

Molloy University

DigitalCommons@Molloy

---

Faculty Publications: English

English

---

6-2022

## "Hail to the King[s], Baby" Arthur vs Army of Darkness

Jeff Massey Ph.D.

Molloy University, [jmassey@molloy.edu](mailto:jmassey@molloy.edu)

Tabitha Ochtera MLIS, MBA

Molloy University, [tochtera@molloy.edu](mailto:tochtera@molloy.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.molloy.edu/eng\\_facpub](https://digitalcommons.molloy.edu/eng_facpub)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Medieval Studies Commons](#), and the [Renaissance Studies Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License](#).

[DigitalCommons@Molloy Feedback](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Massey, Jeff Ph.D. and Ochtera, Tabitha MLIS, MBA, "Hail to the King[s], Baby" Arthur vs Army of Darkness" (2022). *Faculty Publications: English*. 1.  
[https://digitalcommons.molloy.edu/eng\\_facpub/1](https://digitalcommons.molloy.edu/eng_facpub/1)

This Contribution to Book is brought to you for free and open access by the English at DigitalCommons@Molloy. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications: English by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Molloy. For permissions, please contact the author(s) at the email addresses listed above. If there are no email addresses listed or for more information, please contact [tochtera@molloy.edu](mailto:tochtera@molloy.edu).

## 28 “Hail to the king[s], baby”: Arthur vs *Army of Darkness*

Jeff Massey and Tabitha Ochtera

### Abstract

Given the current penchant for “medieval misappropriation” among white supremacists, neo-Nazis, and political pundits, medievalists are clearly justified in directing their critical attention toward debunking the overly popular neomedieval misrepresentations portrayed in so much serious modern Arthuriana.

Yet, it is worth remembering that comedy also played an essential role in medieval Arthurian storytelling, and that neomedieval comic representations of King Arthur (and his silly English kuh-nigguts) remain worthy of critical attention as well, perhaps especially so during times of modern “darkness.” Two major strains of neomedieval Arthurian comedy remain perennially present in modern media: those following Mark Twain’s time-traveling Connecticut Yankee (wherein a cocky modern hero replaces an ineffective King Arthur as the new “boss”) and those echoing Monty Python’s satiric *Holy Grail* (wherein King Arthur is a self-important, dim-witted authority figure worthy of ridicule). These two comic strains find an unexpected hybrid representation in Sam Raimi’s horror-adventure-comedy, *Army of Darkness*, which presents fans with a cocky, dim-witted, and modern replacement for Arthur: Ashley J. Williams, the modern buffoon king we deserve . . . if not the one we want.

As an escapist fantasy, a critique of modern hyper-masculine heroism, and a self-conscious distortion of medieval film tropes, *Army of Darkness* exemplifies how comic neomedieval Arthuriana can offer audiences solace during times of hardship, critique modern cultural concerns within a distant medieval construction, and remind viewers that the “real Middle Ages” was not a uniformly dour, shit-laden time of pestilence, violence, and ethnocentrism but—like our own time period—an age capable of self-reflection, criticism, and comedy.

LARGE MAN: Who’s that, then?

CART DRIVER: I dunno. Must be a king.

LARGE MAN: Why?

CART DRIVER: He hasn’t got shit all over him.<sup>1</sup>

### “Trapped in time. Surrounded by evil. Low on gas”<sup>2</sup>

Just as most die-hard trekkers reluctantly agree that the best *Star Trek* feature film ever made is, in fact, *Galaxy Quest* (a non-canonical parody of the science fiction franchise and its fandom), most serious medievalists secretly agree that the best King Arthur movie ever made is *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (a non-canonical parody of medieval and modern Arthuriana).<sup>3</sup>

In *Holy Grail* (1975), Graham Chapman portrays a generically naïve, verbally abused, and ultimately impotent King Arthur who has, by the film’s end, “got shit all over him,” a pungent rebuke of overly romanticized English kingship and legend. Indeed, as a hit musical, sold-out reunion tours, multiple anniversary celebrations, and theatrical re-releases of the film have shown, the “shadow of Chapman” has yet to fade away, leaving Arthuriana with a comic specter of influence looming over its heroically armored shoulders. Or, as Carol L. Robinson notes, “Monty

Python's *postmodern medievalism* [has] both spawned and permeated *neomedievalist* aesthetics, particularly its humor" (368).<sup>4</sup>

Yet, as much as they may have influenced the comedy landscape with their surreal and erudite humor, the Pythons did not invent Arthurian satire, nor were they the first comedians to popularize modern Arthuriana. Mark Twain and his fish-out-of-water time-travel yarn, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), influentially undercut the chivalric Middle Ages by inserting a modern American "Boss"—an everyman engineer named Hank Morgan—into the archaic politics of Camelot. Over the years, Twain's time-hopping protagonist has inspired a seemingly endless string of cinematic incarnations—from Harry C. Myers's silent-screen Martin Cavendish (*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, 1921) to Whoopi Goldberg's fast-talking Vivien Morgan ("A Knight in Camelot," 1998)—which have, in turn, helped perpetuate the trope of savvy modern heroes replacing inept medieval rulers. Together, these twin strains of comic Arthuriana—the Twainian and the Pythonesque—have kept the image of an outmoded medieval king in need of a modern upgrade current in the popular imagination for over a century, via comic books, animated cartoons, television shows, modern multimedia, and cinema. But of all these iterations, one particularly sharp comedy-adventure-horror film blends both strains of comic Arthuriana into one blood-splattered critique of idiot heroes and neomedieval reconstruction: director Sam Raimi's *Army of Darkness* (Renaissance Pictures, 1992). In this culmination of their *Evil Dead* cult-film franchise, Raimi and company employ temporal and cultural mashups, sight gags, splatstick physical comedy, portal fantasy, cocky modernism, and technological superiority tropes—alongside a clear understanding of neomedieval expectations—to produce a genre-bending film that both occupies and ridicules Arthuriana. Over the course of the film, Bruce Campbell's heroically inept protagonist—Ashley J. Williams—becomes both Hank and Arthur, a clueless modern American hero who replaces a powerless medieval English king. The Twainian and Pythonesque merge, leaving audiences with an escapist neomedieval fantasy that offers a critique of both medieval misappropriation and modern idiot heroism . . . all through the medium of comedy.

