

In King Arthur on Film: New Essays on
Arthurian Cinema ed Kevin J. Harty.
Jefferson NC: McFarland, 1999.



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How to Handle a Woman, or Morgan at the Movies

MAUREEN FRIES

Handling the characterization of Morgan Le Fay has proven as difficult to twentieth-century filmmakers as it has for almost all other Arthurian fictionists since her creation by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *Vita Merlini*. That twelfth-century cleric presented a positive and even androgynous portrait of the powerful ruler of an island paradisaical in its fecundity where—without the use of the male-associated plough—grow “grain and grapes, and apple trees ... in its woods from the close-clipped grass ... and people live there a hundred years or more ... [under] a pleasing set of laws,” including “those who come ... from our country” (Geoffrey 85).

Here, Morgan is a beautiful omniherbalist and healer, a shapeshifter able to “cleave the air like Daedalus” (a suggestive analogy) as well as teach “mathematics to her sisters”—none of the famous female-linked math block here. No wonder that Taliesin, relating the tale to Merlin, takes to Morgan his royal patient, the mortally wounded Arthur. Morgan receives them “with fitting honor,” places the king in her own “golden bed and with her own hand” uncovers “his honorable wound,” which she assures his seer-companion can be cured if he stays with her “for a long time” and makes use “of her healing art” (Geoffrey 85).

This initial and (comparatively) full portrait is succeeded by brief but not hostile references in the work of the great French romancer, Chrétien de Troyes, who emphasizes Morgan’s healing power but also introduces for her a lover—a circumstance upon which the soignée poet makes no comment, as nonjudgmental here as in the case of the liaison between Lancelot and Guinevere which he apparently invented. But this twelfth-century

circumspection yields to besmirchment of Morgan's character in thirteenth-century story. Her lover, Guiomar, who has now become a relative of Guinevere's (or Arthur's, depending on the text), impregnates her, then renounces her at the behest of the queen. The embittered Morgan—Arthur's sister from the time of Chrétien—is exiled from the court, bears her lover's son, and seeks out and seduces Merlin, using the skills the besotted seer teaches her to gain (or try to gain) ascendancy over those who have rejected her.

In later French romances, Morgan uses her acquired sorcery to found her *val sans retor*, the magical air curtain which entraps passersby. No longer, notably, is her learning *sui generis*—she has acquired it, first from Merlin and then, in the prose [*Estoire de*] *Merlin* and in Malory, from a convent school (so much for the danger of educated women)—but her magic is reduced in scope as well, drugged wine or potion replacing irresistible mental spell, and iron bars the unseen but potent magic curtain. Her physical beauty is, additionally, put in question: after her yielding of her body to the devil, from which she becomes only intermittently (and by spell) lovely, she is regularly ugly, hot (in medieval terms, oversexed) and brown of face, essentially a loathly lady (*Merlin* 166) and even owing any attractiveness to cosmetics alone (*Les Prophecies* xcvi 941 ff). Morgan becomes in the late Middle Ages the most notorious villain in Arthurian romance, seducing others into (potentially) evil actions (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*); even when married, taking lovers freely (prose *Lancelot du lac* and Malory); plotting against Arthur as well as Guinevere with rigged chastity tests (prose *Le Roman de Tristan* and—especially—the Italian version of *Tristan, La Tavola Ritonda*, in which Morgan conspires to arrange extended magical “honeymoons” for Tristan and Isolde as well as Lancelot and Guinevere, all at the expense of deceiving Arthur); entrapping as she can good knights she lusts after (not just Lancelot but the Cornish Alisaunder le Orphelin (who vows to castrate himself rather than sleep with her); and committing repeated acts of high treason against her brother, the king.

That villainy culminates in Malory's characterization of Morgan in his *Le Morte Darthur*. Important not only in its own right, as the definitive medieval narrative in English of the by now prolific Arthurian corpus, but also as the overwhelmingly influential source of the vast majority of modern (that is, nineteenth- and twentieth-century) retellings, this narrative has grandfathered a large proportion of the (since 1884) over two hundred novels, as well as poems, plays, children's stories, and—either directly from these, or from Malory himself—over two score Arthurian films. Not all of the latter include Morgan, and in most she is as marginal as in *Le Morte* itself, where her appearances are sporadic and her malice largely local.

