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A Quest for the Black Knight:
Casting People of Color in Arthurian Film and Television
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A Quest for the Black Knight: Casting People of Color in Arthurian Film and Television

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The first thing everybody notices (or perhaps does not even need to notice) about films set in the Middle Ages is that all the characters are usually white. The fantasy of the Middle Ages has always been the exclusive province of European colonialism, representing the historical legitimization of white Christian European domination; a nonwhite character in such a landscape would surely seem “unrealistic” and need explaining.

Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman, *Cinematic Illuminations*, 353-354.

In the quotation above, Finke and Shichtman attempt to explain assumptions a contemporary audience might bring to Gil Junger’s film *Black Knight*. The title of the movie alone highlights race as a key issue in the film. Martin Lawrence’s character Jamal is out of place for many reasons: he is a twenty-first century American man who has time-traveled hundreds of years into the past of a distant country. However, the film’s advertising campaign specifically focused on his race as a distinguishing feature. Racial difference between his character and the white society he visits remains a central issue throughout the film and is frequently a source of humor. The way the film uses race as the basis for comedy raises the question of why it should be considered funny to cast a black actor in a film set in the medieval period. Must actors of color be portrayed as the “Other” when (or if) given roles in films made in the West about the European Middle Ages?

This essay will address the roles assigned to actors of color in films and television shows that draw upon the Arthurian legend. Modern audiences remain fascinated by the legend of Camelot, and there continues to be a wide variety of adaptations of the Arthurian stories. As the British Empire grew and shared its cultural heritage, the legend of Arthur became part of the legacy that was handed down to the citizens of the Empire’s colonies, including those citizens of British ancestry as well as those whose ancestors were enslaved peoples or the indigenous peoples of colonized territories. The fact that current audiences for the legend are made up of a more diverse population may account for the increased diversity in casting for many of the adaptations for film and screen. However, though there are more people of color in Arthurian film and television productions, progress toward inclusivity has not been quick or simple to achieve. Adaptations such as *A Knight in Camelot* (1998), starring Whoopi Goldberg as Dr. Viven Morgan, and *Black Knight*

society to adopt what is best in the Arthurian tradition and to fashion a new story. In casting people of color, the makers of *Merlin* welcomed actors of color, and correspondingly audiences of color, to connect to this enduring legend.

In conclusion, the casting of actors of color in leading roles in each of these adaptations of the Arthurian legend offers an opportunity for a discussion of the British Empire's role in the historical exploitation and oppression of people of color. Interestingly, though, the Pulliam, Goldberg, and Lawrence films skirt around putting the blame on Arthur. In the first two films, he is an unwitting participant in problems his people face. In the Lawrence film, as stated before, the wicked King Leo is a stand-in for Arthur. What each of these films does then, is critique the history of oppressive tendencies while allowing the myth of Arthur to remain unsullied. After all, Arthur's reign predated British colonialism and the slave trade by centuries. It is Merlin that situates the tendency of government to perpetuate inequity in Camelot itself. Uther's prejudicial and discriminatory practices have a strong influence on Arthur, who frequently acts on his father's wishes. Though *Merlin* seems to skirt the issue of racial difference within the series, it aggressively attacks the evils of discrimination, of which discrimination based on skin color is only one variety. By offering Arthur a more extended opportunity to reflect on, and ultimately reject, the prejudices of his father, the show ultimately offers a way forward for modern audiences. Audiences must acknowledge a shared past of prejudice, exploitation, and oppression, but it is possible to move forward toward a new vision of peaceful unity that is represented by the idea of a new Camelot.