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Reviewing the Middle Ages

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Acknowledgments

Studies in Medievalism

Two great principles divide the world, and contend for the mastery, antiquity and the middle ages. These are the two civilizations that have preceded us, the two elements of which ours is composed. All political as well as religious questions reduce themselves practically to this. This is the great dualism that runs through our society.

Lord Acton

Editorial Note

The "Editorial Note" to the previous volume of *Studies in Medievalism* remarked that it contained no contribution directed towards popular, commercial, and contemporary forms of medievalism, but that these would be as welcome in future as studies directed towards the academy or towards medievalisms of the past. It is a pleasure accordingly to note that the balance has been to some extent redressed in the present volume, which contains three essays discussing modern film representations of the Middle Ages.

Nickolas Haydock's analysis of the movies *First Knight* and *A Knight's Tale* indeed challenges common academic views of these mass-market productions, including it must be confessed this editor's. A standard professional reaction to them, made overt in several reviews, has been to dismiss them as simply erroneous, ignorant, even catchpenny. *First Knight* delivers a version of the Arthurian story which makes drastic changes to the canonical versions of Malory, or Tennyson, or even John Boorman, and has accordingly been condemned for its lack of fidelity. *A Knight's Tale* meanwhile presents the chivalric tournament with all the accoutrements of modern professional sport, including fans, stars, and even hooligans, while Chaucer, "the father of English poetry," becomes a public relations expert. Deliberate anachronism, or just insolence? Haydock carefully and engagingly presents a perspective from outside traditional scholarship, while exposing and demolishing many of the standard assumptions about how such "historiographic metafictions" should be "read," or viewed.

Gwendolyn Morgan takes a more aggressive view of the two recent film versions of the story of Joan of Arc, showing how they reject many aspects of what is a well-documented life, arguably out of the triumphalism which is so marked a strain in modern views of "the Middle Ages," and expressed of course in the very phrase "Middle Ages." Not dissimilarly from Haydock, though, Morgan concludes that "the more we compare the products of popular culture to current scholarly trends, the more we see that they take different, but equally serious, departures from record." The 1994 film of *The Advocate*, discussed in detail by William Woods, was the least commercially successful of the medievalising films grouped together here, as also the most artistically ambitious and

deliberately provocative. It opens by reproducing familiar concepts of medieval barbarism and superstition – would you believe it, in the old days they even tried animals for murder! – but goes on to draw far less comforting and self-flattering parallels, the Middle Ages becoming steadily less alien and distanced than one would wish. The law which "the advocate" practises is not ours, but nor is it the vicious and ludicrous stereotype of anti-clerical fears (for which see Brasington below).

   The present volume also contains more methodologically familiar but no less welcome analyses of historical fictions, which further confirm a remark made in the last volume's "Editorial Note." There it was claimed that "there is no completely non-scholarly medievalism left in the world," a claim surprisingly supported by Haydock's demonstration of the unac-knowledged influence of Sir Maurice Keen on *A Knight's Tale* (see p. 27). Carl Hammer's simultaneous analysis of the changes in scholarly histor-ical views of the Norman Conquest, and their re-creation in a whole string of historical novels, however, documents in detail the constraints which history imposes on fiction and the opportunities which it creates even if the latter, in Hammer's historian's view, have not yet been taken. It may be that no-one any longer has the old confidence in writing history *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, the way it actually happened. But should this not be balanced by a corresponding creative freedom of the imagination? Apparently this has not always been the case. . .

   One reason for this may appear by noting an occasion when two contributors to the volume seem to contradict each other flatly. The "Norman Yoke" theory of early English history remains powerful still, declares Hammer (see his note 34), with oppressed Saxons regularly appearing in film and fiction under the heel of jackbooted Norman invaders, just as in Scott's *Ivanhoe* almost two centuries ago. Not so, argues Joanne Parker (see her note 135). The "Norman Yoke" theory has been vitiated and discredited not by any new sympathy for Normans, but by a widespread rejection of Saxonism, and Anglo-Saxonism, as tainted by nineteenth-century theories of racial supremacy. Parker also points to the destructive effects of expert knowledge. While King Alfred was known to every school-child as "the king who burned the cakes," he was a national icon and a focus for intense and continuous re-creation. Once the scholars had dissected the cakes away as apocryphal, a once overpow-ering interest faded, and myth or metafiction dwindled to mere history. Though King Alfred, it should be said, remains a centre for impassioned and even bitter debate within academia, outside academia (Parker reports, p. 129) the common and equally impassioned response may be that of her student respondent: "I know nothing about this man, NOTHING!" The

gloomy conclusion would appear to be (from Parker) that "research by experts" can kill off fiction, but (from Hammer) that it has not had a good record of inspiring it. It is to be hoped that this question can be pursued further, and answered differently.