Beyond the decision to include Le Fay in his work, the filmic auteur may choose to emphasize, rationalize, or ignore her magical nature; or he may choose to substitute in an appropriate narrative slot an (however confused) analogous figure; or he may, following the lead of numerous fictional adapters, conflate her with another Arthurian female, usually either the Lady of the Lake or—the most usual novelistic conflatee—her sister Morgause. What follows is a selective look at some assorted movie Morgans and quasi-Morgans, with an extended consideration of the most impressive of these, the *Excalibur* Morgan (Morgana).

Morgan suffers not just from the rationalization we might expect from the translation of a late medieval trope into nineteenth- and twentieth-century idiom but from a startling domestication in Mark Twain's often filmed—at least seven times—*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889). Here, any power Morgan has results from her feudal status: as a particularly cruel seigneur—seigneuse?—and one of the prime targets of Twain's bitter satire on medieval morals and customs, she is reduced to “Mrs. Le Fay,” a wanton murderer of innocent servants and (in a Victorian variant of medieval misogyny) henpecker of her husband Uriens.

Even further reduction of Morgan's otherworldly powers and ambience appears in the two most notable screen *Yankees*, David Butler's (1931) and Tay Garnett's (1949). In the latter she is little more than a malicious gossip, only a bystander to events fairly faithful to Twain's novel, although with some bowdlerization to suit the squeaky-clean image of a singularly miscast Bing Crosby. But the 1931 film, aptly described by *Videohound's Golden Movie Retriever* (1995) as “charming, if somewhat dated” (293), offers a drastically revised plot and dialogue sometimes distressingly full of contemporary and Babbitish humor designed to fit its star Will Rogers' persona. All this is mitigated, at least for this viewer, by Myrna Loy's performance as Morgan, sprightly and very sexy as was more possible in the days before the puritanical movie code than for some time after. She has, moreover, an integral rather than a marginalized part to play, not only at her brother's court but as ambitious ruler of her own separate kingdom and would-be annexer of his.

This desire for dominance appears first in the movie's front frame, involving Rogers' attempt to deliver a radio part to an almost ludicrously sinister mansion, where Loy is the tyrannical aunt of a beautiful young girl (Maureen O'Sullivan), who in the requisite dream of the Yankee becomes Arthur's daughter, Alisande (the name but not the identity is from Twain) and, along with her commoner sweetheart (Emile de Poulet, rechristened Clarence by the Yankee), the love interest replacing Lancelot and Guinevere. In the dream, a disguised Morgan comes to Camelot to

“behold my brother’s marvel,” the Yankee, and, enraptured by his “something strange,” even admiring the rope tricks he employs in a joust with (the here totally corrupt) Sir Sagramore, decides that she could love him. Arthur’s mandated Grail Quest is subverted by Morgan’s demand for half his kingdom (should he refuse, she will torture Alisande), and her ensuing capture of both Arthur—shorn of his beard and repudiated by Merlin as well as his sister—and the Yankee.

In a nice bit of role reversal, Morgan orders her ladies to “Bedeck him [the Yankee] in fine raiment, in silks and velvet, and return him to me,” and although he protests—“I don’t wanna be bedecked”—bedecked he is, to the amusement of the court. She casts an appreciative eye (and hand) on him, pursuing and wooing him as roughly as any miscreant knight, declaring that she is so “afame with love” that she will do “anything thou wishes.” Such sexual suggestiveness alarms Rogers’ Yankee until he realizes he must play along with it in order to attempt the release of the king and Alisande. (Morgan’s wooing has been interrupted by screams from her torture chamber.) But he fails to shoot his way out, and—along with the others—is condemned to hanging. To save them all, Clarence (earlier revealed as an ancestor of the Yankee) arrives in anachronistic might—not Twain’s bicycles but vintage cars, tanks, and big guns, to say nothing of a biplane fitted out as a helicopter. Freed, the Yankee pursues Morgan, who pulls a knife on him, but as the castle is dynamited, he wakes up in the back frame of the mansion in time to help (the modern) Alisande and Clarence in their elopement.

