GRAILING ACROSS TIME AND SPACE: METAPHORICAL QUESTS, ACADEMIC PURSUITS AND IRREVERENT VISITATIONS OF CAMELOT

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Abstract: *The main focus of this paper is the rewriting of Arthurian and Grail lore in the modern vein, with a particular emphasis on revisitations that explore the metaphorical rather than the literal meaning of the quest and of the Grail itself and favour a less reverent approach (whether merely light-hearted, harshly cynical or downright surreal) over an attitude of awed idealization of the past. The analysis will primarily focus on two prose narratives – Mark Twain's* A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court *(1889) and David Lodge's* Small World. An Academic Romance *(1984) – a surrealist comedy –* Monty Python and the Holy Grail *(1975) and a twenty-first century animation –* Shrek the Third *(2007) – but will also entail references to other cinematic and literary works from both the British and the American space, including an action film (*Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*), a comedy-drama (*The Fisher King*), a conspiracy-theory novel (Dan Brown's (in)famous* The Da Vinci Code*), a musical (Monty Python's* Spamalot*) and even computer games in an attempt to explore the intertextual complexity of most such endeavours as well as to highlight the wide (and enduring) appeal of the Grail plot.*

Key words: *Arthurian legend; Grail; identity; intertextuality; quest; violence.*

Introduction

The study of literature is one of the areas most likely to benefit from the increasingly appealing transdisciplinary methods, irrespective of the text or subject under discussion, yet there are few research topics across the entire field of humanities that require such an approach as unequivocally as those related to the Grail Quest. The Grail's precarious (or privileged, depending on one's vantage point) position on the ever-shifting borders of reality and fiction, at the crossroads of theology, history, archaeology and literature, has indeed made it virtually impossible for its various literary incarnations to be tackled without resorting to at least passing references to a wide range of disciplines. The quest undertaken in this paper entails an analysis of several prose narratives and films that rely in different measures on medieval history and Arthurian mythology yet provide readers with equally interesting insights into the metaphorical rather than the literal significance of the search for the Grail (and indeed of its very object). The common denominators of the narratives selected for analysis include their rejection of awed reverence and exposure of intellectual pompousness, as well as a similar tendency to liberate the quest from its institutional apparatus and view it as an individual project independent of a common ideology or an official agenda and above all as a journey applicable to the reader's own interactions with the universes located both inside and beyond texts.

'A several years' cruise': Yankees vs. Knights

The most appropriate starting point of any survey of the less reverent approaches to the Arthurian legend is, at least from a chronological point of view, Mark Twain's 1889 *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, even though it is the text's twentieth-century progeny rather than its actual content that is likely to yield more relevant examples for the

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purposes of the present paper. Indeed, as far the quest motif is concerned, Twain's narrative only includes a brief comment on the extent to which the knights' search was more of a glamorous pastime or at best a manly rite of passage than a feasible project:

> The boys all took a flier at the Holy Grail now and then. It was a several years' cruise. They always put in the long absence snooping around, in the most conscientious way, though none of them had any idea where the Holy Grail really was, and I don't think any of them actually expected to find it, or would have known what to do with it if he had run across it. You see, it was just the Northwest Passage of that day, as you may say; that was all. Every year expeditions went out holy grailing, and next year relief expeditions went out to hunt for them. There was worlds of reputation in it, but no money. (Twain 64)

It is quite interesting to observe that following a rather stubborn insistence on being trapped in a dream about finding himself "in Arthur's court – a person who never existed" and talking to "nothing but a work of the imagination" (Twain 34) Hank Morgan eventually comes to accept the truth of his new surroundings yet never seems to consider the existence of a tangible chalice that the knights' efforts might eventually bring to light.

The Grail is also markedly absent from most of the works capitalizing on Twain's plot, ranging from long prose narratives to high school comedies, animated features, cartoons, television productions of varying length, mildly entertaining yet, with a few notable exceptions, "largely unsuccessful attempts to update Twain's novel which cheerfully appropriate the gimmickry and comic surfaces but suppress or fail to recognize the somber resonances of their original" (Sklar 97). Ironically, some of the shrewdest commentary is to be found (much like the Grail itself, whatever form it might choose to take) hidden in quite unexpected places, as is the case with Warner Bros' 1978 animation *A Connecticut Rabbit in King Arthur's Court*, a fusion of Twain-inspired time-travel, Ray Bradbury science-fiction and earlier Warner Bros attempts at medieval rewriting such as "Knights Must Fall" (1947) and "Knight-Mare Hare" (1955). Apparently amounting to little more than children's entertainment, the 25-minute cartoon featuring "Bugges Bunnye of Carrot Patchville, USA" and Daffy Duck as a disinterested, world-weary "Arthur, king of England, Etc." draws attention to its chief strategy and greatest merit by proclaiming that "the pun is mightier than the sword" and includes occasional gems of understated humour and surrealism such as Daffy's philosophical comment – "It is sort of ridiculous for King Arthur to be a duck" (Jones) – as his reign gives way to King Arth-Hare's Court.

