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**From the Selected Works of Daniel Terkla**

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## "I'm gonna git Medieval on your ass": Pulp Fiction for the 90s--the 1190s

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## **"I'm gonna git Medieval on your ass": *Pulp Fiction* for the 90s—the 1190s<sup>1</sup>**

**Dan Terkla and Thomas L. Reed, Jr.**

Rarely does contemporary film offer any zippy ephemera to grace the office doors of medievalists, since film-makers like Quentin Tarantino do not often look to our discipline's corpus for inspiration. Imagine, then, the mix of incredulity and delight we two professors felt while taking in the pawn-shop scene in Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*. After being painfully violated—anally raped, to be precise—and then rescued in a most chivalric manner by one of his minions, Marsellus Wallace swears an oath to Zed, his "hillbilly boy" rapist: "I'm gonna git Medieval on your ass" (*Pulp Fiction* 13<sup>1,2</sup>). What? we thought: "Medieval"? Why, we asked, "Medieval"? Had we heard correctly? Was this a critical mandate? After discussing this at some length behind closed office doors (still sans Tarantino ephemera) and after trying it out on our team-taught undergraduates, we decided to allow ourselves the guilty pleasure of investigating ways Quentin Tarantino might indeed have gotten medieval on us.

What justification might we offer for such an enterprise, though? Even allowing that Tarantino has likely spent more time apprenticing in video stores than browsing the medieval sections in university libraries, we feel confident in asserting that there are any number of tellingly informative analogies between *Pulp Fiction* and medieval chivalric literature, particularly Arthurian romance. We address a number of these lesser, if intriguing, resonances in this essay, but our main focus is on larger socio-cultural synchronicities: the role vengeance plays in keeping the peace; the "homosocial"—to use a concept from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*—parallels between feudal and gangster cultures; and, most importantly, the centrally paradoxical role women play in these societies. When Vincent Vega speaks to himself in Marsellus Wallace's mirror, he reminds himself that loyalty to Marsellus—Mia's new husband and his overlord—is more important than having sex with his most charming dance partner: "Because when people are loyal to each other, that's very meaningful. . ." (69). As we shall see, in this scene Vincent Vega is very much a latter-day Lancelot, torn between the claims of Reason and Love.

Although we do not know if Tarantino knows much about *Lancelot* (or Lancelot, for that matter), considering the published screenplay and dialogue in *Pulp Fiction*, it is clear that he knows Westerns, gangster films, TV's *Kung Fu* and—if we look carefully when Mia gets an adrenalin stake to the heart—vampire films. Tarantino might not be a junior medievalist, but when Butch Coolidge walks warily down the steps, samurai sword in hand, into that ersatz dungeon to rescue Marsellus, when he chivalrously refuses to slash Zed until the rapist has had a chance to arm himself, when he just happens to escape on a chopper named "*Grace*" (as much a *deus ex machina*—or *machina ex deo*—as any ferry in the Grail

Legend or Wagnerian opera)—at any of these times he could easily be one of Arthur's more daring and fortunate knights. After all, when Tarantino looks, as he predominately does, to the American cinematic staples of gangster and cowboy films, he is looking back through these descendants of quest romances to that literary genre which took its distinctive shape during the European Middle Ages. Put differently, much of chivalric literature, and Arthurian romance in particular, tested and reinforced the same basic set of feudal values that bind Michael Corleone to Tom Hagen, Gawain to King Arthur, Wyatt Earp to Doc Holliday, Tristan to King Mark, or Butch to Sundance.