Altogether less interesting but sharing some plot twists with (perhaps derived from) the Butler *Yankee*—rather than his own 1949 version—is Richard Thorpe’s supposedly Malory-based *Knights of the Round Table* (1953). Here again Morgan makes a political claim on Arthur’s kingdom, this time advancing her own legitimate birth as opposed to his technical bastardy, in apparent ignorance of the importance of male bias for medieval inheritance. Eager to publicize Lancelot and Guinevere’s illicit love, and husbanded and championed by Mordred, murderer of Merlin and insurrectionist whose treason directly causes the kingdom’s downfall, Morgan displays the sexual wiles as well as the deceit and jealousy by now stereotypical of her character, although none of the original magical power. Magic plays, however, a prominent part in other movies from which Morgan seems to be absent, but in which obviously related narrative substitutes appear.

Two of these substitutions involve versions of the Lady of the Lake, in medieval times another water-connected fay and, as I have noted elsewhere, an increasingly (perhaps because more innocuous) avatar of the Morgan archetype (“Female Heroes” and “From the Lady to the Tramp”).



Myrna Loy as Morgan in David Butler’s 1931 film *A Connecticut Yankee*.

Originally Lancelot’s foster mother in a twelfth-century romance now only extant in the Middle High German *Lanzelet*, and the ruler—like Morgan—of a female-dominant, sea-connected (here under the sea) kingdom, this Lady is gradually (and mostly) refined to the norms of her male

culture and developed into a foil for the unrefined, untamed Morgan. Especially in the medieval prose *Lancelot* and Malory's *Le Morte*, she does her best to undo Morgan's magic and to otherwise aid good knights, Lancelot in particular but also Arthur and eventually, singularly in Malory, Sir Pelleas, whom she weds and always protects. Her Arthurian benefactions include control of the sword Excalibur and its life-protecting scabbard, which she first gives to Arthur, then retrieves from his treasonous opponent Accolon (Morgan's lover), and then reclaims as it is thrown to her while he lies mortally wounded. While she ensorcelles Merlin in a narreme originally attached to Morgan, her defenses of Arthur and even Guinevere from Morgan's attempted entrapments and her wise counsel make her a worthy successor to the vanished seer.

Such counsel is lampooned—along with Hollywood medievalism in general—in the merely verbal presence of the Lady of the Lake in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975). Early in the film, the horseless Arthur, with his coconut clackers and his dwarfish attendant Patsy, encounters the peasant Dennis and other members of an alleged anarcho-syndicalist commune, who question not only his suppositious kingship but also the validity of monarchy as a system. The pompous, priggish, Pythonic Arthur replies that “the Lady of the Lake, her arm clad in the purest white samite, held aloft Excalibur” as signifier of his right to rule. In an increasingly bizarre rhetorical riff, a sexually ambiguous commundard opines that “strange women lying about in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government,” whether or not a “watery tart threw a sword at you,” or a “moistened bint had lobbed a scimitar at me” (put that way, it is a proposition worth pondering). But the Lake Lady disappears promptly from the film, and Morgan makes no appearance at all. Could we expect her, after all, in a movie whose infrequent women tend to run to carrot-nosed suppositious witches or Grail-deceiving, sex-starved suppositious virgins, created and performed by a troupe of wacky male cross-dressers and frequent female impersonators for whom any representation of the Fay proper might have threatened an already problematic tone? Pythonic satire is at least nonsexist since chivalry, the Holy Grail, and romance staples like heroic action and marvelous beasts come under its unsparing gaze as well.

But another and more recent cinematic foray into Lake country is as sexist as any medieval work in spite of verbal disclaimers to the contrary. *October 32nd* (1992), released on video as *Merlin* (1993), presents the Lady as Crystal Lake, Merlin's daughter, repeatedly reincarnated through the ages as the only person who can protect Excalibur from the villainous and also eternally returning Pendragon, here not an honorific but the son of

Mordred. Yet both in brief flashbacks and a California present in which she is a girl reporter (I deliberately choose the cliché because it fits), Crystal is essentially powerless on her own. Her protectors include not only (the symbolically named?) John Pope but, in an obviously multiculturalist gesture, Chinese and Native American helpers as well. Pendragon is a much more powerful worker of magic than Crystal: although “in every age [he is allegedly] stopped by a girl,” his defeat is always accompanied by a prophecy of his return. As is perhaps obvious, this is a much sillier movie than *Monty Python*.