As far as the Grail is concerned, the disinterest displayed by Twain's factory foreman has been more than atoned for in recent decades by the efforts made by two more academically oriented fictional Yankees, the tenured professor and part-time action hero played by Harrison Ford in the *Indiana Jones* movie franchise and the "Harrison Ford in Harris tweed" (Brown 10) lookalike in Dan Brown's notorious conspiracy theory novel. Leaving aside this minute (yet, for a dedicated student of intertextuality, heart-warming) nod to a common pursuit and a certain level of indebtedness, as well as their similar mainstream status and questionable scientific accuracy (not to mention aesthetic quality), the two narratives resort to the methods of different disciplines to explore two equally significant routes: in the former the joint efforts of an initially sceptical professor of archaeology (whose research is funded by a fictional college in Connecticut, of all places) and his father, a teacher of medieval literature, "the one the students hope they don't get" (Spielberg), culminate in the retrieval (and subsequent loss) of the physical Grail, whereas in the latter a Harvard University professor of religious iconology and symbology chooses to interpret the chalice as "a metaphor for something else, something far more powerful" (Brown 176).

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In both narratives time-travel gives way to slightly less dramatic (not to mention convenient) journeys across contemporary national borders and texts, occasionally resulting in encounters not entirely unlike those experienced by the original Yankee. Thus, following his successful completion of the first three challenges designed to thwart the attempts of unworthy Grail seekers, Dr Jones finds himself inside a temple in which time appears to have frozen seven hundred years before, confronts "the last of three brothers who swore an oath to find the Grail and to guard it" (Spielberg) and is acknowledged as his rightful successor. Robert Langdon's marginally less heroic exploits do not include such an unmediated encounter with the past he studies yet, given the inevitable inclusion in the narrative of a stereotypical British villain, even Brown's Yankee gets his own opportunity to face a Knight of the Realm once he has correctly answered his version of the three questions:

> 'And finally, I must make the most grave of inquiries.' Teabing paused and then spoke in a solemn tone. 'In which year did a Harvard sculler last outrow an Oxford man at Henley?' [...]
> 'Surely such a travesty has never occurred.'
> The gate clicked open. 'Your heart is true, my friend. You may pass.' (Brown 241)

An apparently benign British Royal Historian with a penchant for Earl Grey (and, it later transpires, murder and organised crime) Sir Leigh Teabing, the novel's primary antagonist, also represents an obvious Fisher King figure by virtue of his physical disability and his (largely self-assigned) role of Grail guardian.

Leaving aside their protagonists' citizenship and the occasional intertextual echoes listed above, neither *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* nor *The Da Vinci Code* are half as reminiscent of Twain's "dismissive spoof of 'holy grailing'" (Umland and Umland 63) as the apparently unrelated landmark of British surrealist cinema, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975). While it could be argued that a cinematic endeavour centred around the search for a holy relic is unlikely to borrow too much from a nineteenth-century novel that barely acknowledges the said quest, both narratives rely on "a similar use of the Middle Ages as a vehicle to generate humorous effects out of – absurdist? nonsensical? – incongruity" (Umland and Umland 64). Moreover, an in-depth analysis of the Monty Python film reveals a "critique of social injustice, imperialistic arrogance, and technological hubris" (Sklar 97) at least as scathing as Twain's, as well as a score of stereotypical characters "possessed of one overriding unattractive quality which sets them up for a fall" (Levy and Coote 111) in a manner highly reminiscent of the tragicomic evolution of Twain's Boss.

'He's already got one, you see?' From God's missing mug to Jesus' juice cup.

Considering how many British critics took umbrage at *A Connecticut Yankee*'s "burlesque of ideals of King Arthur's Round Table, part of hallowed British tradition" (Sloane 123) in the years immediately following its publication, it might appear bizarre that a film merrily taking apart "everything from Malory and Tennyson to Bergman and *Camelot*" (Aronstein 115), subverting "the chivalric ethos of heroism" (Kline 78) and attacking "British myths of national identity, monarchy, class, and government at the moment of their supposed origin" (Aronstein 116) should enjoy such popularity among academic members of the public, yet there is quite a lot to be said about collective mindset changes over time as well as about a nation's responses to mockery from inside its own ranks (as opposed to criticism coming from a former colonial subject).