Twain—arch satirist that he was—knew how to deflate the modern American ego even as he skewered outmoded English royalty and all things popularly medieval. The Pythons—led by the late, great, Terry Jones (noted author of *Chaucer's Knight: Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary*)—knew what they were talking about as well; they certainly knew what their contemporary audience wanted to see when it came to the Middle Ages: filth, violence, filth, plague, filth, filth, death, shrubberies, and filth.<sup>5</sup> Given their general anti-authoritarian streak, the Pythons also leveled sharply pointed anachronistic satire at self-important positions of power, embodied by an atavistic King Arthur.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, the legendary English monarch was never a stranger to comic criticism. The so-called Dark Ages, despite popular misconception, were not so dark as to be devoid of humor: as Keith Busby and company deftly prove in *Comedy in Arthurian Literature*, "humor is a fundamental characteristic of the genre of Arthurian romance," and has been "from the earliest stages" (Busby).<sup>7</sup> Regardless of the tenuous historical provenance of a real King Arthur, Hollywood seems intent on producing "true" Arthurian pseudo-histories every few years, requiring pop-culture medievalists to correct increasingly common but potentially dangerous cultural misappropriations before such films further mystify an already misunderstood period of history.<sup>8</sup> Yet as necessary (and well-intentioned) as professional corrections are toward debunking misconceptions about the Middle Ages, such insistent critical focus upon dark medievalisms—in the absence of similar attention directed toward comic neomedievalisms—inadvertently solidifies a popular belief in a monolithic Dark Ages.<sup>9</sup>

As a result, students and consumers too often fail to recognize that the Middle Ages—like any other time in human history—was a complex period with a range of cultural attitudes, literary genres, and expressive styles. It was, like our modern era, sometimes violent, ethnocentric, and overly serious, but was also sometimes peaceful, self-critical, and funny. Modern Arthurian comedy is, thus, every bit as "medieval" as any dramatic Hollywood history claiming to tell the true story about any "so-called Arthur King." *Connecticut Yankee*, *Holy Grail*, and *Army of Darkness* all provide—through a glass, comically—a glimpse at the long legacy of Arthurian humor in Western culture and provide a needed corrective to predominantly dark modern depictions of the Middle Ages. Informed writers and directors (like Twain, Jones, and Raimi) thus offer modern viewers a more holistic understanding of the "real" Middle Ages, as well as a temporally displaced locus from which to deconstruct their own modern cultural concerns.

## **"He's a 20th century guy, trapped in the middle ages"**

Time-travel portal comedies have regularly invaded the medieval court of Camelot since Twain's 1889 text. These narratives rely heavily on the clash between modern and medieval ideologies, particularly notions of chivalry,

masculinity, and heroism, often superficially evidenced by differences in language, etiquette, and technology. Twain's rich literary satire—which calls into question medieval and modern notions of cultural superiority—inspired two popular Hollywood tropes: the incompetent medieval King and his replacement, the savvy modern Boss. The earliest film adaptation of Twain's novel was an immediately popular (but now largely lost) silent film, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (directed by Emmett J. Flynn, Fox Film Corporation, 1921). In this overtly literate retelling, protagonist Martin Cavendish (Harry Myers) reads Twain's novel only to awaken in Camelot . . . and then uses the information from the novel to navigate his way into power. A less metaliterary “talkie” starring Will Rogers as radio salesman Hank Martin, pithily titled *A Connecticut Yankee* (directed by David Butler, Fox Film Corporation, 1931), followed soon after; from there, the string of adaptations would continue apace throughout the century.

Even today, the most enduring of Twainian films remains *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (directed by Tay Garnett, Paramount Pictures, 1949), starring Bing Crosby. Transported to Camelot (AD 528), Crosby's Hank Martin sings the praises of modern technology while ultimately doing little to enhance sixth-century life, even after being dubbed “Sir Boss.”<sup>10</sup> As Kevin J. Harty notes, the film's many musical numbers make it apparent that this iteration was an engine to showcase Crosby's musical talents and not Twain's political satire (101). The humor instead leans heavily into superficial differences to distance Hank from Arthur's court. For example, Hank liberally suffixes *-eth* to verbs and peppers his speech with random *ye*, *thee*, and *thou* pronouns in a mocking echo of the court's Hollywood Middle English (Osberg and Crow 43). King Arthur (Cedric Hardwicke) suffers from advanced old age, a perpetual snuffle, and apparent hearing loss, all of which are played for laughs and underscore his impotence as king. In contrast to Arthur's comic decrepitude and senility, deft physical comedy reaffirms Hank's status as a modern Western hero, as evidenced when he tauntingly uses a lasso during the requisite joust scene. Add to this physical superiority a knowledge of modern metallurgy and an abundance of self-confidence, and Crosby's Hank confirms his status as the right-wise Boss of all England.

Although immensely popular, influential, and charming, the film codifies a constructed medieval past without raising much interest in problematizing that construction. Instead, Hank sings, winks, and woos Alisande La Carteloise (aka Sandy, played by Rhonda Fleming) and rises to the rank of Sir Boss on easy charm and wit rather than technological or socio-political engineering. In the end, although Hank exposes the king to the injustices of the land (where white slavery is reduced to a kind of jovial “bachelor auction”), and saves the day/girl, he also suffers another blow to the head and inexplicably wakes up back in Connecticut (AD 1912). Happily, while touring the old castle in England, Hank meets modern Lord Pendragon (Hardwicke, still as sniffly), tells his time-hopping tale, and is introduced to Pendragon's niece: a modern Sandy (Fleming again) awaiting him on a parapet, winking.

Despite the surface treatment of this offering, the majority of Twainian film adaptations follow the Crosby plot arc. And there have been *many* Twainian time-hops to Camelot since Crosby, from Bugs Bunny to Xena to All-American spacemen and teenage delinquents.<sup>11</sup> Yet perhaps the most didactically Twainian film is “A Knight in Camelot,” a 1998 made-for-TV Disney feature starring Whoopi Goldberg as Dr. Vivien Morgan, an intellectual successor to the savvy, informed, engineer/mechanic protagonists of the earlier monochromatic masculine tradition. As an exceptionally earnest attempt at raising social awareness via neo-Arthurian comedy, the film occupies the other end of the self-reflexivity spectrum from Crosby's *Connecticut Yankee*. While Crosby's Hank is casually charming, romantically driven, and self-assured, Goldberg's Vivien is sharply critical, socially motivated, and professionally frustrated; they embody the two sides of Twain's Hank Morgan: the romantic hero and the social advocate.

Vivien, a gravitational physicist working on the aptly named Kablooeey Project, accidentally transports herself (along with her laptop and boombox) into the Middle Ages (AD 589), where she uses her quick wit to undo the machinations of an antagonistic Sagamore, Lancelot, and Guinevere. In a double distancing move, Vivien is not only a modern American but also a black woman, differences that are not overlooked by the local medievals. Sir Sagamore and King Arthur (Michael York!) initially call her an “ogre” (00:06:45; 00:09:45), Queen Guinevere calls her an “it” (00:10:05), and Clarence the Page actually rubs her face, prompting her to chide him, saying “it doesn't come off; I'm this color all over” (00:08:00–15). Heedless of her alienation, Vivien maintains her distinct modern American dialect throughout (eschewing Crosby's half-hearted medieval mannerisms). Escaping execution thanks to her laptop's record of a timely eclipse (a direct nod to the almanacs of Twain/Crosby) and finding the king's favor, Vivien simply requests “a little respect [and for] people to stop threatening me with flaying, and chaining” (00:17:55–00:18:05), all unobvious coding for the film's secondary slave narrative.