Jóna Hammer offers an example of a much more creative tension between scholarship and creativity in her study of Rider Haggard's "Viking novel," *Eric Brighteyes*. This could never have come into existence, Hammer shows, without the intense Victorian interest in the rediscovered Icelandic sagas, which led Haggard to produce perhaps the most detailed of all the many Victorian "neo-sagas" – *Njáls saga* meets Gunnlaug Wormtongue, one might say, irreverently. Yet the interest and the emulation (Viking sea-kings as literal and spiritual ancestors of the Royal Navy) met also a shocked awareness of paganism, cruelty, superstition – this too, as Conrad wrote of the River Thames, has been "one of the dark places of the earth" – so that Haggard's neo-saga is met and combined with a simultaneous anti-saga.

Nineteenth-century views of medieval poets and poetry are also contrasted in the essays by Paul Hardwick and William Calin. Chaucer was never too much of a problem for later venerators: the image of him presented in Florence Converse's historical novel *Long Will*, and discussed by Hardwick, is not completely incompatible with the one in *A Knight's Tale* (see above). William Langland was a different matter, as Hardwick shows, intensely interesting to scholars (the disputes over his text set off by Walter Skeat have still not faded), but liable to be written off as only historically interesting, too surly, passionate and metrically rough to fit into what Hardwick calls the "Merrie England" and "Return to Camelot" views of the medieval past. Nevertheless these perceived faults were perceived virtues to some, notably to William Morris, and after him to a contrarian, socialist, and anti-feudal medievalising tradition, still, as Hardwick notes, not entirely welcome in scholarly circles. By contrast Longfellow's Chaucer, a little amiable and easily-removed raffishness aside, entirely suited the spirit of the age. That age is not ours, though, and Calin remarks on the thoroughness with which Longfellow has been removed from academia's unofficial, indeed officially non-existent canon. His image of Chaucer is now greeted only with indifference. Yet Longfellow's eclipse can be seen as a result of the *translatio studii* which he himself laboured to bring about. And it may yet be reversed as medievalism comes to be seen as "almost as central" to modernism as it was to Romanticism.

Two final comparisons close the volume. Baronets, Clare Simmons shows, are almost invariably bad in Victorian prose and melodrama,

labouring under curses and prone to reinvent the greatest horror of medieval times (for Mark Twain and others), the *droit de seigneur*. However, it was well-known that they were not medieval, being mostly discreditable and commercial early modern creations. The dislike of spurious medievalism shown in the hostile portrayals of baronets could accordingly be combined with admiration for what was seen as real medievalism, authentic, hereditary, noble, and even *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. Meanwhile, passionate Anglo-American dislike of what was seen (by Mark Twain again) as real medievalism, i.e. the Catholic Church and its whole dimly-understood apparatus of canon law, is compared by Bruce Brasington to a strikingly modern phenomenon, the "urban legend," like Protestant horror-stories about canon lawyers seemingly in continuous oral circulation and always without a definitive text. Brasington uses the modern technology of the Internet and its search engines to trace and compare both these fluid, ubiquitous, and irritatingly sourceless streams of story in a way perhaps not possible before.

Cross-references and cross-comparisons are easy to find in the ten essays printed here. Any common theme, other than medievalism itself, is much harder to locate, while it is obviously true that there have been many varieties of medievalism. A majority of the topics dealt with lie in the field of literature, if one includes film within that field, though only half of the contributors work within departments of English. The historical topics covered are however characteristically diverse, ranging from straightforward and traditional medieval history to the history of law, and including the impact of medieval history on national culture. Meanwhile the literary topics addressed are even more diverse, and even harder to classify or categorise, reactions to poetry mingling with national politics, popular stereotype cohabiting with the severest of scholarship. This unclassifiability poses problems for editors, and for reviewers, but remains a continuing strength of medievalist studies. Interdisciplinarity is so to speak built in, and the field encourages perspectives not from the standpoint of the professional university department, for which there are many opportunities already, but from that of national and international culture. *Studies in Medievalism* will remain the major forum for research of this kind, which is as important outside universities as within them.

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April 2002

Arthurian Melodrama, Chaucerian Spectacle, and the Waywardness of Cinematic Pastiche in *First Knight* and *A Knight's Tale*

Nickolas A. Haydock

If they met aboard some unidentified flying object near Montaillou, would Darth Vader, Jacques Fornier, and Parsifal speak the same language? If so, would it be a galactic pidgin or the Latin of the Gospel according to St. Luke Skywalker?
                    (Umberto Eco, "Dreaming of the Middle Ages")[1]

An art not systematic but additive and compositive, ours and that of the Middle Ages.
                    (Umberto Eco, "Living in the New Middle Ages")[2]

"That medieval style offends me, it is all artifice. What is it that you painters say? Pasticcio. *It is all* pasticcio. . . *"It must be real,"* she went on. *"What is the reason for the imitation of an imitation?"*   (Peter Ackroyd, *Chatterton*)[3]

This essay explores certain broad analogies in the medievalism of American popular cinema during the past six years, focusing primarily on *First Knight* (1995) and *A Knight's Tale* (2001). Both movies flaunt anachronism, designed not to render faithfully their respective sources in Malory or Chaucer, but rather to appeal to a cinematic imaginary[4] about the Middle Ages, composed of bits and pieces drawn from film history and popular culture. The postmodern call to revisit the past with a mixture of nostalgia and irony is answered in such films by deploying the "prior textualization"[5] of the cinematic history of the "Middle Ages" as pastiche.

