

## BEER AND RENEWAL:

### THE FISHER KING IN TIM POWERS' *THE DRAWING OF THE DARK*

HELEN STEELE

Authors have been using the Grail legend and in particular, the legend of the Fisher King for centuries as the source of inspiration. The legend of the Fisher King seems to come from the ancient Celtic folklore of Bran, later recorded along with the similar tale of Peredur in the *Mabinogion*. In *The Drawing of the Dark* by Tim Powers, the author uses this same legend and sets it within the context of sixteenth century Europe. He uses much of the same themes, with a few significant changes, to better accommodate the legend to the novel form.

There are multiple versions of the legend of the Fisher King, many appearing in works of literature from the twelfth century onwards. While scholars argue over the exact source of the legend, many agree that it comes from the Celtic folklore of the British Isles. Roger Toomis argues that there are distinct parallels between the Fisher King story and that of Bran in Irish mythology, stating, "Bran [...] was the original of the Maimed King of the Grail romances"<sup>1</sup>. Richard Cavendish concurs with this interpretation in his book, *King Arthur and the Grail*<sup>2</sup> as does Arthur Nutt in *Studies on the Legend of the Holy Grail*<sup>3</sup>. As he appears in the *Mabinogion*, Bran is a British King who possesses a magical cauldron, capable of restoring life. When he fights the Irish King, the cauldron is destroyed and Bran wounded. In the aftermath, the wounded Bran cannot protect Britain and orders his men to cut off his head. This they do, and return to Wales where they live for eighty-seven years in peace, feasting and drinking in a magnificent hall. Ultimately, however, they

break a *geas*, are ejected from the castle, and they take the head to London where, buried, it protects the land from invasion<sup>4</sup>.

The Fisher King also appears in the story of Peredur in the *Mabinogion*, in which Peredur visits a mysterious castle where sits a "handsome hoary-haired man"<sup>5</sup>. There, Peredur sees a strange procession: a "spear of incalculable size with three streams of blood running from the socket to the floor"<sup>6</sup> but asks no questions. He later learns that had he asked questions, "The king would have been made well and the kingdom made peaceful" and Peredur must set out to right this wrong<sup>7</sup>.

The *Mabinogion*, while first collected in *The White Book of Rhydderch* ca. 1325, has its origins in earlier Celtic folklore. Toomis believes that a single author wrote the four main strands, including the story of Bran, drawing upon earlier Celtic mythology<sup>8</sup>, while Gantz argues that the disparities in the books suggest separate authors even within a single strand<sup>9</sup>. Whether one or many collected the stories in the *Mabinogion*, the appearance of similar stories and legends in the works of Chretien de Troyes and Wolfram von Eschenbach would suggest that these were tales extant in Europe in the early medieval period from which both authors drew. Only later, especially with Robert de Boron's *Didot-Perceval* version of the story, did the authors associate the sustaining grail with the last supper of the Bible<sup>10</sup>, possibly in an attempt to make the legends more acceptable to the Church. Authors such as de

---

<sup>1</sup> Roger S. Loomis, *The Development of Arthurian Romance* (London: Hutchinson, 1963), 63.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Cavendish, *King Arthur and the Grail* (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Nutt, *Studies on the Legend of the Holy Grail; with Especial Reference to the Hypothesis of its Celtic Origin* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1965).

---

<sup>4</sup> *The Mabinogion*, translated by Jeffrey Gantz (London: Penguin, 1976) 66–82.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>8</sup> Loomis, *Arthurian Romance*, 23.

<sup>9</sup> *Mabinogion*, Jeffrey Gantz, 2

<sup>10</sup> Juliette Wood, "The Holy Grail: From Romance Motif to Modern Genre," *Folklore*, Oct 2000, para. 14.

Boron then linked the Grail stories with the legend of Joseph of Arimathea<sup>11</sup>.

In Tim Powers' *The Drawing of the Dark*, the author ignores the later Christian themes in the Medieval Grail stories, instead concentrating upon themes found in the earlier forms, such as the *Mabinogion* or Chretien. In the novel, Powers takes the tale of the Fisher King from the early British Arthurian legends, and imagines it as a cycle, replayed time and again, this time in sixteenth century Europe. The mysterious Aurelianus pays the Irish mercenary Brian Duffy to go to Vienna to help protect the famous Herzewestern brewery. Once there, Brian begins to realize that the Dark beer from the brewery is vital to the revitalization of the King of the West, the Fisher King, and that without it, the injured King cannot protect the land from the invading Turks. Brian reacts against this information and the growing realization that he is the reincarnation of the legendary Arthur himself, refusing to acknowledge the mystical problem until it is almost too late. Yet he does come to the aid of Aurelianus and of the King at the last; the King drinks the beer and renewed, can protect the land<sup>12</sup>.