In a return to the literary roots of the Twain narrative, Vivien actively deploys her modern ideas and technology to effect substantive change in the sixth century by, as she says, starting “the Industrial Revolution” (00:28:15). As Sir Boss (a title she desired in her modern workplace), Vivien effectively takes over for Arthur (who—if not necessarily sickly—lounges abed in many scenes) and reshapes Camelot in her own image of modernity. Significantly, she

invents a steam powered flour mill for the “progress of Camelot” and staffs it with newly freed men who are even paid for their labor. However, after several freemen are injured by the engine (or, as they call it, “monster”), Clarence and Sandy must educate Vivien that being a mistreated freeman is no better than being a slave. When Vivien proclaims, “we’re building the future here,” Clarence angrily retorts, “then why does it look worse than the past?” (00:34:15–30). Vivien’s blind spot—focusing on using her power to eradicate larger social ills at the expense of the individual—connects her directly to the darker side of Twain’s original social mechanic, Hank Morgan (Lupack, “A Knight” 168).

Arthur, whose confident ignorance echoes that of many leaders, fictional and non-fictional, remains “blind” to the social inequalities in his realm until Vivien brings the injustices of slavery and “the king’s law” to his attention; he himself is to be hanged as a slave after disguising himself as a freeman (after Vivien and Clarence bespatter him with “filth”).<sup>12</sup> Vivien overtly questions the feudal class system, gender roles, slavery, and a host of other pre-modern issues, even as she somewhat naively asserts: “Where I come from, everybody is free!” (00:24:05). Her lessons in “proper” slave behavior and “cringing” (subservience embodied by crouching and scurrying) are, at times, cringe-worthy themselves, a constructed projection of social ills upon a medieval time “long ago and far away” rather than a self-reflexive investigation into current social concerns, but they are leagues above Crosby’s bachelor auction primping. As John Aberth reminds us, “how we choose to remember the past reveals much about how we live in the present” (xi). Vivien remembers the recent past of her modern present rather selectively when in the distant past, but it seems unlikely—given the explicit social didacticism throughout the film—that any self-aware viewer would take Vivien’s distant depiction of slavery at face value. If naught else, the film attempts to level social criticism upon its materials in a Twainian fashion and offers viewers an opportunity to reflect upon their own construction of modernity in opposition/parallel to the constructed neomedieval world presented by Disney. It certainly re-modernizes Twain by introducing a non-white protagonist into an all-white past without playing the subsequent fish-out-of-water elements simply for cheap laughs.<sup>13</sup>

Goldberg’s Vivien and Crosby’s Hank illustrate how Twainian Arthuriana can evidence great comic elasticity, from slouching crooner to driven scientist, innocuous romance to social critique. Such elastic comedy, in turn, colors—stretches, even—a modern audience’s understanding of “the medieval” as depicted on screen: all and none of these depictions are true, just as all and none of our understanding of history is *the* truth.<sup>14</sup>

## **“In an age of darkness, at a time of evil . . . When the world needed a hero, what it got was him”**

Shot by directors Terry Jones and Terry Gilliam with an “excretory verisimilitude” that colors—or discolors—their presentation of the Middle Ages, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) displays a viciously anti-authoritarian streak, relentlessly ridiculing the assumptive power of kings, texts, and history. As John Cleese recalls, *Holy Grail* was “full of angry political crap,” the bulk of it aimed at Chapman’s King Arthur, who stands in as a clueless straight man throughout the film: the crowned avatar of undeserved authority. Although Arthur begins the film as a pristine questor, by the end he has had abuse—verbal and physical—heaped upon him (including a final denouncing in French ordure) before being passively led away in handcuffs. Arthur-as-authority is depowered, debunked, and disgraced, but not before a host of medieval and neomedieval tropes are trotted out by the Pythons for a good ribbing. As Susan Aronstein notes, the film “made life hard” on medieval texts and traditions, but “it made it even harder on future Hollywood Arthuriana” (116).

The film begins as Arthur and his faithful coconut banging pantomimetic steed, Patsy (Terry Gilliam), set out seeking knights to join Arthur “in his court at Camelot.” After a few establishing scenes—including an unexpectedly articulate discussion regarding the migratory patterns of coconut-laden swallows and a brief walk through a conspicuously filthy plague village—Arthur and company eventually receive their eponymous sacred quest from God Himself: “To seek the Holy Grail.” So far, so medieval. Episodically, Arthur and his knights (“kuh-nigguts”) encounter French Taunters, a chatty three-headed ogre, an impassive Black Knight, 160 nubile blondes and brunettes, a pyrokinetic wizard, a mysterious bridge-keeper, a killer bunny (!?), a two-dimensional cave beast, and a host of other archetypes popular in medieval Arthurian romances and modern role-playing games. Curiously, despite all their knees-bent-running-about, Arthur and his cinematic knights never set foot in Camelot nor sit at the Round Table. After Arthur and company spy Camelot castle in the distance, prop-master Gilliam (as Patsy) meta-theatrically mutters: “It’s only a model” (00:22:20–25).<sup>15</sup> After summarily shushing Patsy, Arthur looks off dramatically and somehow sees *into* the castle, where an inanely chipper musical number is going on, a direct

parody of the recently popular and overly romanticized *Camelot* musical (stage 1960; film 1967).<sup>16</sup> Seeing this performative misrepresentation of serious knighthood, Arthur decides not to go to Camelot after all, brusquely concluding: “‘Tis a silly place” (00:23:35–40). Perhaps lost in the meta-theatrical humor of the scene is how Chapman’s serious disappointment and summary dismissal of Camelot decentralizes Arthur’s traditional power position; Chapman’s king is so dim that he actually disenfranchises himself.

The film relies, in great part, upon a construction of the Middle Ages—embodied by Arthur—as a uniformly dull and humorless place. Peasants harvest “filth”; the dead and not-yet-dead are stacked like cordwood; forests are dark and foreboding; maidens with grail-shaped beacons remain sexually frustrated; even weddings are dour, bloody affairs. The Pythons then extend this grey uniformity upon all authority before debunking such power positions via a series of disempowering subversions of convention. That is, King Arthur (with one notable exception discussed below) always loses because Arthur is an impotent, humorless git: an armored embodiment of an outmoded monarch incapable of thinking beyond his self-constructed power position as the “right-wise” and inflexible King of all England.