First Knight reimagines Arthurian courtly romance as an amalgam of feudal horse opera and Hollywood melodrama. *A Knight's Tale* recreates fourteenth century England as a Debordian society of the spectacle where jousting is an X-treme sport.[6]

What is by turns engaging and infuriating about both films is their postmodern ontology: Exactly what worlds are these?[7] The two quotes by Umberto Eco above reflect our mixed emotions about the medievalism-by-collage of such movies. We distrust the depthlessness of pastiche and yet recognize that the anachronistic, agglutinative representation of the past in Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale* may be closer to the poetics of Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale* than we would comfortably admit.[8] Likewise, the nostalgic eclecticism of *First Knight* is, *mutatis mutandis*, a salient feature of many medieval romances. Yet if both films flaunt the wild conglomerations of postmodernism, they do not share its suspicion of meta-narratives. *First Knight* rewrites the Day of Doom as a Hollywood happy ending, a smooth *translatio imperii* where Camelot never falls and Excalibur passes from the notably British Connery to the notably American Gere. Likewise, *A Knight's Tale* traces democratic pluralism and Horatio Alger stories back to Chaucer's England. However, the persistent methodology in the study of such films which proceeds by comparing them to their supposed medieval sources needs to be supplemented by a more consistent use of the tools of film theory and formal film analysis. The following discussion focuses primarily on topics conventionally employed in the critical analysis of cinema, such as: auteurism, film genres, celebrity, violence, the gaze, spectatorship, parody and pastiche. These films do offer provocative images of the Middle Ages, but the pictures are projected through the lens of the popular film industry.

First Knight

First Knight has met with a cool and (I think) hasty critical reception.[9] Both film reviewers and medievalists have panned the film as a seemingly chaotic hodgepodge that distorts the Arthurian material nearly beyond recognition. Kevin Harty's authoritative guide, *The Reel Middle Ages*, represents the mainstream opinion:

> Given that there is no one version of the tale of Arthur, Lancelot and Guenevere, filmmakers can be granted some license in their interpretation of that legend. But nothing here quite works. Clearly, Zucker intends his film to be an Arthuriad for the 1990s, but it fails to capture the spirit of the original

legend or to make a case for its contemporary translation of an oft-told story.[10]

It is surely unfair to place too much weight upon a single entry in what is certainly an invaluable reference work, yet Harty does repeat the same judgment almost verbatim in a more extensive discussion of Arthurian films as well.[11] It should also be emphasized that his use of these terms is relatively benign, yet the passage enlists a number of cross-media metaphors that might repay a closer look. Despite a nod toward the variety of the medieval Arthurian materials, the verdict still derives from assumptions about fidelity to written sources. This vocabulary hints at a comparative methodology widespread in the analysis of films about the Middle Ages. Film-making is seen as being analogous to a scholar's "interpretation" of written sources. The director is like an author who "intends" his version as a response to a literary tradition, and expects it to be understood and evaluated in terms of that tradition. Alternately, he is like a translator who ideally should strive to be faithful to the "spirit" of his "original" and to make his new translation timely.

These metaphors of scholarship, authorship and translation are a convenient but misleading short-hand, common to a good deal of academic criticism of films about the Middle Ages. That the roles of medieval scholars and Hollywood directors are in any but the most frivolous ways similar is almost too ridiculous to merit serious consideration were the assumption not so persistent.[12] Its tenacity is perhaps best explained by the sense of superiority such a comparison gives scholars over their vastly better paid and better known counterparts. It is difficult to imagine, however, that simply employing medieval historians to edit screenplays or design sets would significantly improve these movies. In any event, the analogy between filmmaking and scholarly interpretation is misleading. It automatically privileges what need not be the most essential component in a film: the validity or creativity of its "interpretation" of a medieval text, legend, figure or historical period. While such an approach has its place, contemporary films about the Middle Ages made within the Hollywood system are best approached as products of that system rather than as attempts to approximate the interpretations of professional medievalists.

The metaphor of authorship is vastly more problematical. To analyse a movie chiefly as the product of a director's intentions, based on the analogy of authorship as the controlling intelligence of a work, ignores the realities of the movie industry where the cinematographer, screenwriters, producers, actors, etc., all have an influential role to play.[13]

