Medieval Community: Lessons from the Film *Black Knight*

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Abstract
In the film *Black Knight*, a star vehicle for comedian Martin Lawrence, the filmmakers present an up-to-the-moment hipster from Compton who learns a valuable lesson in the context of medieval moral clarity—a lesson which apparently cannot be efficiently addressed in the fast-paced complexity of the modern world. His experiences in the medieval world teach him both to seek out community and to learn to rely upon it. Strengthening those community bonds leads, in the simplified economy of the Disneyfied film, to success, respect, and true love. While simplistic and at times even moronic, *Black Knight* nonetheless touches on issues central to the racial roots of economic disparities and offers a hopeful message of strength through community.

Keywords
medievalism, film, race, community, ahistoricism, comedy, gender, class, economics

In "The Ahistoricism of Medieval Film," Arthur Lindley writes that filmmakers tend to reduce the complexity of the Middle Ages to a commodity that provides a simplistic lesson for the audience: "The notional Middle Ages supplants the historical one, being, after all, much simpler to deal with and easier to sell" (par. 16). This is certainly the case in *Black Knight*, in which the writers Darryl J. Quarles, Peter Gaulke, and Gerry Swallow reshape an earlier appropriation of the Middle Ages, Mark Twain's narrative of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, to enhance lessons about community and economic responsibility in a medieval setting at

two removes from reality. Rather than the canny Yank that long-time Hartford resident Twain knew so well, the filmmakers here present us with an up-to-the-moment hipster from Compton who learns a valuable lesson in the context of medieval moral clarity.

The film literally sells the Middle Ages, taking place in a deteriorating medieval theme park in Los Angeles. Lindley's "Disneyfication" of the medieval seems complete, yet there is an undercurrent of resistance to that simplification and its denial of historicity. For example, once he arrives in the medieval world, Lawrence's character Jamal first seeks to take advantage of his modern (read "superior") knowledge by demonstrating his lighter, assuming the (in his mind) primitive people of the fourteenth century will be astounded. "We have fire," an onlooker tells him icily. Jamal likewise finds that real combat works vastly differently from the video gaming to which he is accustomed. As Greta Austin argues, "the Middle Ages in the movies are often modernity in drag" (137). Yet the simple injection of racial variety into a European medieval narrative, while done primarily to achieve predictable humorous reversals, nonetheless offers opportunities to read scenes against the usual simplified assumptions of medieval films. (In this way the film varies from other similar mash-ups of medieval and modern like Brian Hegeland's *A Knight's Tale*, which often do not address race at all).

The primary role of the medieval in *Black Knight* is in keeping with Lindley's concept of the Middle Ages as "visionary key" where it provides "a source of moral rigor and clarity" (par. 15). Jamal begins the film as a careless slacker who feels no loyalty to his economically precarious community in modern Los Angeles. His experiences in the medieval world, however, teach him both to seek out community and to learn to rely upon it, in other words, to join community rather than to focus on himself as an individual. Strengthening those community bonds leads, in the simplified economy of the Disney film, immediately to success, respect, and love. Yet while the straightforward aim of the film supports the usual commoditization of the Middle Ages as Lindley suggests, there are moments of resistance to the simplistic depiction which offer genuine, albeit fleeting, glimpses of the issues of community and connection.

The issues of community, responsibility, and cohesion have been a contentious one in African-American discourse in recent

years. While combative at times,[1] twenty-first-century discourse has found much to celebrate as well as to disparage. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. writes in *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man*,

> There's a sense in which the American century might be thought of as the African-American century—culturally speaking. As the writer Albert Murray would insist, the cultural differentia that would elevate America—in an aesthetics of modernism otherwise dominated by Europe—was indelibly black: It's also true that most of the American culture that has gone global ([...]some of it junk, some of it sublime) is at least partly of black parentage. Of course, the paradox is that the cultural centrality of the African-American—this is a country where Michael Jordan and Shaquille O'Neal look down from every billboard—coexists with the economic and political marginality of the African-American, most especially of the African-American male.
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> (xiv)

While it may seem sacrilegious to mention Gates and *Black Knight* in the same sentence, the film touches (albeit lightly) on those very topics: the ubiquity of African-American sports stars and rap singers who provide an unreachable dream for many impoverished African-Americans.