In his first attempt at establishing castle-hopping authority over England (AD 932), Arthur encounters a Marxist-minded peasant named Dennis (Michael Palin), who is gathering “some lovely filth” alongside a Pepperpot (Terry Jones) in a field beneath a distant castle (00:09:00–00:12:00).<sup>17</sup> Inquiring about the castle’s presumed regent, Arthur is schooled in modern political theory by Dennis, who disavows the authority of Arthur’s kingship—“Strange women lying in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government!”—and instead assures Arthur that he and his medieval proletariat live in an “anarcho-syndicalist commune,” a decidedly post-medieval form of shared governance. Their conversation devolves into a one-sided flyting match in which Arthur reverently recounts his legendary origins while Dennis heaps abuse and ridicule upon Arthur’s illusion of regency. Ultimately, the legendary Arthur loses their verbal battle, exposes his ignorance of social structures, fails to make a case for his authority over all Britons, and ultimately tromps off in frustration as Dennis calls out to his mates to witness Arthur’s authoritarian impotence. As Palin notes in the film’s commentary track, this is simply one of many instances where Chapman’s Arthur represents “authority not getting to the common people.” There is, certainly, an ideological failure to communicate here, an amplified version of the linguistic confusion in the Twainian films.<sup>18</sup> In both of his flyting encounters with the French Taunters, Arthur makes futile attempts to breach their castles—via verbal assertion, forceful assault, or limited guile—only to fail miserably. In return, the Taunters mock Arthur’s parentage, his nationality, and his intelligence . . . then pelt him with animals and shit. To all these criticisms, Arthur has no winning answer, only the repeated assertion that he is literally entitled to their respect and obeisance. Like a medieval fabliaux victim, the foolish Arthur repeatedly fails in, and fails to learn from, his adventures; he is thus deserving of ridicule and disempowerment.

In fact, there is but one antagonistic encounter that Arthur truly wins (“All right: we’ll call it a draw”), and that is against the Black Knight. Faced with an unresponsive and immobile foe, Arthur deftly dismembers the Black Knight, who is arguably defeated only because he is the one character in the film who is even more inflexible than Arthur: an immovable object meeting an implacable force. The scene gruesomely parodies the nearly ubiquitous bridge-crossing trope of heroic medieval romances, boy-friendly Howard Pyle adventures, and swashbuckling Robin Hood films, all of which inform a neomedieval image of the Middle Ages as the land of fair play and chivalric bonhomie. By presenting a bloody subversion that literally dismembers the expected medievalism, the Pythons prompt the audience to reconsider the construction of such silly macho posturing, might-makes-right conflict resolution, and utterly impractical medieval codes of conduct.

In these and other scenes, *Holy Grail* asks confounded audiences to make sense of the senseless, to see the “violence inherent in the system” of neomedieval construction. By juxtaposing presumed medieval tropes (filth, feudalism, the French) and neomedieval romanticism (fair play, magic, monsters) with modern intrusions (Marxism, science, the police), the Pythons debunk the assumptions of contemporary film-goers, encouraging a re-evaluation of what is medieval, modern, or neomedieval mashup.

## **“Foretold by a mystical book. Forewarned by a wiseman. Fulfilled by a wise guy”**

*Army of Darkness* (1992) is the third and final installment of the *Evil Dead* cinematic series (following the more pithily named *The Evil Dead* and *Evil Dead II*), offering fans a conclusion to the Ashley “Ash” Joanna Williams story.<sup>19</sup> Over the course of the increasingly absurdist comic horror series, Ash (Bruce Campbell) fights endless

waves of *deadites*: evil spirits who possess living bodies (or corpses) in an effort to suck the souls of the living. Yet, as Campbell notes, “Ash is so not the right guy . . . He’s got no skills, and he’s cocky, and he makes horrible mistakes,” even if he is somehow terribly good at killing deadites in violently comic ways (*Medieval Times* 00:02:40–50). Ash is a brash everyman painfully aware of his cognitive limitations yet cloaked in an armor of self-mocking bravado, a mix of Chapman’s persistent confusion and Crosby’s cool self-assurance.<sup>20</sup> In the films, he is the “promised one,” all that stands between humanity and the undead armies of darkness. In addition to medieval temporal displacement and intrusive modern technology (Ash is reunited with his signature shotgun, chainsaw prosthetic, and Oldsmobile Delta 88 Royale early in the film), Raimi overtly borrows other elements from Twain, including dialect affectations, political discord, impotent kingship, and a Sandy-esque love interest.<sup>21</sup> On the Python side, Raimi employs absurdist comedy, buckets of splatstick blood, incessant generic mashups, meta-theatrics, and a Chapmanesque idiot protagonist. In short, Raimi was well aware of the twin neomedievalisms that preceded him as he crafted his own bit of modern neo-Arthuriana.

The film opens in “The Middle Ages” with a shot of Ash chained alongside a handful of heraldically attired prisoner knights, trudging through a desert in medieval England (!?) after being transported back in time by the Necronomicon at the end of *Evil Dead II*. As his opening voiceover melodramatically notes, “My name is Ash and I am a slave. Close as I can figure, the year is 1300 and I’m being dragged to my death. I wasn’t always like this . . . I had a real life once” (00:00:45–00:01:05).<sup>22</sup> Of course, Ash’s “real life” in *Evil Dead* and *Evil Dead II* previously included frequent ultraviolet encounters with undead monsters (alongside a mundane day job at S-Mart), so what is “real” in this film is suspect from the start.

After Ash arrives at a conspicuously matte “12th CENTURY BATTLE CASTLE” (which simply screams for Terry Gilliam to mutter, “it’s only a model!”), we meet the expected cast of medieval archetypes: Lord Arthur (powerless leader); Wiseman (berobed Merlin figure); Henry the Red (royal frenemy); the aptly named Blacksmith; and Sheila (a Slap/Kiss version of Sandy).<sup>23</sup> The castle is sparse, and the design aesthetic—wool-woven chainmail, foam-core castellation, and filthy peasantry—all recall the low budget and over-the-top “excretory verisimilitude” of *Holy Grail*.

Although the theatrical release never explicitly identifies the location as Camelot or Lord Arthur as *the* King Arthur, the neomedieval aim of the film is apparent in the working title, various script notes, commentary tracks, attempts at historical armor and heraldry, accents, and even Raimi’s repurposing of storyboards from the spectacular Ingrid Bergman hagiography, *Joan of Arc* (1948) (Muir 153). Sadly, the limited budget and shooting location—Bronson Canyon outside of the Mojave Desert—worked against any attempts at historical or geographic verisimilitude. As production designer Anton “Tony” Tremblay notes, “I wanted *Army of Darkness* to look like England, and you just couldn’t do it because everything was just so drab. You know it’s a desert” (*Medieval Times* 00:38:51–00:39:09). Yet there is enough film shorthand for the audience to recognize where and when this tale takes place: in a quasi-medieval universe that recognizes—sometimes meta-theatrically—how ahistorical it really is. Ash magically lands in a version of the Middle Ages that constantly requires its audience to suspend their disbelief and reflect upon other questionable cinematic representations of the medieval.