Questioning "conventions of narrative, history and authority" (Aronstein 115) alike, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* challenges King Arthur's legendary status as well as the divine right of kings and all forms of aristocratic power by initially implying that the only real

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distinction between a king and a commoner resides in the fact that the former "hasn't got shit all over him" (Gilliam and Jones) and subsequently undercutting the entire "aristocratic mythos with filth" (Kline 78). Although largely unrelated to the Grail quest thread, the infamous encounter between "Arthur, son of Uther Pendragon, from the castle of Camelot, king of the Britons, defeater of the Saxons, sovereign of all England" and an extremely vocal member of an anarcho-syndicalist commune exposes "the violence upon which knighthood rests" (Kline 78) and accurately highlights the most absurd details of Arthurian lore:

> DENNIS: Listen - strange women lying in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government. Supreme executive power derives from a mandate from the masses, not from some farcical aquatic ceremony.
> ARTHUR: Be quiet!
> DENNIS: Well you can't expect to wield supreme executive power just 'cause some watery tart threw a sword at you!
> ARTHUR: Shut up!
> DENNIS: I mean, if I went around sayin' I was an emperor just because some moistened bint had lobbed a scimitar at me they'd put me away!
> ARTHUR: Shut up! Will you shut up!
> DENNIS: Ah, now we see the violence inherent in the system.
> ARTHUR: Shut up!
> DENNIS: Oh! Come and see the violence inherent in the system! HELP! HELP! I'm being repressed!
> ARTHUR: Bloody peasant! (Gilliam and Jones)

As far as the actual Grail is concerned, one of the most frequently quoted exchanges is the one between the English knights and a French guard, whose abusive language and "outrageous accent" are overshadowed by his even more outrageous claim regarding the object of Arthur's quest:

> ARTHUR: Go and tell your master that we have been charged by God with a sacred quest. If he will give us food and shelter for the night he can join us in our quest for the Holy Grail.
> GUARD: Well, I'll ask him, but I don't think he'll be very keen... Uh, he's already got one, you see? (Gilliam and Jones)

Even though the guard's claim turns out (unbeknownst to Arthur) to be a malicious joke, the plurality of Holy Grails implicit in his comment represents an accurate description of the state of affairs in the fields of historical, archaeological and theological research. While some literary critics might be reluctant to waste any time over such mundane considerations and choose to only consider the Grails to be found in works of fiction, the fact remains that in Europe alone "an estimated 200 goblets vie for the title" (Whipple 1). This realization has recently prompted a number of light-hearted comments, from John Wrenglesworth's observation that "all the proposed Grails would constitute a fair-sized dinner service" (1) to Tom Whipple's argument that if "as John Calvin said, there are enough fragments of the True Cross to fill a ship, then there are also enough holy grails to toast that ship's launch many times over" (1).

It would thus appear that, far from amounting to merely locating a unique and readily recognizable relic, the knights' real task entails seeing beyond appearances and resisting the appeal of illusory replicas, something Sir Galahad fails to do when he allows the Grail-shaped beacon of Castle Anthrax to lead him astray. It might be interesting to remember at this stage

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in the analysis that Spielberg's version of the Grail quest features four rather than three trials, the last of which requires the seeker to choose the right vessel from a vast array of silver and gold chalices: "You must choose. But choose wisely. For as the True Grail will bring you life - the False Grail will take it from you." While the hero's successful identification of the right cup hardly comes as a surprise, certain viewers might derive additional enjoyment from the realization that it took an action hero portrayed by a carpenter turned Hollywood star to recognize the earthenware jug of a Jewish carpenter turned charismatic preacher and finally break the cycle of failed fictional quests.

The same distinction between finding a hidden Grail and acknowledging the value of an ostensibly mundane object can be employed in reference to yet another Hollywood production (directed by Terry Gilliam, the only America-born member of the Monty Python team) whose very protagonist embodies the contrast between appearance and essence. A former college teacher and the author of a thesis entitled *The Fisher King, A Mythic Journey for Modern Man*, Parry (Henry Seagan in his past life) finds himself unable to get over the trauma of his wife's violent death and escape the hallucinatory image of a red knight and ends up voluntarily unemployed – "I don't need a job. I have a quest." (Gilliam) – and surrounded by the kind of people who describe the Holy Grail as "Jesus' juice glass" and more likely than not perceive the Crusades as a "frat initiation" (Gilliam), not that such an outlook is massively different from Hank Morgan's or indeed the suggestion in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* that God might have devised the quest scenario to get the irritatingly grovelling knights off His case:

> GOD: Right! Arthur, King of the Britons - your Knights of the Round Table shall have a task to make them an example in these dark times.
> ARTHUR: Good idea, oh Lord!
> GOD: 'Course it's a good idea! Behold! Arthur, this is the Holy Grail. Look well, Arthur, for it is your sacred task to seek this Grail. That is your purpose, Arthur - the Quest for the Holy Grail. (Gilliam and Jones)

Animated by the same purpose as the Grail knights – as evidenced by his answer to Lydia's mundane inquiry: "What do you do - for a living I mean?" "Well, I'm in search of the Holy Grail." (Gilliam) – and consequently perceived by those around him as nothing but a delusional homeless man notwithstanding his two Master's degrees, one in medieval history, another in medieval literature, Parry ends up unable (or indeed unwilling) to remember his own identity: "The Fisher King myth has a lot of derivations... I remember I was at this lecture in Princeton once - and there was this one speaker... Henry Sa... Henry... uh... Henry..." (Gilliam)

The central intertext of *The Fisher King* is provided, as clearly indicated by the very title and the various references to ancient lore supplied by the protagonist himself, by the legend of the Wounded King, the last guardian in a long line charged with keeping the Grail safe, more specifically by the version in which the Grail eludes power-hungry seekers and reveals itself to a kind-hearted simpleton. Chosen to be the guardian of "God's highest symbol of divine grace" for his courage, the young, innocent and foolish Fisher King is "blinded by greater visions - a life ahead filled with beauty and glory, hope and power" and the sense of his own invincibility and is consequently left Grail-less, "wounded and ashamed at what his recklessness had lost him", determined to "reclaim his destiny" yet doomed to failure notwithstanding his persistence. Likewise, the bravest knights of the realm search to no avail for "the Grail that would heal their King and make them the most respected and valued men in the land" and the quest gradually turns into "a ruthless struggle between ambitious men vying for the King's power". The Grail is ultimately found neither by a King,

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nor by a knight, not even by anyone "particularly skilled or admired" but by someone motivated neither by the Grail itself nor by the power it brings with it but by pity for another human being:

> And the King says, 'I need a sip of water to cool my throat'... So, the fool takes a cup from the bedstand, fills it with water and hands it to the King... Suddenly, the King feels a lot better. And when he looks to his hands, he sees that it was the Holy Grail the fool handed him... an ordinary cup that had been beside his bed all along... And the King asks, 'How can this be? How could you find what all my knights and wisest men could not find'? And the fool answers, 'I don't know. I only knew you were thirsty.' And for the first time since he was a boy, the King felt more than a man - not because he was touched by God's glory... but rather, by the compassion of a fool. (Gilliam)

In light of this detail, it might be argued that the *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* Grail reveals itself neither to Indiana Jones the action hero nor to Dr Jones the archaeology professor but to Henry Jones Jr., a selfless son willing to risk his own life to save his dying father. As far as the protagonist of the *Fisher King* is concerned, he is healed the moment his cynical friend decides to overcome his scepticism (or at least temporarily suspend his common sense) and steals a trophy from the Upper East Side castle of a famous architect. Far from implying that "some billionaire" did have the Holy Grail "sitting in a commode on Madison Avenue" (Gilliam), Parry's recovery suggests that the success of the Grail quest has more to do with the seeker's motivation and personal identity than with the magical powers of a holy relic.

Rather than attempt a similar exploration of their own identities, the Monty Python knights appear quite content to lower the standards of their lofty pursuit and settle for any Grail available, as indicated by the subtle shift from the definite to the indefinite article (as well as from their previous aggressive certainty and aristocratic arrogance to the hesitation and self-effacement stereotypically associated with contemporary British identity) in the course of their conversation with Tim the enchanter:

> ARTHUR: Yes, we're, we're looking for the Grail. Our quest is to find the Holy Grail. [...] And so we're, we're, we're, we're looking for it.
> KNIGHTS: Yes we are we are.
> BEDEMIR: We have been for some time.
> ROBIN: Ages.
> ARTHUR: Uh, so, uh, anything you can do to, uh, to help, would be... very... helpful... [...] Fine, um, I don't want to waste anymore of your time, but, uh I don't suppose you could, uh, tell us where we might find a, um, find a, uh, a, um, a uh-
> TIM: A what...?
> ARTHUR: A g-, a g-
> TIM: A Grail?!
> ARTHUR: Yes, I think so.
> KNIGHTS: Yes, that's it. Yes. (Gilliam and Jones)

Their failure to complete even this comparatively modest task and the film's anticlimactic finale, equating the "quest for the King Arthur of history" with the "Quest for a Holy Grail that lies eternally beyond our grasp", has been regarded as the only appropriate ending "to any modern attempt – be it cinematic or scholarly – to bring to light the entire historical truth of the Middle Ages" (Aberth 28). It is up to the individual viewer to decide whether to read Arthur's arrest by a present-day police constable literally (as the capture of a homicidal

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megalomaniac labouring under the misapprehension that he is a medieval king on a sacred quest) or metaphorically, as an image of the often aggressive appropriation, obliteration and rewriting of past centuries by modern scholars, novelists and film producers.