When we meet the Fisher King, whether it is in the novel or in one of the earlier folktales, the King lives in a difficult location. Most often, it is a castle, located deep within a wood, to which someone – often the Fisher King himself – must lead the hero. This is the case in *Peredur* and in Chretien; in the tale of Bran this castle corresponds to the hall of Gwales. In all three halls, there is a surprising and welcoming atmosphere, with warmth and food for the hero<sup>13</sup>. It is notable though that the castle is hidden in each version of the story. It does not exist in any real place, but in an otherworld, to which the hero must be led. This liminality of place is included and expanded upon in the

novel. Powers posits that Aurelianus creates a barrier to protect the King, so that while the King stays within the Wienerwald woods outside Vienna, Aurelianus must guide any who wish to reach him<sup>14</sup>. It is thus a place that is also a not place, a pocket within a normal world. However, in the novel, the King no longer lives in a castle. Instead, he stays in a cabin, albeit a surprisingly comfortable and pleasant one. In Powers' world, the time of the castles is over and the people have forgotten about the Fisher King. Instead of being a real force, to them, the Fisher King is a legend, a tale told for children. Their kings are Charles and Suleiman and Henry. The forgetfulness of the people has humbled the Fisher King and this reflects in his dwelling. The cabin also harks back to the dwelling places of the earliest Celts: by placing the King in such a place rather than a medieval castle, Powers reinforces the Celtic roots of the story. In addition, Powers may have made this change to make the King more accessible to modern readers, to remove the King from the magnificence of a castle and make him more human. He accentuates the King's real frailty, and in doing so, emphasizes the weakness of the land itself.

In both the Fisher King folklore and in the novel, the Fisher King bears an incapacitating wound, often to an area of the body associated with fertility. In the novel, the protagonist, Brian Duffy, sees the Fisher King as "Clean-shaven though his white hair hung down around his shoulders, and his face was seamed with [...] centuries of experience. Aside from the bandage around the hips, he didn't appear to be in bad shape"<sup>15</sup>. However, Duffy soon realizes that the King is unable to move except upon a litter. In *Peredur*, the fishing King is similarly "lame"<sup>16</sup> and in Chretien, is described, "Seated on a bed, a man of worth, handsome and with greying hair. [...] The moment the lord saw his guest approaching, he greeted him. 'Friend,' he said, 'take no offense if I do not rise to meet you, for I cannot move without pain.'"<sup>17</sup>.

One of the clearest parallels between the early Fisher King legends and the novel is the connection

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., para 18.

<sup>12</sup> Tim Powers, *The Drawing of the Dark* (New York: Ballantine, 1979).

<sup>13</sup> "Peredur, The Son of Ewrawc", *The Mabinogion*, translated by Lady Charlotte Guest (1849), reproduced by the Electronic Texts Collection, University of Adelaide (<http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/>), episode 5; Chretien de Troyes, *Perceval le Gallois* (Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail), translated by Ruth Harwood Cline (New York: Pergamon, 1983) and *Mabinogion*, Jeffrey Gantz, 81.

---

<sup>14</sup> Powers, *The Drawing of the Dark*, 189

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 189.

<sup>16</sup> *The Mabinogion*, Charlotte Guest, episode 5.

<sup>17</sup> Chretien de Troyes, *Perceval le Gallois*.

between the Fisher King and the health of the land. This belief, that the king and the land were connected, appears in multiple cultures, including the Celtic. James Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, talks extensively of the belief, writing, “The king's life or spirit is so sympathetically bound up with the prosperity of the whole country [...] that if he fell ill or grew senile the cattle would sicken or cease to multiply, the crops would rot in the fields, and men would perish of widespread disease”<sup>18</sup>. In both Bran and Peredur in the *Mabinogion*, it is the *peace* of the land that is explicitly at stake, and Powers uses the same theme in his novel. Although the temporal Emperor Charles V theoretically rules the land, Aurelianus makes clear to Duffy that “Charles is not the Western King”<sup>19</sup>. The health of the Fisher King holds the balance between the West and the East: should he fall, so too would the West, to the armies of the Turks descending upon Vienna. As Aurelianus notes, “Out King [...] is ill. And so is the West. Which way the connection works I’m still not certain, but the connection unarguably exists; when the King is well the West is well”<sup>20</sup>. Thus, while the earlier legend specifies the ill health of the land in very general terms, the novel makes the effect of the same very tangible. This is not surprising, as Powers wrote the novel for modern audiences, and a concrete threat invokes far more tension in this medium. In the novel, the hero, Brian, faces the very real consequences of the weakness of the King. Enemies sent by the Eastern King attack him; he fights against the Ottoman Janissaries and confronts sorcerers and ifrits. While Peredur faced many perils, most were unrelated to the Fisher King. This is not surprising, given that *Peredur* is coming from a tradition of oral storytelling, where the narrators might intersperse several different short and unrelated tales in their narrative to improve the entertainment without worrying about the overall theme. A novel, on the other hand, must usually remain internally

consistent and flow to a climax, with limited ‘sidebars’, to succeed as a unified narrative.

One of the apparent changes between the novel and the earlier legend is the identity of the Grail Knight, the savior of the Fisher King and the land. Although both Gawain and Galahad appear in medieval versions of the legend of the Fisher King, the earliest version is probably Peredur or Perceval. While Peredur becomes a prominent warrior, at first, he is distinctly non-knightly in his actions. He is often rude, distracted and prone to make gaffes, and must learn knightly etiquette from his uncle before he can truly become a knight. Arthur then seeks out Peredur and accepts him into his court at Caer Llion<sup>21</sup>.