After Arthur condemns Ash as one of Henry’s men, the prisoners watch on as “a geyser of blood erupts upward from THE PIT,” heralding a Pythonesque mashup of the trash compactor and Rancor pit scenes from the *Star Wars* franchise.<sup>24</sup> Clonked by an angry Sheila (Embeth Davidtz) and then knocked into the Pit, Ash must prove himself in the battle against his first foe: the Pit Bitch. His victory is aided greatly when Wiseman (our pseudo-Merlin) throws Ash’s chainsaw prosthetic down to him, offering the hero a chance to reunite with his technologically advanced “Excalibur.” Leaping up in slow motion from the ankle-deep water of the pit, Ash catches his signature blade in a clear visual nod to the slow-motion retrieval of Excalibur by the Lady of the Lake at the end of John Boorman’s *Excalibur* (1981), perhaps the most iconic visual from that influential film. As the shooting script for *Army of Darkness* notes, “THE CHAINSAW—SLOW MOTION tumbling downward. Blinding beams of sunlight bouncing off its blade of steel. Ash’s Excalibur!” (128). There is no mistaking Raimi’s neomedieval thematic here, or his repositioning of Ash as an imminent neo-Arthur.

After summarily beheading his own “lady of the ankle-deep lake,” Ash rises from the Pit, like a boss, then sucker-punches Arthur, orders the release of Duke Henry and his men, intimidates the locals, and even shatters Arthur’s sword with a shotgun blast. Arthur’s medieval Excalibur is no match for a modern “Boomstick,” which Ash (a salesman by nature) advertises to the “primitive screwheads” gathered about in a manner reminiscent of Crosby’s smooth-talking Hank Morgan:

This is my BOOMSTICK! It’s a twelve-gauge double barreled Remington, S-Mart’s top-of-the-line. You can find this in the sporting goods department. That’s right, this sweet baby was

made in Grand Rapids Michigan. Retail for about \$109.95. It's got a walnut stock, cobalt blue steel and a hair trigger. That's right. Shop smart. Shop S-Mart. (00:18:00–40)

Ash's Twainian hucksterism remains gibberish to the medieval crowd, but like Chapman's Arthur, Ash is not terribly bright: both typically fail at communication . . . and neither is very good at counting.<sup>25</sup>

Throughout his encounters with (what he considers) the "primates" of this desert Camelot, Ash dumbs down his already limited vocabulary and often defaults to modern consumerist salesman patter (rather than any half-hearted attempts at medieval "thee/thou" mimicry). His inept attempts at cultural assimilation fail, but after repeatedly establishing his puissance in deadite battle, Ash is hailed as "the promised one" and (literally) arms himself for battle. Teaming up with Blacksmith, Ash mixes modern and contemporary technology to create an air-powered mechanical hand to replace his usual chainsaw prosthetic. This same blend of old and new will later lead Ash to transform his trusty Oldsmobile into the "Death Coaster" for the final requisite "joust."<sup>26</sup>

Following his victory over the Pit Bitch, Ash is treated like royalty by the assembled court, while a disarmed Lord Arthur is reduced to glaring impotently from the sidelines. Even Sheila warms to "the chosen one" and a romance of sorts blooms. After rudely playing coy ("First you wanna kill me, now you wanna kiss me"; 00:19:55–00:20:05)—and killing another deadite—Ash gets slapped for his continued insolence, pulls Sheila into his arms, caresses her face, fixes her hair, and huskily croons: "Give me some sugar, baby" (00:24:30–55). Their literal Slap/Kiss romance is surely an intentionally corny reflection of the winking lyric romanticism of Crosby and Fleming, another distortion of expectations that simultaneously links/separates the film and tradition.

Ash then goes off on a knightly "Quest for the Book" (scene 7): as Wiseman says, only Ash—the chosen one—can retrieve the Necronomicon, an anti-Grail that could serve the dual purpose of saving Arthur's kingdom and sending Ash home. As Ash sets off for the graveyard, he is chased through a forest by a deadite spirit; to escape, Ash barricades himself in a windmill, where he smashes his own reflection and spawns a bunch of evil Lilliputian Ashes (what a six-foot pane glass mirror is doing in a medieval Dutch windmill is anyone's guess). These mirror-spawned Tiny Ashes bedevil the hero, who is comically outmanned by himself, as it were, awakening after a fall to find himself tied down à la *Gulliver's Travels*.<sup>27</sup> The Tiny Ashes manage to get Ash to swallow one of their own, causing Ash to asexually bifurcate into Ash and the aptly named "Bad Ash" (also played by Campbell). The pair then fight it out Two-Stoogian fashion, until Ash literally gets the drop on Bad Ash, saying "Good, bad . . . I'm the one with the gun."<sup>28</sup> Shooting his doppelganger point blank in the face with his Boomstick, Ash defeats his bad self, then dismembers and buries the still mouthy (undead) Bad Ash before continuing his quest for the Necronomicon.

Finding three identical Necronomicons on a graveyard altar, Ash fails twice before remembering he must utter the magic phrase ("Klaatu barada nikto": a nice meta-theatrical nod to *The Day the Earth Stood Still*) that should enable him to retrieve the book without further physical peril.<sup>29</sup> Of course—Ash being Ash—he partially screws up the incantation and inadvertently resurrects not only the titular Army of Darkness but Bad Ash as well. As Wiseman says after hearing of his incomplete incantation in the graveyard: "Dung eating fool! Thou hast doomed us all!" (00:44:25–30).

Despite this deserved admonishment, Ash selfishly demands that Wiseman uphold "the deal" to send him back to his own time. Although Arthur remains a neutralized background character, at this point Ash fails to step up as the new king and even turns his back on Sheila, dismissing their earlier intimate promises as "pillowtalk" (thus further subverting—at least temporarily—the romance tropes of both medieval and Twainian relationships). Ash's selfishness is short-lived, however, as a harpy deadite abducts Sheila, prompting his return to "Boss" mode. Seconds later, a scout arrives with news of the impending arrival of the Army, engendering confusion and cowardice in the knights. Arthur's indecision at this juncture cements Ash's leadership: Ash postures atop a castle wall, orders the locals about, organizes their defenses, and (thanks to a copy of *Chemistry 101* from the Oldsmobile's trunk) creates that Twainian miracle of modern martial superiority: gunpowder. In short: Ash who had become the new (idiot) Hank becomes a new (idiot) Arthur.