While largely reliant on the same script, the musical spinoff *Spamalot*, written and produced by the same team, includes a more elaborate debate on the true (metaphorical rather than literal) meaning of the Grail, punctuated by typical Monty Python puns, double entendres, irreverent humour and surreal commentary yet ultimately resulting in the same conclusion as more dignified approaches to the legend:

> GOD: Arthur, this is the Holy Grail. Look well. For that is your purpose, Arthur, the Quest for the Holy Grail.
> ARTHUR: But how will I…?
> GOD: Just find the Grail, okay. And get on with it. These people don't have all night!
> ARTHUR: God be praised! We have a Quest.
> BEDEVERE: To find the Grail.
> ROBIN: The Quail!
> ARTHUR: No, the Grail. The vessel used at The Last Supper.
> ROBIN: They had a boat at the Last Supper? Was it a sort of Dinner Cruise?
> ARTHUR: The Grail is a Cup.
> ROBIN: God the Almighty and All Knowing has misplaced a cup?
> GALAHAD: Apparently.
> ROBIN: Doesn't sound very plausible. If God is all-knowing He must know where it is.
> GALAHAD: It does seem very careless. There must be other cups he could use.
> ROBIN: Couldn't we just buy him another one?
> ARTHUR: Look, it's not just about a missing mug. It's a metaphor. We must all look for the Grail within us.
> ROBIN: Somebody's swallowed it?
> ARTHUR: Nobody has swallowed it. It's a symbol. (Idle)

Recapitulated at key moments in the musical by means of an apparently simplistic motivational song – "Find your Grail. Life is really up to you. You must choose what to pursue. Set your mind on what to find." (Idle) – the interpretation of the quest as the pursuit of one's own innermost desires is further reinforced by an ending devised so as to give one random spectator the chance to be the Grail finder. No longer resulting in Arthur's arrest, the confrontation between the Killer Rabbit and the Holy Hand Grenade presents the knights with the final clue, a combination of letters and numbers (changed from one performance to the next to prevent ticket purchasers from tampering with the odds) that leads them to an aisle seat whose occupier is rewarded with a small trophy and a few seconds of fame and glory. As far as the rest of the audience is concerned, the prize resides (at least in the case of those paying attention to more than the surface comedy) in a reminder of the importance of introspection, self-awareness and the quest for personal rather than establishment-imposed goals.

'Looking for a girl.' 'Looking for the Grail?' True romance, academic ambition and the quest for meaning.

No discussion of modern Grail seekers would be complete without an analysis of David Lodge's labyrinthine *Small World. An Academic Romance*, a narrative building on the "equivalence between the lives of modern academics, jetting around the world attending conferences, competing for glory and sometimes love, and the adventures of the knights of

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chivalric romance" (Lodge 2003: 273) and systematically targeting the same "professorial seriousness and pompousness" (Day 127) so frequently attacked by the Pythons. The genesis of both Lodge's academic novel and the Python film are to be found in the belief that the Arthurian legend would provide an excellent basis for a story (Lodge 1988: 72-3) as well as a "structure that most people can understand: a quest" (Chapman et al. 312) and the similarities between the finished works extend beyond the pervasive use of irony to include multiple narrative threads and an impressive range of intertextual borrowings.