Auteurist approaches, however, have an esteemed history in the analysis of film. The director/author analogy underwrote the professionalization of film theory and the incorporation of film study within the academy.[14] Despite the numerous theoretical challenges leveled at auteur theories, a large number of book-length studies of particular directors like Eisenstein, Ford, Hitchcock, Scorsese, and Kubrick continue to be published each year. Yet herein lies an especial crux for medievalism. While many studies of medieval films are conducted according to the director/author analogy, little of this work addresses the auteur's complete oeuvre, but rather it tends to focus almost exclusively on a single movie, or on a collection of movies about the Middle Ages, directed by different people. In the case of Jerry Zucker's *First Knight*, the film's sentimental romanticism, its melodramatic reconstruction of the love triangle and the self-conscious fetishizing of the kiss surely call for more comparison with Zucker's most commercially successful film, *Ghost* (1990). Likewise, many of the wild anachronisms and the introduction of themes from genres like the western and science fiction may begin to appear to be less a product of unthinking popular cinema and more the result of a deliberate authorial tendency toward parody when we compare *First Knight* with more obvious film parodies produced by the Zucker/Abrhams/Zucker team, such as: *Airplane* (1980), *The Naked Gun: From the Files of Police Squad* (1988), and *The Naked Gun 2½: The Smell of Fear* (1991).[15]

The final term in this triad of metaphors by which medieval films are conventionally judged, "translation," is the most prevalent and the most difficult to dislodge. It proceeds from the assumption that Hollywood's forays into the past should be governed by fidelity to an original text or group of texts according to the far from complementary aims of translation to "get it right" and "make it new." Even if one relaxes these imperatives from literal fidelity to a prior text to a requirement that filmmakers be faithful to its "spirit," one still runs the risk of introducing misleading comparisons. In the case of *First Knight*, the often implied source which the film is supposed to mistranslate is Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*. Rebecca and Samuel Umland have cautioned against "template matching, in other words, discerning the degree of one-to-one correspondence between a film and its (apparent) narrative source; determinations of the film's merit follow as a consequence."[16] *First Knight* also suffers from implicit comparisons to John Boorman's modernist *Excalibur*, a respectful but revisionist film that follows Malory's story *ab ovo ad mortem*. While Zucker's film has no definitive medieval source, it is in fact a much more elegant "translation" of Malory's work than many critics

have surmised. The screenplay adapts the story of Mellyagaunce's kidnapping of Guenevere and her rescue by Lancelot, narrated in Malory's "The Knight of the Cart" episode of the "Book of Lancelot and Guenevere." The film fashions out of this Malorian subplot a sort of microcosm of the Mordred plot of kidnapping and invasion which it replaces.[17] However, in doing so *First Knight* is faithful neither to the truth of a medieval source nor to the spirit of any medieval legend. It draws instead on a cinematic imaginary about the story of Arthur, Lancelot and Guenevere, a swirl of patriotic and heroic images of what we might call a cinematic unconscious and its dreams of the Middle Ages. The "spirit" at the center of the film is derived not from Malory *per se* but from the transhistorical, transnational ideal of Camelot (*quondam civitas et civitas futura*) that is an essential part of the cinematic inheritance. In the words of Connery's Arthur: "That is the very heart of Camelot. Not these stones, timbers, towers, palaces – burn them all and Camelot lives on because it lives in us, it's a belief we hold in our hearts." Or in the more melodious version of Lerner and Lowe's lyrics: "In short there's simply not/ A more congenial spot/ For happily ever-afterings/ Than here in Camelot." The question of the film's sources will be examined in more detail below, but first I want to discuss how two central themes, violence and the gaze, link *First Knight* with the postmodern anxieties of a number of historical films produced recently.

Violence and the Gaze

The last six years have seen a surge of big-budget, historical epics garner a large share of American and international audiences. I am thinking in particular of films like *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* (1999), *Braveheart* (1995), *Patriot* (2001), and *Gladiator* (2000). These films all share an abiding concern with the construction of national identity in the face of colonialism or imperialism. Historical accuracy is seldom a consistent feature. They are probably best categorized by Linda Hutcheon's term "historiographic metafiction" where the past is revisited through cunning appropriations and additions which provide for us what we need from it. Such works investigate the constructedness of received history and project contemporary desires into the past.[18] Whether we choose to view the historiography of recent popular cinema as revisionist or opportunistic, it is difficult to ignore the similarity of their appeals to patriotism and national identity. One could argue, for instance, that *Braveheart* and *The Patriot* are in almost every important way the same movie, and that

the resemblance is far from nugatory. American patriotism has gone back in time to colonize the patriotic struggles of the past. Contemporary American audiences are interpellated into wars for liberation, national identity, and democracy with which they happily identify.[19] Remote, complicated historical processes become distant but clear approximations of American democratic freedoms. And the English, identically sadistic, tyrannical oppressors in thirteenth-century Scotland, fifteenth-century France and eighteenth-century North America, are made to bear the whole historical burden of colonialism. Americans in the past (*The Patriot*) and in the future (*Independence Day*, 1996) are heroic resisters of colonial domination whose current privilege as the sole remaining super-power exists only to promote freedom (and free trade) throughout the world.