Meanwhile, Bad Ash, who increasingly looks like a member of the cult thrash/shock/comedy metal band GWAR as his foam-latex masking deteriorates, converts Sheila into a deadite of sorts (via a perverse echo of her earlier romantic Slap/Kiss encounter with Ash), and gathers an army (of darkness!) to assault the castle and regain the Necronomicon. As the SFX crew note in the DVD extra, "The Men Behind the Army," the army of skeletal warriors are inspired by Ray Harryhausen, the father of stop-motion animation; Raimi wanted "this to be like *Sinbad, Jason and the Argonauts*, buddy . . . I want a Harryhausen brow on the skeletons" (00:03:00–15). As with Raimi's intentional push for practical effects in an age of CGI, abundant pop culture and meta-referents are peppered throughout *Army of Darkness*—from *Joan of Arc* framing, to *Gulliver's Travels* homage, to GWAR costuming, to *Magnificent Seven* training montage, to *Star Wars* scenes—all of which belie the low-brow splatstick presentation of



the film. Ash's Chapmanesque idiocy aside, there is no finer proof of the Pythonesque nature of *Army of Darkness* than the film's absurdist mashups of pop-culture referents and generic expectations.

The *Army of Darkness* attacks, but, thanks to English longbows loaded with gunpowder charges (!), things look promising for a bit. Ash even wreaks havoc with his blade-spinning Death Coaster ("Welcome to the 21st Century!") until Sheila, seemingly human again, distracts our not-so-selfish-after-all protagonist. This distraction provides the deadites a momentary advantage, but just as things are looking grim, Duke Henry and his men arrive to bolster the human cause. Ash again fights his evil self until—fortuitously—Bad Ash straddles a catapult laden with gunpowder and is lofted into the sky. BOOM. Good, Bad . . . both Ashes are pretty stupid, really. The deadite army flees, Sheila miraculously transforms back into her lovely self, and Arthur reconciles with Henry. Having saved the neomedieval past, the Boss from the future then returns to his "own kingdom," in this case, the "consumeristic court"<sup>30</sup> of a modern American S-Mart.

Of course, deadite evil always dogs Ash, and his current location (Housewares) is no different. As Ash is flirting with a fellow employee, a female customer transforms into a hellish deadite and attacks. Yet here—amidst the toasters and strobe lights (and convenient shotgun displays) of consumer America—Ash is in his element, handily defeating the deadite threat before getting his just rewards: a romantic smooch with a comely coworker. As Ash notes in voiceover as the film ends: "Sure, I could have stayed in the past. Hell, I could've been king. But in my own way, I am king" (01:15:00–15). Curling his arm around his coworker (Angela Featherstone) and pulling her in for a quasi-romantic kiss just as he had done with Sheila seven hundred years ago, Ash closes out the film with one last cheesy line that bridges his constructed neomedieval past with our still-under-construction present: "Hail to the king, baby!"

But...should we?

## **"Sound the trumpets, raise the drawbridge, and drop the Oldsmobile"**

Arthuriana is, and has always been, messy: an amorphous set of sometimes incompatible tropes, characterizations, and plotlines. Medieval authors knew this, and offered their audiences comic Arthurs—questing buffoons, ignorant cuckolds, ineffective leaders, and lazy lords of banquets—as well as violently heroic saviors, morally righteous paragons, and divinely just regents. Yet when comedic Arthurs pop up nowadays—rude and glorious tales couched in Twainian time-traveler garb or Pythonesque political satire—they are too seldom treated as worthy of recognition by critics and teachers.<sup>31</sup> Given the rise in medieval misappropriation among neo-Nazis and political pundits nowadays, medievalists are morally justified in directing critical attention toward debunking the overly popular medieval misconstructions portrayed in so much dramatic neo-Arthuriana. Yet, we also need to more vocally acknowledge modern comic representations of the Middle Ages: to do otherwise inadvertently distorts popular perception of the past. The medieval period was simply not a monolithically dour Dark Age, and silently allowing the popular construction of a uniform, oppressive, and humorless period of history sets a dangerous precedent for those who would seek to justify their uniform, oppressive, and humorless actions via quasi-historic appropriation. Comedy—as medieval authors knew full well—holds the power to question the status quo, to destabilize authority, and to bring joy during hard times. Neomedieval comedy can continue to do so today, if, instead of just laughing off their obvious historical errors or cheesy effects, we engage critically with the traditions they re-present and recognize that their sometimes obvious (and often intentional) medieval misrepresentations can be pedagogically valuable.<sup>32</sup>

The many cinematic iterations of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* replace the incompetent medieval English King Arthur with a clever modern American Boss; *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* depicts Chapman's Arthur as an oblivious medieval English king who repeatedly fails to understand that his presumed authority is utterly undeserved, ineffective, and silly. While Robinson rightly suggests "it is doubtful that Mark Twain, for example, would recognize [Pythonesque] humor, much less understand it" (385), modern audiences do "understand" both Twainian and Pythonesque neo-Arthuriana, and that understanding has helped create modern conceptions of the Middle Ages. Although these two strains do not often occupy the same space simultaneously in modern films, they come to a limited shared representation in *Army of Darkness*: a film wherein an incompetent modern American hero becomes an oblivious neomedieval king whose status as "the chosen one" is utterly undeserved. When pressed about Ash's unexpectedly positive cult-hero status, Bruce Campbell once noted, "Why the hell would you have an asshole as a lead character? Because we think that's funny!" (*Medieval Times* 01:34:00–01:36:00). The Pythons, and perhaps Twain, might agree.

As an escapist fantasy, an absurdist pop-culture mashup, and a self-conscious distortion of the cinematic Middle Ages, *Army of Darkness* exemplifies how comic neo-Arthuriana can offer solace during times of hardship and critique modern cultural concerns within a distant medieval construction. It also, like the best comic neomedievalism, reminds viewers that the “real” Middle Ages was never a uniformly dour, shit-laden time of pestilence, violence and ethnocentrism, but—like our own time period—an age capable of self-reflection, criticism, and comedy. Or so we hope.

Ashley Joanna Williams, Hank Martin, Vivien Morgan, and Graham Chapman may not be the kings we want, but they do have our shit all over them.

## Works cited

Aberth, John. *A Knight at the Movies: Medieval History on Film*. Routledge, 2003.

*Army of Darkness*, directed by Sam Raimi, performance by Bruce Campbell, Renaissance Pictures, 1992.

Aronstein, Susan. *Hollywood Knights: Arthurian Cinema and the Politics of Nostalgia*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Studies in Arthurian and Courtly Cultures.

*Black Knight*. Directed by Gil Junger, performance by Martin Lawrence, Twentieth Century Fox, 2001.

Busby, Keith. “General Editor’s Foreword,” *Comedy in Arthurian Literature*, special issue of *Arthurian Literature*, edited by Keith Busby and Roger Dalrymple, vol. 19, 2003, pp. vii–viii.

Chris. “Medievalists Respond to Charlottesville.” *The Medieval Academy Blog*, 18 Aug. 2017, [www.themedievalacademyblog.org/medievalists-respond-to-charlottesville/](http://www.themedievalacademyblog.org/medievalists-respond-to-charlottesville/).