It would probably be rash, though, to argue that *Pulp Fiction* owes anything directly to the Middle Ages, or even to modern cinematic redactions of medieval material like *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (a loony, yet stunningly "accurate," portrait of the time) and *Excalibur* (a hyperbolic, if intriguing, reworking of various medieval texts). More plausible is the observation that, when students of Western culture over the past thousand years or so have sat down to consider the ways heavily armed men have structured their relations with each other in the absence (or defiance) of any Transcendent Law, they have observed similar behavioral strategies. *Beowulf*, Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*, and the more recent *Wild Bill*—all show that radical social flux leads men in search of stability and security to ally themselves with and to submit themselves to strong overlords. With no legal sanctions available beyond the *comitatus* or *famiglia*, the threat of reprisal is the only pacifier—beyond, that is, the sometimes civilizing, if often divisive, influence of the queen or "da boss's girl."

From its opening scene, a film like *The Godfather* reminds us that gangster culture is essentially feudal, and thus anachronistic, and that it is in many ways separated from the political, legal and economic structures of the modern state. Like the feudal system, the gangster patriarchy depends upon symbiotic, if hierarchical, relationships between its "vassals" and their "lords": those on the lower rungs of the power ladder turn to those above them for justice and material support. In return, these dons (from the Latin *dominus*, "lord") enfeoff their soldiers with casinos in Las Vegas—as in the recent film *Casino*—or Brooklyn neighborhoods where they run the numbers, drugs, or prostitution rings. In this otherworld, there is no law higher than that of business, and transgressors are punished most violently.

In the first narrative strand of *Pulp Fiction*, tellingly titled "Vincent Vega and Marsellus Wallace's Wife," a band of college boys, whom the late Georges Duby, in "Youth in Aristocratic Society," might have called "youths" or '*juvenes*' (112), forget their roles as underling business associates of Marsellus Wallace—"[t]he black man [who] sounds like a cross between a gangster and a king" (34)—and who presides over his kingdom from his topless bar, Sally LeRoy's. Vincent Vega and the Ezekiel-spouting Jules Winfield, Marsellus's more mature and loyal vassals, must make examples of these feudal loose canons. Vincent and Jules collect Marsellus's property—the mysteriously glowing, Grail-like briefcase—and mete out .45-caliber justice in his name and that of the Lord; just as someone else has enforced Marsellus's rule by throwing Antwan Rockamora from a four-story window for allegedly giving "Marsellus Wallace's new bride a foot massage" (20); just as Butch Coolidge is slated for discipline after failing to take the agreed-upon dive in the boxing ring; and just as Zed is surely gotten medieval on by "a coupla pipe hitting niggers" (131) after raping Marsellus. Ever the faithful member of Marsellus's *comitatus*, Jules never tires of pointing out that "great vengeance and furious anger" will be visited upon "those who attempt to poison and destroy my brothers" (32). Clearly, violent retribution rules in this world, as it does in *Beowulf* in almost any Icelandic saga, and in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*, where Arthur brings fatal justice to Mordred for usurping his kingdom and eloping with his queen.

Just as feudal and gangster cultures depend somewhat incongruously upon the threat of violence to keep the peace, so do they require their soldiers to maintain a delicate psychological equipoise between

belligerence and graciousness. To be of maximum use to their lords or godfathers, both knights and goodfellas must be kept hungry but not too hungry, materially dependent but not avaricious, erotically motivated but not adulterous patricides. In chivalric literature, the nurturing, socially-cohesive values of Loyalty, Generosity, and Courtesy counterbalance to some extent the violent, selfish, socially-disruptive values of Prowess and Renown. In *Pulp Fiction* Jules plays the courtly role with dark irony, when he taunts the offending college youths with a diabolically affected gentility. After casually pumping three rounds into Roger, "Flock of Seagulls" (27), he returns coolly to his conversation with "preppy-looking. . . blow-dry" (24) Brett: "Oh, I'm sorry. Did that break your concentration? I didn't mean to do that. Please, continue" (29). Or, as Jules tastes Brett's Big Kahuna Burger, he asks: "You mind if I have some of your tasty beverage to wash this down with?" (27). Brett, of course, acquiesces and is shortly slaughtered by Jules and Vincent. Acting for all the world like Lancelot, when he releases the thoroughly vanquished guardian of the ford in Chrétien de Troyes's romance, *Lancelot*, Butch runs Maynard through with his own samurai sword, eviscerates him and then shows his wickedly courteous side by allowing his partner Zed the opportunity to rearm himself (129)—a chivalric gesture frequently replayed in pseudo-medieval films like Errol Flynn's *Robin Hood* and *The Princess Bride* and in myriad westerns. When Vincent Vega complains to Lance, the Knight of the Potent Heroin, that someone "keyed" his 1964 cherry-red Chevy Malibu convertible, his indignation could be that of Chaucer's Sir Thopas, when the giant unchivalrously threatens to kill his steed. "It's chicken shit," Vincent says. "You don't fuck with another man's vehicle. It's just against the rules"; to which Lance responds: "YOU DON'T DO IT" (43). Rules, indeed: *Pas cheval, pas chevalier*.