Such films thrive on ecstatic carnage and the supernatural invincibility of pious rage, a rage that remains sympathetic because of the particularly grisly way it is born. Both *Braveheart* and *The Messenger* provide a back story of disgusting savagery to explain their heroes' zealousness in battle as adults. In *Braveheart*, Blind Hary's fictional Barns of Ayr story is transposed to an episode which Wallace experiences as a boy, where he rushes into the barn only to be trapped and traumatized by a harvest of swinging corpses that glower down on the frantic child.[20] Luc Besson's *The Messenger* has the young girl Joan witness her sister's rape and murder from inside a cupboard. The intimacy of the *mise en scène* is especially appalling because of the way it employs shot-counter-shot, point-of-view and double-framed close-ups. The camera cuts back and forth between two positions of observation and the rape that takes place in the center. From their vantage point at a table two English soldiers enjoy a meal (waiting their turn) while they casually observe their countryman's struggle with Joan's sister. Joan remains inside the cupboard watching the rape through the cracks in the door – the space and lighting is eerily similar to scenes before and after with Joan in the confessional. The soldier, frustrated with his victim's "squirming about," impales the young woman on a sword which lifts her off her feet and plunges, blood-streaked, through the door, inches from Joan's face. The ugly, black-toothed soldier then completes his rape and calls to his comrades, "your turn." The violence in such scenes strikes an audience with particular immediacy because their gaze is sutured to that of a child.[21] It also justifies our sympathy with his or her pious carnage later in the movie.

Like Joan of Arc and William Wallace, *First Knight*'s Lancelot is a child victim,[22] and like them this status seems to confer on him supernatural abilities as a warrior. As Guenevere herself concludes, "it made you

what you are." However, the back story of the murder of Lancelot's family has none of the visceral or visual immediacy of the examples discussed above. It consists of two brief flashbacks of a burning church where the camera, in relatively objective mid-shot, shows only the anguish of the boy watching outside, not the suffering of those inside. While being burned alive is surely a gruesome way to die, we do not watch it happen – and neither does Lancelot, who sees only smoke and stained glass. The distinct lack of carnage in the scene is not an isolated reticence. Despite a screenplay thickly crowded with violence of all sorts (pitched battles, sneak attacks and hundreds of deaths) only the scarcest hint of blood is ever seen on screen. Arthur receives three bolts directly in the chest and Malagant is sliced wide open by an Excalibur-wielding Lancelot, but neither shed a drop. Death is stylized, in the manner of the classic style of the Hollywood western and melodrama – genres to which the film's *mise en scène* and worldview are deeply indebted. And just as *First Knight* is remarkably bloodless, it is also remarkably sexless. Not only is there no depiction of sexual intercourse, there is never any implication that any sexual exchange other than a kiss ever occurs! But if the film does seem to frustrate the voyeuristic appetites of its audience, it remains deeply invested in celebrity, the gaze and spectatorship.

It would be difficult to imagine a film more focused on the visual, although this focus is embedded within a style which refuses to call attention to itself in the manner of more self-consciously scopophilic films like Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) and its legion of imitations. The dialogue is packed with references to looking, eyes, and seeing. Indeed, in the movie's reimagining of the adultery-plot, Guenevere's sole crime is having gazed passionately at Lancelot. Connery's Arthur jealously rages at her: "Then look at me as you looked on him!" Gere's celebrity is constantly evoked in a screenplay that seems structured around recurrent public spectacles. The defining characteristic of Gere's Lancelot is performance: in carnival displays of swordsmanship and agility, in repeated scenes where he receives enthusiastic applause for his exploits (including a round of applause from Arthur and the knights of the Round Table), and finally when he stands on trial in the public square watched by the assembled population of Camelot. In a nighttime battle with Malagant's army, Gere takes off his helmet and shakes his long hair loose like a shampoo model before flying into battle bare-headed.[23] At the end of this battle he is greeted by admiring stares from the other knights. Gere's performance gives us Lancelot as movie star and sex symbol. Conversely, it is difficult to imagine a contemporary treatment of the Arthurian material with a Guenevere more high-principled and chaste than Julia Ormond's.

Perhaps the most controversial and influential essay in film studies in the last 25 years is Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."[24] Mulvey showed how popular cinema genders the viewer's gaze as male and thereby reproduces and confirms in cinematic discourse the patriarchal objectification of women. Mulvey eventually had occasion to modify the determinism of this thesis somewhat in order to leave more room for oppositional readings of the dominant visual strategies by women themselves.[25] Still, the *mise en scène* of *First Knight* seems determined to invert the very strategies Mulvey describes. Gere is continually the object of shots designed to maximize not only his sex appeal and virility but also his vulnerability. This curious reversal of roles is also a fundamental feature of the film's dialogue. Arthur's demand that Guenevere look at him as she had at Lancelot follows an earlier scene in the forest where Lancelot's confident come-on ("I can tell when a woman wants me, I can see it in her eyes") is unconvincingly rebuffed by Guenevere's embarrassed: "Not in my eyes." In this film men solicit the passionate female gaze and a woman is embarrassed when caught in the act of sexually objectifying a man. This reversal may simply be a concession to political correctness or a way of capitalizing on Gere's sex appeal, but it also suits well with Zucker's reimagining of medieval romance as a modern romance or sentimental melodrama. The interpellated gaze which the film invariably solicits is a feminine not a masculine gaze and the melodramatic plot makes its appeal directly to a feminine audience.