The Pythons' elaboration of a plot in which each knight decides to seek the Grail by taking separate paths and the search is not conducted by a group but by distinct individuals stemmed from the awareness that "however holistic, Grail romances specifically highlight the significance of the individual's path" (Housel 86) and David Lodge favoured a similar approach, accurately summarised by the most innocent but occasionally the most perceptive of the novel's academic knights: "I suppose everyone is looking for his own Grail. For Eliot it was religious faith, but for another it might be fame, or the love of a good woman." (12) The novel's complexity is further augmented by the way in which the "plurality of words, possibilities, quests, transformations" (Morace 200) is endlessly multiplied: Persse McGarrigle's pursuit of Angelica, for instance, becomes "entwined with his search for his fallen cousin and his exposure to contemporary literary theory" (Morace 202) and so do the evolutions of the other characters. It might be interesting to note at this stage that intimations of the reading of the Grail quest as a personal ambition (as well as of the extensive use of elements of romance in *Small World*) are to be found in *The British Museum is Falling Down*, an earlier text centred around the intricate journey of an equally confused academic protagonist: "For what was the house in Bayswater [...] but a Castle Perilous from with, mounted on his trusty scooter, he, intrepid Sir Adam, sought to snatch the unholy grail of Egbert Merrymarsh's scrofulous novel?" (129) In the later novel the quest represents the central unifying element in an otherwise heterogeneous text in which the search for the Holy Grail is replaced by a young man's relentless pursuit of the woman he loves and medieval violence makes way for a less gory yet equally vicious fight between "profoundly restless and ungratified" (Morrison 293) academic questers over a grail of contemporary scholarship, the UNESCO Chair of Literary Criticism.

The irony results both from the inglorious protagonists who, contrary to one's expectations of an allegory of the Arthurian tales, are never "inspired or spiritually enlivened" (Fawell 184), and their undignified exploits, set in a desolate and corrupted universe not particularly congenial to romance (Holmes 48). This academic wasteland is presided over by a King Arthur – Fisher King fusion unlikely to elicit more respect from the reader than the inept figure of his namesake in the highly irreverent song heard at the end of the Rummidge medieval banquet – "King Arthur was a foolish knight, A foolish knight was he, He locked his wife in a chastity belt, And then he lost the key!" (54) – or indeed any of the other Grail knights: "'Oh, but they were such boobies,' says Miss Maiden. 'All they had to do was to ask a question at the right moment, and they generally muffed it.'" (286) No longer "able to achieve an erection or an original thought" (94), Arthur Kingfisher, "doyen of the international community of literary theorists" (93), perfectly embodies both the sterility of contemporary criticism and the regal reluctance to share privileges and power, the latter aspect becoming manifest when he graciously consents to "come out of retirement and allow his own name to go forward for the chair" (333) he was supposed to award.

Like all Lodge's novels, *Small World* abounds in clues and explanations that help even less perceptive readers navigate the intertextual background, from Morris Zapp's comparison between contemporary scholars and "the errant knights of old, wandering the ways of the world in search of adventure and glory" to Miss Maiden's reference to the highly desirable UNESCO Chair as "the Siege Perilous" (245), the vacant seat at the Round Table

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reserved by Merlin "for him who was destined to achieve the quest of the Holy Graal" (Cobham Brewer 398). Indeed, in the true tradition of novels written by academics, *Small World* blends fiction and criticism and embeds its modern versions of the quest in a veritable compendium of Grail lore, literary theory and criticism, including a symbolic reading of the cup similar to (if simultaneously more comprehensive and less solemn than) the one popularised by Dan Brown's novel:

> 'So Puss in Boots is equivalent to the Grail?' Persse said facetiously.
> Miss Maiden was not discomposed. 'Certainly. Boots are phallic, and you are no doubt familiar with the vulgar expression "pussy"?'
> 'Yes, I have heard it occasionally,' said Persse weakly.
> 'It is a very ancient and widely distributed metaphor, I assure you. So you see the character of Puss in Boots represents the same combination of male and female principles as the cup and spear in the Grail legend.' (36)

The parallel between Persse's quest and the theory put forward by M. Baigent, R. Leigh and H. Lincoln in *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* and later employed in *The Da Vinci Code* – "Sangreal... Sang Real... San Greal... Royal Blood... Holy Grail. It was all intertwined. The Holy Grail is Mary Magdalene... the mother of the royal bloodline of Jesus Christ." (Brown 273) – can be further extended by means of references to various other episodes, the most memorable being perhaps the moment when Persse's "Looking for a girl" is misheard by Ronald Frobisher as "Looking for the Grail" (182). Persse's own role in the ultimate rekindling of hope and fertility can be grasped even by readers unfamiliar with either T. S. Eliot's *Wasteland* or with Arthurian legends, as even if one fails to identify the wounded Fisher King in the person of Arthur Kingfisher and read the young protagonist as a contemporary avatar of Percival, Miss Maiden's analysis of the 'Puss in Boots' pantomime also provides the main coordinates of the myth: "Well, the gouty King is obviously the Fisher King ruling over a sterile land, and the miller's son is the hero who restores its fertility through the magic agency of Puss in Boots." (36)