Cogan, Brian, and Jeff Massey. *Everything I Ever Needed to Know about \_\_\_\_\_ \* I Learned from Monty Python*. Thomas Dunne Books, 2014.

*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*. Directed by Tay Garnett, performance by Bing Crosby, Paramount Pictures, 1948.

Elliott, Andrew B. R. *Remaking the Middle Ages: The Methods of Cinema and History in Portraying the Medieval World*. McFarland, 2011.

*The Fabliaux: A New Verse Translation*. Translated by Nathaniel E. Dubin, Liveright, 2013.

Finke, Laurie A., and Martin B. Shichtman. *Cinematic Illuminations: The Middle Ages on Film*. John Hopkins UP, 2010.

Foster, Tara. “*Kaamelott*: A New French Arthurian Tradition.” *Arthurian Literature*, vol. 31, edited by Elizabeth Archibald and David F. Johnson, D. S. Brewer, 2014, pp. 185–202.

Foster, Tara, and Jon Sherman. “King Arthur in the Twenty-First Century: *Kaamelott*, BBC’s *Merlin*, and Starz’s *Camelot*.” *Arthuriana*, vol. 25, no. 1, Spring 2015, pp. 3–4. doi:10.1353/art.2015.0007.

Harty, Kevin J. “Cinematic American Camelots Lost and Found: The Film Versions of Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* and George Romero’s *Knightriders*.” *Cinema Arthuriana: Twenty Essays*, rev. Edition, McFarland, 2002, pp. 96–109.

Jewers, Caroline. “Hard Day’s Knights: *First Knight*, *A Knight’s Tale*, and *Black Knight*.” *The Medieval Hero on Screen: Representations from Beowulf to Buffy*, edited by Martha W. Driver and Sid Ray, McFarland, 2004, pp. 192–210.

- “A Knight in Camelot.” *The Wonderful World of Disney*, directed by Roger Young, performance by Whoopi Goldberg, season 2, episode 6, Walt Disney Television, 1998.
- Larsen, Darl. *A Book about the Film Monty Python and the Holy Grail: All the References from African Swallows to Zoot*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.
- Lupack, Barbara Tapa. “A Connecticut Yankee at the Movies.” *Arthuriana*, vol. 29, no. 2, Summer 2019, pp. 64–85. doi:10.1353/art.2019.0020.
- . “A Knight in Camelot.” *Arthuriana*, vol. 9, no. 1, Spring 1999, pp. 167–69. doi:10.1353/art.1999.0022.
- Massey, Jeff, and Brian Cogan. “Spamalot: Loving Ripping Off/Ripping On the Establishment.” *Medieval Afterlives in Contemporary Culture*, edited by Gail Ashton, Bloomsbury Academic, 2015, pp. 11–21.
- Medieval Comic Tales*. Edited by Derek Brewer, D. S. Brewer, 2008.
- Medieval Times: The Making of Army of Darkness*. Produced by Heather Buckley and Michael Felsher, Shout! Factory, LLC 2015.
- “The Men Behind the Army.” *Army of Darkness*, Anchor Bay Entertainment, 1999.
- Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Directed by Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones. Python Pictures, 1975.
- “Movies Timeline and Canon.” *Evil Dead Wiki*, evildead.fandom.com/wiki/Movies\_Timeline\_and\_Canon.
- Muir, John Kenneth. “Army of Darkness (1993).” *The Unseen Force: The Films of Sam Raimi*, Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2004, pp. 148–70.
- Neufeld, Christine M. “Coconuts in Camelot: *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* in the Arthurian Literature Course.” *Florilegium*, vol. 19, 2002, pp. 127–47. journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/flor/article/view/12509.
- Osberg, Richard H., and Michael E. Crow. “Language Then and Language Now in Arthurian Film.” *King Arthur on Film: New Essays on Arthurian Cinema*, edited by Kevin J. Harty, McFarland, 1999, pp. 39–66.
- Pugh, Tison. “Queering the Medieval Dead: History, Horror, and Masculinity in Sam Raimi’s *Evil Dead* Trilogy.” *Race, Class, and Gender in “Medieval” Cinema*, edited by Lynn T. Ramey and Tison Pugh, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 123–36. The New Middle Ages. doi:10.1057/9780230603561\_9.
- Raimi, Sam, and Ivan Raimi. *The Army of Darkness: Screenplay*. Western Renaissance Pictures, 1991. [imsdb.com/scripts/Army-of-Darkness.html](http://imsdb.com/scripts/Army-of-Darkness.html).
- Robinson, Carol L. “‘I’m not dead, yet!’ Tracing the Pythonesque in Neomedievalist Media.” *Neomedievalism in the Media: Essays on Film, Television, and Electronic Games*, edited by Carol L. Robinson and Pamela Clements, Mellen, 2012, pp. 363–87.
- Seven Medieval Latin Comedies*. Translated by Alison Goddard Elliott, Garland, 1984.
- Shoaf, Judith P. “Kaamelott: A Semi-heroic Epic.” *The Heroic Age*, vol. 13, 2010, [www.heroicage.org/issues/13/forumc.php](http://www.heroicage.org/issues/13/forumc.php).
- “Slap-Slap-Kiss.” *TvTropes*, [tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/SlapSlapKiss](http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/SlapSlapKiss).
- Warren, Bill. *The Evil Dead Companion*. Griffin, 2000.

## Further reading

Aronstein, Susan. *Hollywood Knights: Arthurian Cinema and the Politics of Nostalgia*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Studies in Arthurian and Courtly Cultures.

Burt, Richard. "Getting Schmedieval: Of Manuscript and Film Prologues, Paratexts, and Parodies." *Exemplaria*, vol.

19, no. 2, 2007, pp. 217–42. doi:10.1179/175330707X212840.

Kelly, Kathleen Coyne, and Tison Pugh, editors. *Queer Movie Medievalisms*. Ashgate, 2009.

Pugh, Tison and Angela Jane Weisl. *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Queer Interventions.

Shichtman, Martin, and Laurie A. Finke. "Exegetical History: Nazis at the Round Table." *Postmedieval: A Journal*

*of Medieval Cultural Studies*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2014, pp. 278–294. doi:10.1057/pmed.2014.23.

Sklar, Elizabeth S., and Donald L. Hoffman, editors. *King Arthur in Popular Culture*. McFarland, 2002.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (00:08:40–50). Further citations will be in-text.

<sup>2</sup> This and all subsequent subheadings are taglines from *Army of Darkness* posters, which seemed intent on luring movie-goers with promises of "time-travel" or "medieval" shenanigans.

<sup>3</sup> This assertion (based on an admittedly informal poll of medievalists at conferences over the last two decades) is corroborated by modern critics (and aggregators) from ScreenRant to Rotten Tomatoes which consistently rank *Holy Grail* at the top of the plague-cart of Arthurian film releases.