This strategy entails not only a solicitation of the feminine gaze but also a chastening of the male gaze. I want to explore briefly three examples of the chastened gaze, first in the movie's advertising poster and then in two scenes where sex and jealousy, respectively, rear their ugly heads. The movie poster, reproduced for the cover of videotape and DVD releases, is an iconographically complex piece of cover art. Reading down from the upper left hand corner to the bottom right, it includes a half shot of Connery in the background staring straight out at the viewer and dressed in armour, with a reflection of Camelot emblazoned across his chest. The middle of the poster is transected by the sword, Excalibur, which contains a full shot image of Ormond's Guenevere with the top half of her body in focus, while her lower half blurs into the grain of the sword. She stares intently down at Lancelot, pictured in the foreground bottom right, whose shoulder and biceps cover Guenevere's torso. Lancelot, like Arthur, directs his gaze out of the frame toward the viewer. The poster archly quotes a famous scene from *Excalibur* where Arthur finds the two lovers asleep in a forest, embracing naked under a tree. He plunges Excalibur into the ground between their bodies and ultimately

into the back of the world serpent, waking the day of doom. In a *tour de force* of modernist syncretism Boorman's film substitutes the apocalyptic serpent of Norse myth for Malory's dragon. *Excalibur*'s exploration of Malory's love triangle is also deeply indebted to classical tragedy and Freudianism, showing sexual desire as a force which ultimately obliterates all it touches. *First Knight*, though, draws rather on sentimental, distinctly contemporary notions of romance. The film poster's quotation of the *Excalibur* image is thoroughly sanitized of any eroticism. Guenevere alone retains the power of the gaze as she looks over and down on Lancelot. One could argue that the image of her contained within the sword represents a woman trapped within the constraints of a feudal system designed to control feminine desires. Yet, the movie repeatedly emphasizes her agency and strong will. The purpose of this homage to *Excalibur* is to address sensibilities shaped by melodrama and the soap-opera, those appealed to in the poster's riding caption: "Their greatest battle would be for her love." The story of Arthur is thus reimagined as a melodrama where no one is at fault and no one sins: it is simply the tragic way of the world that bad things happen to good people.

My second example occurs early in the film, during Lancelot's first rescue of Guenevere. The scene is worth recalling in detail. It begins with Guenevere fleeing through the forest from Malagant's men when she is pounced upon by Lancelot in a thick scrub of brush. He pulls her underneath his body, covering her mouth – a posture that out of context would suggest assault rather than protection. Fear of this is certainly present in Guenevere's eyes at this point. Two villains arrive and Lancelot makes short and showy work of killing them, watched from the bush by Guenevere in wide-eyed fascination. When she stands up, a third assailant grabs her from behind in a chokehold and with his other arm trains a crossbow on Lancelot. Guenevere is held with her back to her attacker, both face Lancelot. The following exchange ensues.

> Bad Guy: You, drop the sword.
> Lancelot: All right, but can I have her when you're done with her?
> Bad Guy: You were after the woman?
> Lancelot: Of course, of course. You ever see anything so beautiful in your whole life?
> Bad Guy: I don't know about that.
> Lancelot: Ah, don't tell me you don't want her. Soft skin, sweet lips, young, firm body.
> Bad Guy: I have my orders.

Lancelot: So? Who's to know?

Bad Guy: I should take her back.

Lancelot: How 'bout I hold her for you, you hold her for me? It won't take long.

Bad Guy: I don't want any trouble.

Lancelot: This one's no trouble. No, look at her, she wants it alright.

Bad Guy: What's she doing?

(All this while Guenevere has been fumbling with her hands held below her waist out of the shot. Now we cut to a very tight shot which shows her fingering the trigger of a very phallic crossbow.)

Lancelot: See for yourself, turn her around, look in her eyes, see what she's got for you.

(The bad guy turns her around, pressing her against his body.)

Bad Guy: Oh, pretty, pretty! Now what have you got for me then?

(We hear the clink of the crossbow trigger and Guenevere's attacker drops to his knees, staring bug-eyed up at her. He then falls flat on his back with the black bolt jutting perversely from his groin. Guenevere looks over to Lancelot and receives a grim nod of approval.)

Lancelot's trick cleverly solicits the objectifying male gaze of her attacker as well as the masculine gaze of the audience who watch her held squirming against his chest and fumbling with her hands beneath her waist. This object lesson in the perversity and impotence of the voyeuristic gaze climaxes with a soft groan from Guenevere as the bolt strikes its target in his lower abdomen. The broad phallic joke as he lies prostrate on the ground with a fatal erection punishes with death and ridicule his attempt to look at Guenevere as a sexual object.[26] Perversion has itself been perverted in a very literal sense. The scene presents in physical form the etymology of the word: the Latin *perversus* (lit., facing the wrong way round, reversed) from the verb *pervertere* (1. To overturn, knock down; 2. To cause the downfall of a person, subvert; 3. To cause to face the opposite way; 4. To distort, misrepresent, divert to an improper use).[27] What she "has for him" is a hidden phallus: he's been had. Such visual strategies in the film gradually replace the lustful male gaze with a mixture of sentimentalism and Augustinian *caritas*, as I hope to show in my final example of the chastened gaze.