Notwithstanding his much-appreciated contribution to the critical debate, Persse fails to correctly identify a more personal grail at least twice, his inability to distinguish Angelica from her twin sister being followed by the realization that his "infatuation with Angelica had prevented him from perceiving" (332) the real worth of the apparently unremarkable Cheryl Summerbee and that, like so many unworthy seekers and guardians before him, he had missed a grail hidden in plain sight. The protagonist's "unending erotic quest for an ideal of beauty" (Holmes 47) is therefore meant to continue beyond the physical boundaries of the printed text, much like the reader's "endless displacement of curiosity and desire [...] from one level of the text to another" (27) in Morris Zapp's analysis of the activity of reading. The pervading notion that all quests are underlain by the same general plot of desire, whether sexual, professional or narrative (Morace 193) and the equivalence between a character who "does not so much enact the quest as read it" (Holmes 49) and a reader warned from the very beginning of the text to "take pleasure in its teasing" instead of "striving to possess it" (27) suggest their ultimate identification in the common quest for an elusive meaning hidden beyond deceptive appearances.

'That dork over there is Arthur!' A Far Far Away Ogre in Artie Pendragon's Sport Court

Shrek the Third, the 2007 instalment of the prolific DreamWorks franchise, represents another revisitation of the Arthurian plot that dispenses with the physical Grail yet retains the quintessential quest motif and splits it in several important narrative threads, from the search

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for a legitimate male heir to the throne (Butler 73) to the "New Age journey of self-exploration" (Salda 154) that a psychedelic and rather dishevelled Merlin leads his guests on, thus helping them unveil and subsequently face their deepest fears. The former quest takes Shrek, Donkey and Puss to Worcestershire Academy, a fusion of stereotypical medieval town and equally stereotypical twentieth-century American high-school complete with a medieval school bus, a team of cheerleaders ranting their lines in a simulacrum of Middle English, student drivers crashing horse-drawn carriages, "frankincense and myrrh"-smoking stoners, a clique of popular girls led by Guinevere ('Gwen') of Galorus and dorky kids busy altering their board-game "character level to plus three superability" and "not fitting in" (Miller and Hui).

Judging on the basis of appearance alone, Shrek initially fails in his quest for the heir, automatically identifying the putative monarch in the person of the abusive captain of the school jousting team – 'Strong, handsome, face of a leader. Does Arthur look like a King or what?' (Miller and Hui) – much in the same way in which the antagonist of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* mistakenly assumes only a solid gold emerald encrusted goblet could be "the cup of the King of Kings" (Spielberg). In fact, Arthur turns out to be the ultimate loser, bullied even by the role-playing game geeks, his depiction arguably representing one of the "trademark reversals of the franchise" (Downes and Madeley 82), unless one cares to dwell on Guinevere's notorious fondness for Lancelot and on the fact that even the legendary Arthur owed his power to his royal blood rather than to any personal qualities. Artie's initial status makes his gradual metamorphosis into the new monarch of Far Far Away a classic example of the American Dream and jeopardises *A Connecticut Yankee*'s previously unchallenged position as "the most American adaptation of Arthurian material" (Lupack and Lupack 59). His final monologue can be moreover read as a restatement of the "capitalist myth of success for (potentially) all" (Spencer, Renner and Kruck 72) and insists on the fact that there is no barrier to what a motivated individual can achieve:

> You're telling me you just want to be Villains your whole lives? [...] Didn't you ever wish you could be something else? [...] a good friend of mine once told me that just because people treat you like a villain, or an ogre... or just some loser... it doesn't mean you are one. The thing that matters most is what you think of yourself. If there's something you really want, or there's someone you really want to be, then the only person standing in your way... is you. (Miller and Hui)

Arthur's speech suggests that the only important quest is the pursuit of happiness, a distinctly modern, American belief "predicated upon such notions as individualism, entitlement, hard work, and freedom of choice" (Coyne Kelly 213).

Whereas in Twain's narrative the confrontation between modern American and medieval English protagonists (in particular Jack's rivalry with Merlin) can be analysed in a more or less Freudian vein as an allegory of the nineteenth century "struggling to obliterate its memory of and indebtedness to its sixth-century father" and above all the "superstition and brutality associated with it" (Hoffman 47), the personalities (and indeed the choice of accents) in *Shrek the Third* indicate an entirely different approach. Far from merely representing yet another instance of the stereotypical casting of British actors to play (or, in this case, give their voice to) the villain, the fact that "Charming is pureblood British, while Arthur is hybrid American" is accompanied by an implicit contrast between the "old Pax Britannica, which displaced the other" and "the new Pax Americana, which includes the other" and envisages governing as "an act of inclusion not exclusion" (Vardalos 101). It could be argued that the more democratic aspects of Arthurian tradition (including the equality implicit in the concept of the Round Table) are thus assimilated into the American cultural heritage, perhaps (a more

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cynical reader might argue) in an attempt to compensate for missing centuries of history and the absence of a specific mythology.