We can push our chivalric analogy farther, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theories help demonstrate that our juxtaposition goes well beyond felicitous parallels between modern and medieval male martial cultures. Her ideas show that we can read *Pulp Fiction* as "doing the Middle Ages" almost as self-consciously as Jackrabbit Slim's diner in the film "does" the '50s. Following Sedgwick, we earlier characterized this type of society and its self-limiting interpersonal bonds as "homosocial," which she understands as, "a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with homosexual, and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from 'homosexual' (1).

The feudal "aristocratic patrimony" that Duby describes (117) was dependent for stability upon the complex bonds between the alpha males who comprised its knightly elite, between the men Georges Duby calls junior and senior knights. For Duby the junior knight "was already an adult person. He had been received into the company of warriors; he had taken up arms and had been dubbed. He was, in effect, a knight" (112). The senior, on the other hand, was a knight who "had established himself and put down roots, become the head of a house and founded a family" (113). Not surprisingly, there were many more junior than senior knights in this hierarchy. Generally, "the 'youth' found himself caught up in a band of 'friends' who 'loved each other like brothers.' [And] . . . the company collected around a leader who 'retained' the young men, that is who gave them arms and money and guided them towards adventure and its rewards" (114). These bands of single idle warriors constituted the Bloods and Crips, the street gangs of their day. As Duby notes, "Dedicated to violence, 'youth' was the instrument of aggression and tumult in knightly society, but in consequence it was always in danger: it was aggressive and brutal in habit and was to have its ranks decimated" (115). Because of the threat these roving bands posed to the social order, senior knights needed to control them, to channel their potentially destructive energy into patriarchal service. They did so by fostering homosocial loyalty, which, according to Sedgwick, is "the affective or social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotionally charged, that shapes [such] relationship[s]" (2). In "The Fathers Watch the Boys' Room,"

Sharon Willis provides ideas on power in *Pulp Fiction* that connect its overlord with Arthur: "Marsellus. . . is clearly constructed as the ultimate authority in Jules and Vince's work world, as well as the central narrative organizing principle, to the extent that he holds all the plot lines together. Operating as the intersection of plots, Marsellus himself is the link that connects the divergent episodes and initially unrelated characters" (49). Like the absent presence of Arthur, the often-absent Marsellus is the feudal super-glue that holds his society—and its story—together; these senior knights constitute the ever-present power compounded of the elements that youths saw and desired in seniority: largess, prowess, reputation, glory.

Vincent and the rest of Marsellus's "niggers" admire and fear him because of his legendary prowess and reputation. Furthermore, the derogatorily affectionate epithet, "nigger"—the twentieth-century version of the spiteful medieval "vassal"—keeps his minions in place. When Vincent Vega, "our man in Amsterdam" (35), walks into Sally Le Roy's, this underworld society's hierarchy is clear. After seeing him for the first time in three years, Marsellus orders his vassal over and subordinates him with that racial epithet (and here we quote from the film): "Vincent Vega in the house? My nigger! Get your ass over here" (38). After "hugging and kissing" Marsellus, another sign of obeisance (which Marsellus returns as a gesture of support and, perhaps, of genuine affection), Vincent is admitted into his liege lord's *sancta sanctorum*. The hug and kiss are delivered on Marsellus's terms, on his turf, and mark the decidedly homosocial bond holding junior to senior. As Sedgwick makes clear, though, this bond is not homosexual; indeed, such connotations would horrify these men, which is why Maynard and Zed's rape of Marsellus (or even Vincent's raising with Jules the specter of a male/male foot massage) is such an issue.

