe in his version of reality" (LaGravenese 161).

16. This would-be Grail, depicted in the film as appearing in *Progressive Architecture*, belongs to Langdon Carmichael, a powerful real estate broker.

17. This scene, portraying Jack's hallucinations as he scales the "castle wall," is

abridged in the final version of the film. In the original screenplay, however, numerous police aim their rifles at Jack while the same television newsman who reported Malnick's mass murder refers to Jack as "a crazed radio personality." As Jack closes his eyes, he hears Anne's yell, "Stop, Jack!" Then opening his eyes, Jack says quietly, "Anne." This partially deleted episode, Gilliam notes, "shows a different kind of 'delusion' than the one he now shares with Parry—one connected both to his personal life and to the media elements that the film employs and critiques" (Criterion).

18. The following inscription appears on the trophy: "To Little Lannie Carmichael ... Christmas Pageant, PS 247, 1932."

19. Appropriately, the Grail castle (Carmichael's mansion) is the setting for spiritual renewal, for as Johnson notes, the castle is identified with "the inner world, the place of the spirit, the place of transformation" (He 44).

20. In the final version of the film, Parry's "vision" of Lydia in the Grand Central Station waltz is fueled by love. As Gilliam explains the scene, Parry's "love for Lydia is the only source of music, and its power transforms everything, including the film's point of view" (Criterion). Since Gilliam views "the rush-hour tempo as musical" (Criterion), he creates "a brief instant of romantic delusion" for the film (Criterion).

21. While Parry's initial words in the original screenplay (gas-dousing scene) invoked Dante ("All hope abandon, ye who enter here"), the final screen version includes the name of Blancheffleur, a source of martial inspiration ("In the name of Blancheffleur, unhand that errant knight [Jack]"). This reference to Blancheffleur foreshadows Parry's preoccupation with a Grail quest and with a love pursuit (Lydia). The dark setting (Manhattan Bridge) and unorthodox context—rescuing Jack from knife-wielding teenagers—undercut somewhat this medieval allusion.

22. If James' characterization of the apparition is correct, then the fusion of knight on horseback and tree may hint at Perceval's two roles in Chrétien's *Le Conte du graal*—his later role as an Arthurian knight performing feats of arms and his earlier role as an unsophisticated "natural man," a child of the woods.

23. As Gilliam noted in an interview with David Morgan (March 1991) during the final editing of *The Fisher King*, "I'm having this feeling that the Red Knight is going to be soundless. Because everything else in New York is so noisy, the thing to make it frightening is if there's no sound to it" (LaGravenese 167).

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