Conclusions

The release of *Shrek the Third* was promptly hailed as "a sign of a new Arthurian resurgence percolating in recent years" (Salda 155), a surprisingly exhilarated reaction given the overwhelming number of revisitations of the myth brought forth by virtually every decade and spreading from the written text to the cinematic canon and further into the wider world of entertainment, with quite impressive success in the field of video and computer games. If one is to consider the cult status achieved by numerous Monty Python productions and the growing popularity of intertextual humour (as evidenced by its current profusion in all forms of human endeavour), it is hardly surprising that the arsenal devised by the British developers of *Worms*, a popular series of artillery strategy computer games, features a Holy Hand Grenade (or, indeed, that the item in question hardly qualifies as the most surreal device amongst their weaponry). Indeed, such borrowings make perfect sense if one considers the fact that this particular variety of computer games represents one of the closest equivalents to the medieval Grail quest available to contemporary audiences. The similarity between the perilous journeys undertaken by the medieval knights and the path strewn with (virtual, yet still challenging) obstacles awaiting their twenty-first century descendants is even more noticeable in the case of the intertextual component of *Fallout 2*. Indeed, this American role-playing video-game features an even more elaborate act of homage in the form of an intervention by King Arthur and his Knights, whose quest has undergone certain changes as far as the ultimate goal is concerned – 'Hail, travellers. My name is Arthur, son of Uther Pendragon, from the Brotherhood of Steel. We are on quest for the Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch. Hast thou seen it?' – and whose repertoire also includes an iconic reminder of the "violence inherent in the system" (Gilliam and Jones) in the shape of the 'Bloody peasant!' expletive.

Another interesting recent development concerns the similar use of intertextuality by journalists and writers whose focus apparently lies outside the scope of literary studies, some of the most memorable examples including the title of an article discussing the controversial status of the goblet of the Infanta Dona Urraca[1] and a particularly scathing response to the equation between Mary Magdalene and the Grail, along the lines that "in a century which has re-imagined the Grail not as tableware but as a womb [...] Monty Python's notion of a ferocious guardian rabbit needing to be tackled by the Holy Hand-grenade of Antioch is by no means the most absurd assault on a dreamily mystical vision imagined by the medieval mind" (Wrenglesworth 1). The fact that this latter observation amounts to more than a caustic joke is more than amply proven by the scholarly background of apparently frivolous productions such as the Monty Python film and musical, ultimately the output of people with solid grounding in medieval history and literature, whose approach to the topic not only "curiously parallels the concerns of modern medievalists with the ways we try to understand the Middle Ages" but also anticipates and mocks "academic concerns about how we recapture the past" (Day 127). It is therefore infinitely reassuring to come across indications that some contemporary researchers are not only seriously considering the scientific validity of (certain) ideas to be found in works of fiction but also increasingly of the opinion that the quest for meaning and the discoveries made along the way might indeed be more relevant (not to mention more realistic) than the search for absolute truths.

[1] Suggestively entitled "No rabbits guarding this 'Holy Grail'", Tom Whipple's article alludes to the Killer Rabbit of Caerbannog in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, an antagonist inspired by a depiction of a knight fleeing from a rabbit (serving as an illustration of cowardice) on the façade of Notre-Dame Cathedral.

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The journey across texts that any quest for the literary incarnations of the Grail occasions is in itself an indication that transdisciplinarity is an unavoidable rather than merely recommendable approach. It might be apposite to note at this point the references to the ways in which transdisciplinarity synthesizes the various disciplines by "subsuming them within a single system" and thus "points to the holy grail – Unity of Knowledge graspable through a single overarching epistemology" (Rapport and Somerville 43), or indeed to transdisciplinary synthesis as the actual "holy grail of interdisciplinary knowledge" (Jacobs 7). Inflated accolades and fashionable terminology aside, it could be ultimately argued that one of the central merits of the deceptively light-hearted variations on the quest theme analysed in this paper resides in their acknowledgement of multiple and often widely-different interpretations of the Grail and the historical past and in their common tendency to promote an understanding of the quest as a subjective endeavour and implicitly recommend a flexible if comprehensive approach to any pursuit. As far as the reader is concerned, any immersion in such a narrative can yield, beyond the immediate enjoyment of the plot, an encounter with a potentially infinite number of other texts and, in the best of cases, a revised view of the world and one's own identity.

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