Butch Coolidge's relationship with Marsellus exemplifies the strength of the homosocial bond and its relation to the profundity of Marsellus's sexual violation. Butch has violated Marsellus in another way; he has violated his boss's trust, broken their bond, by refusing to take a dive. He has, in fact, bet heavily on himself, beaten his opponent to death, and run with what should be Marsellus's winnings. After a series of events, including the serendipitous murder of the near-traitor Vincent Vega, the truly treasonous Butch and his gangster lord find themselves imprisoned in the Mason-Dixon Pawnshop by two demented sodomites, Zed and Maynard. These racist *Deliverance* progeny beat and humiliate Butch and Marsellus before muzzling them with "*S&M-styled ball gags*" (123). Zed and Maynard choose Marsellus as their first victim. After hearing "*Sodomy and the Judds... going strong*" (128-29) in the Mason-Dixon's "dungeon" (124), Butch escapes, apparently leaving his former boss and current adversary to perish in a nightmare. As he leaves the pawnshop, though, Butch again hears "the hillbilly psychopaths having their way with Marsellus" (128) and returns to rescue him, still unsure what his former boss will do to him. Surprisingly, Butch's gangster liege lord recognizes the risk he has taken in coming back and spares his life. To Butch's query, "So we're cool?" (131), Marsellus responds:

Yeah, man, we're cool. Two things I ask: don't tell nobody about this. This shit's between me and you and the soon-to-be-livin'-the-rest-of-hisshort-ass-life-in-agonizing-pain, Mr. Rapist here. It ain't nobody else's business. Two: leave town. Tonight. Right now. And when you're gone, stay gone. You've lost your Los Angeles privileges. Deal? (131)

Butch agrees, and "[t]he two men shake hands, then hug one another" (131). Marsellus says nothing about the money the fighter has scammed and, more importantly, breaks the gangster equivalent of the feudal bond by exiling Butch. Marsellus's largess involves more than Butch's loyalty; it is also a product

of something much deeper. Their hug echoes the one Vincent gives Marsellus upon his return from Amsterdam and indicates, paradoxically, that although Butch is now a social pariah, their homosocial bond holds and is even strengthened by their common experience of Marsellus's sodomitic shame.

The scenes just before Jules and Vincent "get into character" (22) to take care of the college boys who have double-crossed Marsellus further illustrate the hold this senior gangster has on his men and their attitudes toward homosexual sex. Jules explains Marsellus's vengeance to Vincent by telling him of Antwan Rockamora, a.k.a. Tony Rocky Horror. Allegedly, Tony gave the new Mrs. Wallace a foot massage, which apparently upset Marsellus: "Sent a couple of guys over to his place. They took him out on his patio, threw his ass over the balcony. Nigger fell four stories. They had this garden at the bottom, enclosed in glass, like a greenhouse—nigger fell through that. Since then, he's kinda developed a speech impediment" (19). As Jules points out to Brett, "Marsellus Wallace don't like to be flicked by anyone but Missus Wallace" (32), because, as Sharon Willis points out, "To be fucked equals to be a bitch" (53). Nor does Marsellus want Mrs. Wallace "flicked" by anyone but Mr. Wallace, since being cuckolded is a figuration of sodomy and emasculation. This vivid demonstration of what happens to those who cross their boss sets Marsellus's reputation for both Vincent—who, we remember, has been in Amsterdam for three years—and the audience.