In the novel, it is the Irish mercenary, Brian Duffy. I have no doubt that neither Brian’s name nor nationality is an accident. Clearly, Powers intended to evoke the Celtic source myths of the Fisher King legend, and in particular the legend of Bran. However, as the novel continues, Brian comes to realize that he is also an incarnation of King Arthur, invoked by Aurelianus. The sorcerer tells Brian, “You’re still Brian Duffy. [...] But you’re Arthur, too, and that kind of outshines everything else. Brandy and water tastes more like brandy than water, after all”<sup>22</sup>. Brian must come to accept the presence of the spirit of Arthur to help defeat the Eastern King and save the Fisher King. While some might argue that Powers chose to invoke Arthur, not Peredur, by name merely because Arthur is a more familiar figure to modern audiences, I do not believe this to be the case. In this book, and in others, Powers has consistently been unafraid of using relatively obscure folklore and rarely caters to the lowest common denominator. Instead, Powers here seems to be synthesizing both the uncivilized Peredur and the knightly Arthurian Peredur into Brian. In the early stages of the novel, Brian resembles the young Peredur: an uncouth warrior distracted by women and easily affronted. However, just as instruction and interaction with Arthur change the Peredur of the legend into an almost unrecognizably different Knight, so too does time and wisdom change Brian. In accepting Arthur

---

<sup>18</sup> Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), reproduced at Bartleby.com (2000), [www.bartleby.com/196/](http://www.bartleby.com/196/), chapter 24.2, para 4.

<sup>19</sup> Powers, *The Drawing of the Dark*, 100.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

---

<sup>21</sup> *Mabinogion*, Jeffrey Gantz, 233–235.

<sup>22</sup> Powers, *The Drawing of the Dark*, 178.

into himself, he becomes more like Arthur, and thus more like the Knight that Peredur became. Thus, while it would appear that Arthur is the Grail Knight in the novel, I would argue that Brian is Peredur and that Arthur is merely an aspect of the knight. Of course, Powers might also be playing with the notion, common in some Arthurian literature, that King Arthur will one day return to defend his realm from extreme danger.

Similarly, the means to heal the Fisher King appears to be different in the novel from the legend. In the legend, it appears that asking a particular question will heal the King; in the novel, the drinking of the Dark performs this function. However, in the legends, there is the Cauldron or the Grail, “A mysterious vessel or object which sustains life and/or provides sustenance [...] guarded in a castle”<sup>23</sup>. This is analogous to the great beer vat beneath the Herzwesen brewery, under which, Aurelianus informs Brian lies the body of the dead Celtic king Finn MacCool. There is no base to the vat, so the essence of Finn seeps up into the beer, especially the Dark, Aurelianus draws from the bottom of the vat<sup>24</sup>. This essence provides strength and renewed life to the beer and through it, to the drinker<sup>25</sup>. Once again, Powers is probably playing with the Celtic roots of the legend. The Celts considered beer sacred and it features in many of their myths. In addition, the presence of the blood of a Celtic king made it doubly potent. The concept of sustaining blood echoes many other myths: from Christian theology to vampire legends.

Tim Powers’ *The Drawing of the Dark* uses the legend of the Fisher King as the core of its story. Powers uses the infirmity of the King, his link to the health and peace of the land and the liminality of his dwelling in the novel, as well as aspects of Peredur in his hero, Brian Duffy. The beer in the hidden vat is a strong analogue to the healing aspects of the grail in the legends. He weaves this together with continued references to the Celtic origins of the legend.

---

<sup>23</sup> Juliette Wood, “The Holy Grail”, para 11.

<sup>24</sup> Powers, *The Drawing of the Dark*, 164

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

## **Bibliography**

Cavendish, Richard. *King Arthur and the Grail*. London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1978.

Chretien de Troyes. *Perceval le Gallois* (Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail). Translated by Ruth Harwood Cline. New York: Pergamon, 1983.

Frazer, Sir James George. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. New York: Macmillan, 1922. Reproduced at Bartleby.com (2000), [www.bartleby.com/196/](http://www.bartleby.com/196/).

Loomis, Roger S. *The Development of Arthurian Romance*. London: Hutchinson, 1963.

Loomis, Roger S. "The Irish Origin of the Grail Legend." *Speculum* 8 no. 4 (1933): 415–431.

*The Mabinogion*. Translated by Jeffrey Gantz. London: Penguin, 1976.

*The Mabinogion*. Translated by Lady Charlotte Guest (1849). Reproduced by the Electronic Texts Collection, University of Adelaide. <http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/>.

Nutt Alfred. *Studies on the Legend of the Holy Grail; with Especial Reference to the Hypothesis of its Celtic Origin*. New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1965.

Powers, Tim. *The Drawing of the Dark*. New York: Ballantine, 1979.

Wood, Juliette. "The Holy Grail: From Romance Motif to Modern Genre." *Folklore*, Oct 2000.