The classic Hollywood style produces a movie to be looked through,

not at. Film editing, shot protocols, music, lighting and dialogue propel viewers through the story without calling attention to its construction, thereby rendering the simple joys of escapist fantasy through a coherent and uninterrupted diegesis.[28] Zucker's film seldom deviates from this style. One notable exception occurs at the point of crisis in the melodramatic plot when Arthur discovers Lancelot and Guenevere kissing in her room. Radical montage – which Sergei Eisenstein saw as the art of cinema and the chief feature of auteurism – occurs in Zucker's film only this once. The camera zooms in for an extreme close up of Arthur's jealous eye, glaring at a penitent Lancelot. Then a form dissolve montage links his eye with the next shot of a burning cauldron. The camera tracks outward from the central image of the burning eye/cauldron to take in the Round Table itself and Arthur's knights being told of the scandal. In a following scene, Arthur widens the circle of the spectacle even further by throwing open the city gates and allowing everyone to watch Lancelot and Guenevere's trial for treason. The cinematography in its widening scope thus mirrors the ripple effect of Arthur's jealousy. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, those watching the scandalous trial are themselves under surveillance. Malagant's army spring their surprise attack immediately upon Arthur's tragic recognition that the trial and his jealousy are proud folly. (Of course the idea that a spectacular sex scandal and show-trial could destroy a popular leader and plunge a society from its peak of prosperity is a far-fetched idea.) However, the film's continued insistence on the pleasures and moral probity of democratic spectacles is subsequently reaffirmed when all the inhabitants of Camelot (king and commoner, knights, women and children) unite to repel the invasion. The democratic implications of the scene bear a strong similarity to the conventional platitudes of western democracies about terrorism: a free and open democratic society exposes its leaders to both scandal and assassination and places its citizens at greater risk – but it is the only kind of society worth defending.[29] I explore in more detail the significance of public spectacles in medievalized projections of American society in my discussion of *A Knight's Tale* (2001), below. *First Knight*'s political allegories receive a fuller consideration later as well, under the rubric "Malagant and the Pax Americana." But let us return briefly to the final sequences of the film which stage the chastening and final sublimation of Arthur's jealous eye.

From the instant Arthur sees Lancelot and Guenevere passionately kissing the plot progresses with Aristotelian precision. Jealousy overcomes Arthur's compassion and he pridefully insists on a public trial where he threatens with the self-righteous indignation of a classical tyrant: "the law

will judge you." In the next scene, gazing down from the dais at a kneeling Lancelot who offers to give up his life for the good of Camelot, Arthur finally recognizes his folly, averts his eyes, and mutters "may God forgive me." When Malagant and his army take control of the city, Arthur is commanded to kneel in submission before Malagant or die. He appears to obey, bowing down, but then in his last act as king raises Excalibur and commands his people to "fight, fight!" At this moment he turns from tragic tyrant to Christian martyr, his willingness to sacrifice his own life (mirroring Lancelot's own willingness to die in the service of Camelot) saves the city. Later, on his death bed, Arthur lovingly strokes Lancelot's hand as he gives him Excalibur, and then gazes adoringly at Guenevere. All passion spent, his final words are: "I can see it now my love – the sunlight in your eyes." As he dies his eyes remain open, averted slightly from Guenevere to the heavens. The melodrama here is deeply invested with an Augustinian *caritas* toward which the film's chastening of the gaze has been moving all along. The ship-burial at sea with which it ends is cliched and anti-climatic in the extreme, but it does allow Zucker a chance to close the circle of the theme of the gaze. The last shot in the film shows Arthur's burning boat encircled by the dark sea. Clearly, this is designed as a visual echo of the earlier shot of the burning cauldron in the middle of the Round Table in the dark hall that began the sequence. This symbol of an eternal flame is an unabashed evocation of sublimity, the sign of an eternal Camelot and the transcendent love it represents. As Arthur says of the physical city earlier, "burn it all, and Camelot lives, because it lives in us, it's a belief we hold in our hearts." Sublime and sentimental surely, but, I would argue, deliberately and adroitly so. Still, it would be difficult to find any romance from the historical Middle Ages more faithful to the spirit of Augustine's theological distinctions between cupidinous and charitable love, on the one hand, and between the city of man and the city of God on the other.[30] In this sense perhaps Zucker is more "medieval" than Malory himself. The combination of nostalgia and pastiche that results from Zucker's melodramatic Augustinianism is explored next.