This issue comes back to haunt Vincent and the audience after Mia accidentally OD's on his heroin. At that point, Vincent, the "silver tongue [sic] devil" (57) might just as well have stuck his tongue "in her holiest of holies" (20). This tabernacular reference goes right to the heart of the matter and illustrates the gravity of the situation, which even Mia does not seem to understand, as her reaction to Rocky's story indicates: "A husband being protective of his wife is one thing. A husband almost killing another man for touching his wife's feet is something else" (62-63). It makes no difference if this twice-told tale is true or if it is an urban legend. The fact that it might be true is enough to draw new knightly "niggers" to Marsellus and to keep them in line—for a while, at least just as ineffectual Arthur's reputation for past deeds draws junior knights to him and keeps them—most of them—loyal.

But what about feudal (and gangster) women? This discussion of loyalty leads naturally into the importance of that tense triangular construction that we and our students have taken to calling the "Duby Dangle." This concept combines Georges Duby's sociological and Eve Sedgwick's psychological theories and refers to the phenomenon whereby married senior knights took advantage of junior knights' libidinous desires and "dangled" their wives before these anxious bachelors in order to attract them to their households. In *Love and Marriage in the Middle Ages*, Duby argues to do so, "[t]he senior. . . allowed his wife to be placed at the centre of the competition, in an illusory, and ludic situation of primacy and power. The lady refused her favours to some men and granted them to others" (62). The young knight vied with members of his warrior band, ostensibly for the lady's favors, which she granted or withheld at her discretion. *Ostensibly* because, although in theory the youth demonstrated his prowess for his lady and submitted his self to her, his lord was the true object of his submission and martial affection. Although the actual intercourse—which could plausibly range from the verbal to the sexual—took place between the youth and his lord's wife, the essential connection was between the two men. This intercourse, in all its permutations, was largely responsible for holding the twelfth-century aristocracy together. As Sedgwick writes: "The shapes of sexuality, and what counts as sexuality, both depend on and affect historical power relationships" (2). The Dangle is a power game: the authority and power of male seniority attracts junior knights who, in turn, gain access to that power through the lady.

Obviously, this created problems: "on the one hand, the whole spice of the affair came from the danger involved. . . ; on the other hand, it was a test in the course of a continuing education, and the more perilous the test, the more educational it was," *Duby suggests in Love and Marriage in the Middle Ages*

(57). Sex was the attraction and sex was the danger. For the senior knight, the purity and surety of his line was at risk—a most serious threat. For the ladies and lovers who went beyond talking the talk to walking the walk, the likely outcome of discovery was death. Of course, the knight had the wherewithal to escape; the lady had no recourse, no way to escape her suspicious or cuckolded husband. The situation was not only dangerous, it was tensely paradoxical: by attracting the fiercest juniors and keeping them honed for imminent conflict, the senior knight invited into his midst the most serious threat to his hierarchical and patrilineal security.

Writing in the late twelfth-century, Chrétien de Troyes was one of the first fiction writers to investigate this social paradox, and his work provides us with a creative point of reference from which to discuss Tarantino's film. In *Lancelot* he invented the archetypal love triangle between King Arthur, Guenevere, his queen, and Lancelot, his top knight. Written in the latter quarter of the twelfth century at the behest of his patroness, the Countess Marie de Champagne, this tale of adultery-spawned intrigue, along with the sympathy we feel for victims of natural love like Lancelot and Guenevere, inspired countless successors—right down to 1995's color-coordinated if historically-clumsy *First Knight*. In Chrétien's original and in its successors, Guenevere plays arguably the most important role. She is the point around which all the plotting turns because she is the medium through which knightly loyalty—and treason—pass from junior to senior, from Lancelot to Arthur.