In recent years, the discourse of economic turbulence has been addressed with less sunny optimism after initial gains in the 1970s and 1980s. As James A. Geschwender and Rita Carroll-Seguin write in "Exploding the Myth of African-American Progress,"

> The precarious hold upon a middle-class standard of living that many African-American families were able to acquire in the 1960s and 1970s is now likely to be lost. As a decline

[1] Witness, for example, the comments made by Bill Cosby at the NAACP in 17 May 2004 regarding failures within the black community and the subsequent responses to his accusations, some of which may be seen in Mohamed, *passim*.

> in real wages and reduced state spending combines with racism that continues to discourage educational and economic opportunities for African-Americans, we appear to be in the process of returning to a racially polarized society, with increasing numbers of European-American families experiencing economic strain and increasing numbers of African-American families failing to meet their minimal survival needs.
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> (298-99)

More recently, the debate has focused for many on a renewed sense of self-reliance that does not offer the panacea of bootstrap-raising, as has been preached by conservatives since the 1980s, but rather on a broader sense of community self-reliance promoted by such public figures as Cosby and, perhaps more persuasively, television journalist Tavis Smiley in his book *The Covenant with Black America*. Smiley's collection contains a number of essays from leading scholars and professionals of color who seek to address the social and economic disparities experienced by African-Americans today and to erase them via concerted community effort.

In the broadest strokes, the character of Jamal in *Black Knight* highlights the problems identified within this ongoing political discussion even as the film romanticizes the solution of reinvestment in the community. The film opens by situating Jamal in the thick of modernity by observing his morning ablutions prior to work. In a typical simplification the audience is offered the clear demarcation between the extremes of modernity as clean and the Middle Ages as foul. The elaborate opening credit sequence sets the dichotomy in motion and we see it reinforced throughout the film with a stone privy inside the castle, visible animal dung whenever a scene of humiliation requires it, and the seemingly typical dirty peasant who appears upon Jamal's arrival in the past. The roughly dressed man he assumes to be homeless turns out in fact be a fallen knight, one Knolte, belonging to Tom Wilkinson.[2] Even the official movie website emphasized these aspects of medievalism, describing the setting of "thee film" as featuring "questionable hygiene and really lousy plumbing" and describing

[2] His name and appearance serving as a timely nod to the then widely broadcast mug shot of actor Nick Nolte looking drunk and unkempt.

co-star Marsha Thomason's role as "peasant girl" despite her wealthy attire. Naturally, it appears that it will be easy for Jamal to triumph in this backward world of mostly white Europeans with his street smarts, although it takes him some time to realize that he has been transported to another era, not to mention halfway around the world (he falls into a moat in California but magically ends up in fourteenth century England). This apparent lack of recognition is largely due to his employment at the Medieval World theme park, a seedy entertainment castle clearly on its last legs. Jamal thinks that he has merely wandered into the new and clearly superior theme park Castle World that threatens to displace his crumbling place of employment.

The issue of employment and its place within community is at the heart of this theme. Most of the film relies on overused fish-out-of-water jokes that rest completely on the audience continually realizing that Jamal is African-American in a mostly white world. There is, of course, the safe mirror of his love interest, Victoria, the improbable Nubian chambermaid (suggesting perhaps that African-American women have had even less economic success than men, being still confined to servant roles and damsels in distress). Her character allows the filmmakers to skirt the interracial issue that they seem to assume must be an insurmountable barrier for the audience. However, the film's producers do allow the king's daughter to aggressively pursue Jamal to assure the audience that he can have a white woman if he wants to have one but that he chooses to have a lover of African-descent instead. As in most mainstream Hollywood films, women on the whole play little part in the film other than as moral goads or as sexual enticement (or both, as is the case with Victoria).

The other woman-as-goad in the story is Mrs. Bostick, the owner of Medieval World, who chides Jamal at the start of the film for his lack of community identification and sense of shared responsibility at the start of the film. In the opening sequence, she trumpets their survival of "recession, two earthquakes and a health inspector" (who apparently repulsed Bostick's advances because he was gay) and asserts that "we're not going anywhere." At this early part in the film, she raises the stakes of neighborhood involvement, expressing her connection as "providing quality jobs for this community for twenty-seven years." Jamal dismisses both this continuity and reflective sense of responsibility with his question,

"Why don't you cash out?" Implicit in his response is the desire to place the individual's needs above the community's. Furthermore, in his suggestion that Bostick follow that tack is Jamal's desire to do so himself and to abandon the ties of community which he has apparently worn but lightly during his tenure at Medieval World. For Jamal, community is not a tie that binds but instead one that can be shrugged off when economic expediency requires it.