Going to Pieces

It may be that a director's tendency to think visually, in terms of the shot, is perpetually at odds with the narrative constraints of popular cinema. The transparency of the classic Hollywood style is certainly at odds with heavy-handed auteurism that calls attention away from the story and towards the artifice of its construction. Radical montage and distinctive

mise en scène play an important role in foregrounding the director as the creator of a film. Other signs of authorship, like a director's appearance in his own movie (e.g., Woody Allen and Martin Scorsese) or the ironic quotation of other films, also play a role. The transparent style of Zucker's *First Knight* leaves few obvious traces of authorship. Its hodge-podge of neutral quotations from the archive of popular film would seem to leave it open to the charge of "blank or blind parody" leveled by Jameson at postmodern pastiche. Even more relevant is Jean Baudrillard's critique of postmodern images which he sees as controlled by the logic of late capitalism: simulation.[31] For Baudrillard the final, postmodern, phase of the image comes when copies no longer bear any meaningful relation-ship to their originals or to any reality whatsoever. When the image becomes its own pure simulacrum, it erases any connection to history or to the real, becoming "hyperreal." It could be argued that Zucker's film makes of the legend of Camelot just such an image: a sourceless story in a timeless world which reflects only the Plato's cave of popular culture – a kingdom of shreds and patches. A hyperreal Camelot set somewhere between medieval England, the American frontier and Deep Space Nine, where no one commits adultery, where Camelot never falls, and where room is left at the end for a sequel! However, some of the film's parodies are more than empty shadows playing on a wall. There are distinct signs of authorial irony and deft political burlesque beneath its postmodern superficiality. Still, the profusion of pastiched quotation deserves to be surveyed before we try to pick up the pieces in search of patterns of irony or allegory.

   Like Zucker's early credits in more obvious parodies like *Airplane*, *Top Secret* or *The Naked Gun*, *First Knight* is at least in part a send-up of the genre picture. The title seems roughly "medieval" but it clearly mocks big-budget, patriotic action films like *First Blood* (1982) and *Top Gun* (1986). Indeed as Arthur's top gun, Lancelot goes through a process of maturation similar to Tom Cruise's Maverick in *Top Gun*. He begins the film as a fatherless, self-obsessed individual whose fearlessness grows out of alienation and spiritual emptiness. Through an older man's guidance and the love of a powerful woman who tempers his selfishness, Lancelot, like Maverick, finds a new family in the army and takes his rightful place as their leader at the end.[32] Lancelot's character (like Maverick's) is drawn almost whole-cloth from the gun-for-hire exile of American westerns (see, for instance, *Shane*, 1953 or *Angel and the Badman*, 1947). He rides a small, sleek pony, saddled with a bedroll, that comes trotting to his master whenever he whistles. He foils stagecoach robberies, tracks villains to their hideout, and magically disarms antagonists without hurting them. At the

end of the pre-credits sequence where he demonstrates how well he can handle a sword, the hero rides off into the sunset. As academy award-winning recent movies like Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992) excoriate the stereotypes of conventional Westerns, these stereotypes re-emerge with a vengeance in medievalized Westerns like *First Knight* or Costner's own *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991). And just as Baz Luhrmann's street gangs in *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* (1996) tote silver-plated automatic pistols engraved with the words "sword" or even "Excalibur," so Lancelot uses his sword like a gun. To emphasize further the blurred boundary between the Western and medieval romance Zucker arms his villains with miniature cross-bows which they fire like Colt .45s.

Richard Gere's Lancelot also follows a number of action-hero stereotypes. The film employs countless quotations of famous action sequences, specifically recalling shots from *Die Hard* (1988), *Lethal Weapon* (1987), *Romancing the Stone* (1984) and the early James Bond. In the second chase sequence, Gere begins by diving like Errol Flynn's Robin Hood from the castle ramparts into a moat. Then in a shot which quotes Connery's own stint as James Bond (*Goldfinger*, 1964), he latches onto a rope behind a boat towed with such speed that it leaves the distinctive wake of an outboard motor. Later, he and Guenevere make their escape from Malagant's castle by plunging headlong through a subterraneous stream and over a waterfall – shots that specifically echo *Raiders of the Lost Arc* (1981) and *Romancing the Stone*, respectively. The same sequence of shots is employed to exit Beowulf and his company from the Thunder Caves in the recent *Thirteenth Warrior* (1999) – the game continues. Examples could easily be multiplied, but the exercise would serve no particular end. Recognizing these echoes does not tell us anything of importance about *First Knight*, it merely confirms our worst suspicions about the promiscuity of popular cinema. It is blank parody, a simulation in movieland: a style born of film schools and videotape, clever perhaps, but as cluttered as a backlot warehouse.

The suspicion of a derivative, facile imitation is doubly encouraged by the fact that all three of the major stars are cast so rigidly to type. Connery, as the reigning king of the Hollywood Middle Ages, reprises earlier roles like those in *The Name of the Rose* or *Robin Hood* where he serves as the emblem of a benign paternalism which oversees a younger man's transition into full adulthood. Gere reprises the role of the cold-hearted individualist – narcissistic but technically brilliant – that he has made a career of playing. Just as in the 1990 *Pretty Woman* he is transformed from ruthless selfishness by a woman's love and the respect of a