As *Lancelot* opens, it is clear that Arthur has "dangled" Guenevere too far and has lost her to one of his knights—his first knight, Lancelot, as it turns out. Here, as in other medieval romances, most notably Chrétien's *Yvain*, Arthur "rules" ineffectually. In *Lancelot*, this ironically illegitimate son of Uther Pendragon and Ygraine gives his kitchen knight, the seneschal Kay, permission to defend Guenevere against the raptor knight, Meleagant, who has challenged Arthur's authority by abducting his queen. (Kay, this rather lowly knight, threatens to leave if Arthur refuses to grant his wish.) These first scenes are chaotic because the most important figure has gone missing—not Arthur, not Lancelot (who is also missing), but Guenevere. Her abduction by Meleagant and literal absence represent her longstanding figurative absence as Lancelot's lover. She is the crucial vertex in the Duby Dangle/Triangle: Arthur has had her in name as queen and wife, but Lancelot has had her heart and, more importantly for Arthur, her body. When the "evil" Meleagant literally takes her away, chaos ensues at court because its center is gone, the linchpin of knightly relations removed. This is most problematic, and the subsequent chaos hints at knightly flight: After all, if Lancelot is gone and Kay threatens to leave, what is there to keep the likes of Gawain, Yvain, and Bedevere around?

Lancelot, absent as the plot unfolds, shortly appears and takes off unhesitatingly after Guenevere. He soon comes upon a dwarf driving a cart, a vehicle too shameful for knightly transport, reserved ironically for "all those guilty of treason. . . for thieves who had stolen the property of others" (189). Approaching it afoot, the lovestruck knight ponders his vexing options:

Reason, who is at odds with Love, tells him to avoid getting in, warning and instructing him to do and engage in nothing that might bring him shame or reproach . . . But Love, who bids and urges him to climb quickly into the cart, is enclosed within his heart. It being Love's wish, he jumps in regardless of the shame, since Love commands and wills it. (189-90)

Reason urges loyalty to Arthur and avoidance of public shame; Love, fidelity to Genevere and attendant social opprobrium. The profundity of the issues is clear in *Lancelot's psychomachia*, and the medieval audience would certainly have taken his moment of indecision as a cue to debate the merits and demerits

of his and Guenevere's adultery. In much the same way, while watching Vincent Vega talk to himself in Marsellus's bathroom mirror, modern movie audiences debate—however fleetingly or unconsciously—the potential hazards of his and Mia Wallace's "date." As Sir Vincent the Desirous says to Sir Vincent the Ethical, "[I]t's a moral test of yourself, whether or not you can maintain loyalty. Because when people are loyal to each other, that's very meaningful" (69).

Love motivates Lancelot. This is never in doubt (Vincent's motivations are probably not as lofty), and every move Lancelot makes, every step he takes, is directed toward rescuing his lover, his king's queen. Love commands him to prove himself publicly, to do great deeds, even to shame himself, and Reason never resurfaces as part of the debate until the romance's conclusion. The king's subjects, many of whom are trapped in Meleagant's kingdom, assume that Lancelot seeks to rescue Guenevere for Arthur, when, in fact, he seeks her for himself. Here he (and Love) break the fundamental homosocial bond, the mortar that cements this knightly society together. "Meaningful"? Certainly. Unethical? Immoral? Perhaps. But this division and potential power vacuum go deeper still and threaten the stability of the entire kingdom.

Given this unresolvable paradox, Chrétien had no way to reunite the lovers upon their return to Arthur's court. Reason, speaking for ethics and social stability, forbids it. As evidence of this, Guenevere has her own *psychomachia* that recalls Lancelot's but that is informed by her knowledge of—and perhaps Chrétien's worries about—the potential ramifications of their continued adultery: unwanted offspring, the compromising of Arthur's line, public shame, death. They never speak to each other after returning to Arthur's court, and, as she eyes her *ami* upon his return, Chrétien (or, more accurately, his continuator, Godefroi) wonders: "And the queen: is she not there amid all this rejoicing? Indeed, she is, and right in the forefront. ...Where then is her heart?—It was kissing and making much of Lancelot.—Why, then, was her body hiding? Why is her joy not complete? Is it, then, mingled with anger or hatred?" (276-77). Informed readers from any century know the answers to these questions, but our romancier asks them to foreground his tale's pivotal issue and to remind us of its importance—lest our sympathies sway us.