Bostick tries to tutor the young man in the bigger picture, Medieval World's survival in the face of new competition from Castle World. She asks him, "Can't you look outside of yourself for two seconds and buckle down and help me?" When Jamal questions not only her desire to instruct him but also her commitment to the community as a whole, they are left at an impasse. "I had such high hopes for you," Bostick says with real regret, but Jamal shrugs off her expectations, unclear on their centrality to succeeding events of his life. While Jamal appears to be a young man on his own, Bostick clearly tries to define him as part of her community and to incorporate him into her larger sense of family, linking him to her responsibilities within the broader scope of community. Jamal, however, resists this linkage—to his own detriment.

This lesson is the modern one suited up in medieval drag. We can see Bostick's appeal in light of wider phenomena glimpsed by observers in real life. In "Quality of Life: Perception of African Americans," Wayne M. Blake and Carol Anderson Darling write of the crucial support that family supplies to African-Americans in economic stress and the perception that this connection improves the quality of life:

> The resources exchanged among family members had a definite impact on quality of life. Not only was this variable the major contributor to quality of life, but this model explained about one third of the variance in quality of life among African Americans. This relationship indicated that families of African Americans gave each other a lot of support through the resources of love, status, services, goods, information, and money. As the level of perceived resources exchanged increased, so did the quality of life. It should be noted that the resource with the highest level of exchange was love. Because the emergent

> quality of social exchange or successive exchanges is satisfaction with interpersonal relationships and intimacy, the high level of exchanges and the predominant exchange of love was not unexpected. Because one builds equity over time in familial exchanges, the strong bonds of love and support within African American families can be seen through their extended family system of mutual support. Whereas exchange of resources had a positive influence on the ability of African Americans to cope, within this sample, it is also not surprising that religion was the coping style used most frequently.
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> (424)

Given the medieval setting, it seems ironic that religion is the one element missing from this film's plea for community. While a moral structure is hinted at within the dialogue of the female characters, both Bostick in the twenty-first century and Victoria in the fourteenth, neither relies upon religion here. Perhaps it seems too weighty for comedy—or admittedly, perhaps it is because the plot is already stretched rather thin. The idea of community and the importance of mutual dependence are sketched in just enough to provide the lesson on which our filmmakers hang Lawrence's endless mugging.

Thus, a short time after his conversation with Bostick and after establishing a minimal skill with swords as Jamal plays around with a co-worker, he falls into a moat going after a medallion (bling *ex machina*?) and finds himself in the fourteenth century. At this point, the film's audience is situated to be superior to Jamal for realizing that (1) community is the lesson he will learn, (2) he has gone backward in time, and (3) this is not Castle World, the competing theme park, but the real world. Jamal is truly clueless. He fails repeatedly to read the signs surrounding him. As if to cue his realization of the truth with greater force, the filmmakers have Jamal at last comprehend his predicament (and perhaps the true value of life) by having him witness an execution. While initially this shocks Jamal's system, he quickly recovers from the jolt and, buoyed by his certainty of modern superiority, assumes the role of a cocky messenger from "Normandy," Jamal benefits from the confusion between street and realm, plays the court jester, hips the royals to Sly and the Family Stone, and accidentally saves the king's

life (thus assuring his position for the immediate future). When rewarded with a chance to bed the proto-feminist Victoria, he instead discovers from her the true meaning of his (nearly-forgotten) medallion as the marker of the chosen rebel leader, of the mendacity of the king, and of the rebels' desire to restore their queen to power. The film's role for Victoria serves as a fairly subtle underscoring of the traditional role of women as protectors of community, doubling the role of the queen with Bostick's managerial one back in the modern present. However, Jamal proves unwilling to seize that particular gauntlet until circumstances force him, when he is hounded out of the court after ("accidentally") sleeping with the princess and earning the predictable wrath of the king.