<sup>4</sup> Robinson's definition is particularly useful when parsing comedy: "Neomedievalism is a fantasy both of medieval realities (whatever those may have been) and of medieval fantasies, that is created with forethought and self-reflexivity. In other words, neomedievalism 'laughs' at the nostalgia of other medievalisms" (374–75). Considering the self-reflexive re-appropriation and problematizing of medieval and modern Arthurian tropes in the comedies under discussion, we employ both neomedieval and—as a subset of the neomedieval—neo-Arthurian throughout this essay.

<sup>5</sup> As Jones later noted, although the Middle Ages were not really that filthy, such representations feel authentic to modern viewers who construct the past as what they are not. For a discussion of how "filth" became the premiere signifier of the Middle Ages in film, see Finke and Shichtman 48–49.

<sup>6</sup> For the general anti-authoritarianism of the Pythons, see Cogan and Massey 18–22.

<sup>7</sup> Medievalists, certainly, are well aware that the Middle Ages had a funny side, but beyond a Chaucerian comic tale or two in a survey course, few undergraduate students are aware of the range of comic medievalia available in collections such as *Medieval Comic Tales*, *Seven Medieval Latin Comedies*, or *The Fabliaux*.

<sup>8</sup> Note, for example, the tagline to Antoine Fuqua's *King Arthur* (Touchstone Pictures, 2004): "The untold true story that inspired the legend," which did little to bolster box office sales or critical reception. Perhaps audiences are not terribly interested in a "true story" after all, but the act of cultural construction.

<sup>9</sup> Thirty professional medieval associations reacted to the medieval misappropriations evident during "the racist violence in Charlottesville, Virginia" in 2017 by urging scholars to embrace a more global field of inquiry (Chris). This valuable condemnation of white supremacy noted that "to limit our object of study in such a way [focusing solely on Christian and European cultures] gives an arbitrary and false picture of the past. We see a medieval world that was as varied as the modern one. It included horrific violence, some of it committed in the name of religion; it included feats of bravery, justice, harmony, and love, some of them also in the name of religion." We would simply add that, to combat "an arbitrary and false picture of the medieval past," comedy—which is no small humanizing cultural trait—should be included more frequently in current professional discourse as well.

<sup>10</sup> While the BCE and CE abbreviations are used more extensively across this volume, the *Army of Darkness* franchise employs the older BC and AD abbreviations. We therefore reproduce them in our discussions for consistency with the franchise.

<sup>11</sup> For a survey of the many film iterations, see Lupack, "A Connecticut Yankee."

<sup>12</sup> A more pointed experience than in the Crosby film, certainly, and echoic of both Chapman's final befoulment and Ash's initial enslavement.

---

<sup>13</sup> While inconsistent, “A Knight in Camelot” treats the protagonist’s social and racial displacement with far more tact than the later *Black Knight* (2001) starring Martin Lawrence. For the stereotype-dependent humor of *Black Knight*, see Jewers 203.

<sup>14</sup> For more on accuracy and authenticity in medieval film, see Elliott.

<sup>15</sup> This is but one of the many fourth-wall breaking moments in the film that encourage the audience to re-evaluate the “reality” of the neomedieval world presented on film. For a closer read of this fourth-wall breaking scene in particular, see Massey and Cogan 12.

<sup>16</sup> The Lerner and Loewe play and subsequent film adaptation were ridiculously popular and helped usher in a period of romanticized pop-culture medievalism (which the Pythons typically abhorred).

<sup>17</sup> “Pepperpot”: a male Python in drag, typically played for incongruous laughs, akin to traditional British panto Dames. For a brief debrief on Pepperpots, see Cogan and Massey 244–47.

<sup>18</sup> For an exceedingly detailed examination of this scene (including further linguistic failures), see Larsen 94–160.

<sup>19</sup> The film’s *Medieval Dead* working title gave way to the US marquee *Army of Darkness* title, but both in on-screen and in DVD release it is heralded by the far more self-referential and cult-ish title, *Bruce Campbell vs. Army of Darkness*. Foreign distribution titles vary widely, from the mundane *Evil Dead III* (Ghana) to the sublime *Captain Supermarket* (Japan). Ash’s story, much like Arthur’s, has taken on a life of its own beyond its core film narrative. For those interested in parsing the complex timelines and canonicity of the franchise, see “Movies Timeline.”

<sup>20</sup> For a potential counter-reading of Ash transitioning from horror-film “Final Girl to Last Man Standing” throughout the series, see Pugh 125.

<sup>21</sup> As John Kenneth Muir notes, Raimi utilized the Twain narrative because he felt that it was the perfect template to display technology vs the supernatural (166).

<sup>22</sup> Despite Ash’s declaration that the year is AD 1300, notes in the 1991 shooting script repeatedly locate the film in the twelfth century (lines 21–22; 77).

<sup>23</sup> As tvtropes.org notes, a Slap/Kiss (or “Slap-Slap-Kiss”) romance culminates when two mutually attracted but bickering characters, “triggered by their hostilities [reach] a climax that results in an exchange of slaps, followed by a moment where both stare at each other in combined confusion and shock, after which they dive into the kiss.” See “Slap-Slap-Kiss.”

<sup>24</sup> See *Star Wars: Episode IV—A New Hope* (1977) and *Star Wars: Episode VI—Return of the Jedi* (1983), respectively.

<sup>25</sup> In the original ending to *Army of Darkness*, Ash must drink six drops—no more!—of an elixir that will send him into suspended animation until he wakes in his own time. Of course, he miscounts the drops and awakes in a sort of post-apocalyptic future. As Chapman’s Arthur and Jones’s Bedivere would say: “Five . . . no, three, m’lord!”

<sup>26</sup> During the introductory voiceover of *Army of Darkness*, Ash explains (with vivid flashback) that during a prior demonic possession his hand “went bad” so he “lopped it off at the wrist” (00:02:15–25).

<sup>27</sup> At one point, the Tiny Ashes brandish a fork and attack Ash’s buttocks, which Pugh argues is an instance of parodic sodomy reminiscent of Nicholas’s fate in Chaucer’s “The Miller’s Tale” (131).

<sup>28</sup> Campbell and friends were very fond of the Three Stooges as kids, and Raimi subsequently incorporated Stoogian slapstick and “Shemps” into his films with regularity (Warren 21; Muir 304).

<sup>29</sup> “Klaatu barada nikto” originated in Robert Wise’s *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (20th Century Fox, 1951) as a fail-safe phrase to prevent the robot Gort from destroying the Earth. As with many of the cult-ish casual pop-culture references in *Army of Darkness*, this magical phrase cements a Pythonesque “in the know” relationship between creator and audience.

<sup>30</sup> A fine term from Pugh (133).

<sup>31</sup> A happy exception is the French *Kaamelot*, which has enjoyed both popular and critical attention. See, for example, Shoaf; Foster; Foster and Sherman.

<sup>32</sup> For an instructive model, see Neufeld.