Unlike Lancelot, who, as we saw, gave in to Love and hopped in the cart, Guenevere wisely—for the moment, anyway—rides with Reason:

And had Reason not rid her of this foolish thought and mad impulse [to approach Lancelot], they would have seen just what her feelings were, and that would have been the height of folly. So Reason... has to some extent brought her to her senses and postponed the outcome until he sees a more favourable and more private occasion where they might fare better than they would at present. (277)

The implication here is that their natural love, "the height of folly," will continue, as it has done down the centuries. Chrétien could not close his tale on a positive note but did succeed in showing the folly of trying to restrict love's power. As we see here, Reason "has to some extent brought [Guenevere] to her senses," but the "outcome," has just been "postponed"—to resurface, we might say, in Quentin Tarantino and Roger Avary's script.

Mia certainly enjoys spending Marsellus's money and using the power that comes from being his wife, as the scene in Jackrabbit Slim's demonstrates. There she bullies a recalcitrant Vincent into entering a twist contest. While a look-alike "Marilyn Monroe" coos and holds the trophy aloft, "Ed Sullivan" asks:

...Now who will be our first contestants?  
[Mia]Right here!  
Vincent reacts.  
I wanna dance.



[Vincent] No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no.

[Mia] No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. I do believe Marsellus, my husband, your boss, told you to take me out and do whatever I wanted. Now, I want to dance. I want to win. I want that trophy.

[Vincent] All right.

[Mia] So, dance good. (64-65)

Vincent submits to Mia's wish and dances "good," but he's really submitting himself to Marsellus's authority. It is not just fear, but a more complex loyalty that prevents him from refusing to twist in public with Mia. Vincent knows that the closer he gets to Mia, the closer he gets to her husband, his boss. This proximity is dangerous, though, and Vincent's problem lies in defining just how close he wants to get to Mia, since this determines the quality of the closeness he establishes with Marsellus. Too close to her and Marsellus gets Vincent dead.

Because he has established his juniors' loyalty through his prowess, largess, and reputation, Marsellus does not need to dangle his new bride Mia as explicitly as a senior medieval knight. She is not the essential nexus of his power like Guenevere in *Lancelot*; indeed, Woman is less important—and far less dangerous—in Tarantino's film than in any of Chrétien's romances. Mia Wallace is but one of many coveted possessions (her name means "my" or "mine" in Italian) in the film, a possession like Vincent's Malibu convertible or Marsellus's briefcase. She is property to be returned whole, with all that implies, or else. Nevertheless, even though she is not the overt currency of exchange like Guenevere, Mia is the nexus, if not the cause, of Vincent Vega's ethical quandary.

When they return from Jackrabbit Slim's to Marsellus's house, drunker and more drugged than when they left, there is every possibility that Vincent and Mia will cross the line and end up cuckolding their lord as Lancelot and Guenevere or Tristan and Isolt do. (We note, for example, the rather intimate tango and near-kiss Tarantino choreographs for the couple as they unlock the door.) Loyal knight that he is, Vincent retires to the bathroom and has a nervous talk with himself:

*Vincent dries his hands on a towel while he continues his dialogue with the mirror.*

"... it's a moral test of yourself, whether or not you can maintain loyalty. Because when people are loyal to each other, that's very meaningful.