In the camp of the rebels, Jamal finds himself surrounded by a group of similarly dispirited folks who find no strength in their apparent community and who fail to see the power they hold collectively. Jamal has to re-define himself in league with them by recognizing their plight, by defending the failing Knolte, and finally, by losing the beloved Victoria, who has already chided Jamal for tempting her away from the fray with the promise of his future world and the possibility of abandoning all this medieval strife. "I can live with losing the good fight," she tells him, "but I cannot live with not fighting." When the secreted queen reveals herself to her followers (strongly reminiscent of the Errol Flynn version of *The Adventures of Robin Hood* and hundreds of films that followed in its wake), Jamal finally joins with her to fight on behalf of the community because it offers a chance to showcase his superior rhetorical skills. He attempts to improve her strained royal call to action with what he calls "the ol' Al Sharpton." The resulting mash-up of inspirational speeches variously name-checks or references everyone from Rodney King to JFK, FDR and even Lloyd Bentsen. In it Jamal seems to equate the lot of modern African-Americans with medieval English peasants:

> There once was a great king, Rodney King, who said 'ow, ow, ow, officer, I [. . .] get 'em off [the crowd looks both distressed and confused]. He also said, 'Can't we all just get along?' Well, sometimes I say, we can't just all get along. Sometimes we got to take up arms. Look, hear what I'm saying. Your lives are shitty. I know because I been there. I

> know the feeling of waiting for your ship to come in and you're standing in the middle of a desert. Oh England, you lost your kingdom, you live in huts, you look like hell. Well, you do! Check your feet out. Restore this lovely queen to her throne, because when you can do that, she promises there will be a horse in every stable, a chicken in every pot—can I get an amen? […] King Leo, he thinks he's King Arthur. Well, I know King Arthur, and you, King Leo, are no King Arthur. [. . .] Ask not what your fiefdom can do for you, but what you can do for your fiefdom.

Clearly this is the filmmakers' attempt to render a satirical version of a St. Crispin's day speech rousing the folk to war even though the listeners' group identity seems to be the generally impoverished rather than an identifiable community focused on economic improvement. Clearly, Jamal sees parallels between the touchstone of Rodney King and the "shitty lives" of the medieval peasants. He attaches to their community, at least temporarily, because of its commonality with his own modern community to which he longs to return.

Of course, the obligatory training montage comes next as Jamal instructs the peasant rebels in twenty-first century techniques from the Ali shuffle to the latest football training. Success in their endeavor naturally relies upon working as a team against seemingly insurmountable odds, but in keeping with Hollywood standards, it also relies upon the hero's coming through in the final act. Jamal does so, competently fighting by the side of his friends while taking up the persona of the Black Knight, a mythologized hero demonstrated earlier in the narrative via a children's puppet show as a hero destined to arrive and save the people from tyranny. Predictably, Jamal also uses his modern sensibilities to out-think the single-minded evil villain, Percival. But when he seems to be cornered by the heavy villain, it is Jamal's friends who come through for him because he has at last learned the vital importance of being earnest about one's community. Together they triumph and presumably all will be well despite their having to live in such allegedly primitive times.

Of course, the lesson is only of use if it can be applied to the modern world. To demonstrate the success of this lesson, Jamal

returned to his own time, where he immediately turns over a new leaf, glimpsed ever so briefly in the final moments of the film after his precipitous return back to the future. When his co-worker counsels suing Medieval World because of the workplace injury which resulted from his diving into the moat, Jamal refuses, stating plainly, "There ain't no honor in that." Upon finding that Bostick has taken his previous advice to "cash out" and quit her job running the venerable theme park, Jamal convinces her to return to the fight instead, using the message he has learned about courage not being the absence of fear but the will to go on. Six weeks later, a subtitle tells us, all is vastly improved. Medieval World looks shiny and refurbished, Jamal exudes an air of helpful friendliness instead of his past surliness, and Victoria (Vicky) has reappeared as "Nicky" and willingly agrees to a date with the revamped Jamal.[3]

While simplistic and at times even moronic, *Black Knight* nonetheless touches on issues central to the racial roots of economic disparities and offers a hopeful message of strength through community. To appropriate the conventions of the film, while you may come for the jester, if you stay, it will be for the knight.

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[3] There's even a mention of Jamal signing up for night classes, falling into line with Marcus Alexis' argument that education is key in "narrowing the racial gap in earnings" (373).

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