...So you're gonna go out there, drink your drink, say 'Goodnight, I've had a very lovely evening,' go home and jack off. And that's all you're gonna do." (69)

Unlike Lancelot's, Vincent's Reason wins out and warns him of the potential danger of violating Marsellus's property—Mia, that is—and wins out over his desire. He knows that if he does not drink his drink, say goodnight, and go home, he could well end up with "a speech impediment" (19) like Tony Rocky Horror—or worse. Mia's insisting that Jules's cautionary tale isn't true doesn't matter to Vincent. After all, as Chief Bromden says of R.P. McMurphy's antics in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, "Even if it didn't happen, it's true" (8). All that matters is that Vincent believes it. Just as there is a line between homosociality and homosexuality that must never be crossed in these narratives, there is a line which every junior knight or gangster must never cross. Because Loyalty is, after all, "very meaningful" (69), he must never let desire best reason. Vincent nearly does.

Vincent and Mia's dinner date goes innocently enough, and when they return to her and Marsellus's house, she snorts what she thinks is cocaine. Unfortunately for them, it's not cocaine but the Choco heroin, "a fuckin' madman" (40) that Vincent has just bought from Lance. Mia overdoses and this forces Vincent to take drastic measures. He races back to Lance's house with the comatose Mia in his car. Lance gives Vincent a hypodermic filled with adrenalin, which the distraught gangster plunges into Mia's heart,

reviving her instantly. Just before Vincent slams the big hypo into Mia's bared chest, he draws a bright spot over her heart with "*a big fat magic red marker*" (78). This target, the point of entry, collapses the division between heart and vagina, both of which he penetrates—one literally, the other figuratively. If the symbolism there weren't obvious enough, the action slows considerably as Vincent holds the needle/penis aloft, "*like a rattler ready to strike*" (81), while its point drips adrenalin suggestively. This reptilian description takes us back to Zed, who is described as a "*deadly cobra*" (124) and who is the one who penetrates Marsellus. Marsellus, then, gets it twice, once anally and once figuratively, and each violation is brought about by one of his own "niggers": Butch by his doublecross and Vincent by his hypo. Although he does Marsellus a service by saving his wife's life, Vincent's asexual penetration of Mia violates the homosocial bond he has with Marsellus as surely and as profoundly as Lancelot's adultery with Guenevere violates his bond with Arthur.

And so we come back to Duby's Dangle: the senior knight uses his wife to attract and test single, unaffiliated youths into his circle. These bachelor knights try to impress their senior's lady—and, more importantly, her husband—with their martial prowess and loyalty, all in hopes of securing a place at the senior knight's court. We have seen this system at work in Chrétien's *Lancelot* and in Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*, particularly in the potentially dangerous interpersonal relationships it generates. Marsellus's rape affects him and Butch on such an essential homophobic level that their bond is stronger than anything Vincent can fashion with his boss by going through Mia—and means that Vincent's life is worth less to Marsellus than Butch's. Vincent's penetration of Mia further emphasizes the qualitative difference of the male bonds. His life-saving heroics become a secret that separates him from Marsellus and links him with Mia, because it is a secret they can never reveal, one which swears Vincent and Mia to guilty silence. "Mum's the word" (83), Vincent says to Mia as he drops her at home after their debacle. He, Mia, and everyone in the audience remember Tony Rocky Horror's alleged foot massage and Marsellus's post-violation vow to "call a coupla pipe-hittin' niggers, who'll go to work on the homes [Zed] here with a pair of pliers and a blowtorch" (131). Neither Vincent, Mia nor any of Marsellus's "niggers" want this "huge figure" (91) to exact revenge for crimes real or perceived. God forbid he should "git Medieval on [their] ass" (131).

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Terkla delivered a shorter version of this essay at the December 1995, NEH sponsored Arthurian Roundtable in Peoria, Illinois.

<sup>2</sup> There are differences between the film and published screenplay versions of *Pulp Fiction*, as there are between screenplays published at various dates. We cite the first American edition, published in 1994 by Hyperion for Miramax Books. Italics in quotations indicate stage directions and are taken from this screenplay. When we quote dialogue from the film, we indicate this in our text.

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