Equally silly but devastatingly antifeminist is another Morganic substitute, Madame Mim of the animated Disney *Sword in the Stone* (1963). Her character has its beginning in the original, British edition of the eponymous first book of T. H. White's tetralogy, *The Once and Future King*. There she operates like a fairy-tale witch, enticing the Wart (White's name for the young Arthur) and his foster-brother Kay into her woodland cottage, where she intends to eat them. Turning the Wart into a veritable Hansel, she disrobes him, assesses his fat potential, and shoves him into a cage. Summoned by a kindly goat, Merlin engages her in a wizard's duel as—in multiple and responsive shapeshiftings—they vie for mastery, until the seer becomes various germs from the affliction of which his opponent “immediately expire[s]” (92).

This episode expired at the instance of White's American publishers and was replaced by one featuring Morgan Le Fay. Teamed with Robin Wood (White's variant), the Wart and Kay set out to free friends she has imprisoned in her (literally) lardy Castle Chariot. Morgan herself is variously described as “difficult to explain”; “a bad 'un”; a fairy, and not a fairy, having no heart; and, more prosaically but true to Arthurian history, “a daughter of the Earl of Cornwall.” Advised to use against her the iron that fairies cannot stand and not to eat in her dwelling, they find in her “greasy, buttery” castle a Morgan “stretched upon her bed of glorious lard ... fat, dowdy, middle-aged” and—once she feels their metal—“writhing ... like a slug” until her fortress collapses into a forest clearing, still smelling “faintly of dirty milk.” Even the fearsome griffin she sends after them they are able to defeat.

I have dwelt upon these two novelistic versions at length because they illustrate the generally misogynistic and specifically antimaternal bias (note “dirty milk”) acknowledged by White himself in his letters about his book and documented by critics (see Fries, “Natural and Unnatural Childhoods”)—a bias only intensified by the choices the Disney organization made in their film. That they chose the figure of Madame Mim over that of White's Morgan is perhaps understandable, in terms of its

more animatable content (it would be hard, to say nothing of kinetically uninteresting, to create a toon character out of a slug). But the Disney Mim is even more ludicrously a stereotype than the novelist's. Fat, warty, gray-haired, and vainglorious, she advertises herself in cracked-voiced song to the Wart, who—Merlin—metamorphosed into a sparrow—has fallen accidentally down her chimney, as “marvelous,” with “more magic” in her “little finger” than Merlin in his whole body. Delighted with “the gruesome and grim” and with “black sorcery” as her “cup of tea,” she retains shape-shifting power which can make her “uglier yet” as well as “beautiful, lovely and fair” (but not very, as the film shows us an angular and fatuous-faced figure—further self-delusion?). Merlin's arrival produces a duel, for which Mim sets rules she promptly breaks, but—even so—she loses to the male wizard in spite of seemingly equal, often dazzling ingenuity. Trapped in her bed (rather than dead, as in *White*) by the mage's cunning transformation into the multi-infectious, composite disease of the novel, she suffers both “hot and cold flashes” (surely both an agist and sexist slur). The Wart's pronouncements that “knowledge and wisdom is the real power” and that magic is only justifiable as “useful for something good” are designed to validate Merlin's (that is, the male's) superiority to his fat, vain, and menopausal opponent. If it be argued that Merlin is also caricatured in the film, let it be said that his absentminded and often bumbling persona is an affectionate portrait and that Mim's is not. As so often in fiction as well as in life, white-haired old men are seen as socially beneficial, whereas white-haired old women appear as witchlike.

Also gender-prejudicial but the most powerful cinematic treatment of Morgan in her own person is John Boorman's in his landmark *Excalibur* (1981). Here we encounter a highly effective use of conflation as Morgan's functions are combined with those of her most frequent avatar, her sister, Morgause of Orkney. This originally unnamed stepsister of Arthur (by Ygraine's first husband, Gorlois) is the traditional and incestuous mother of Mordred by her kingly brother, either innocently, as in the French *Version Vulgate*, or calculatedly—but from political rather than sensual purpose—as in Malory. A number of recent novels, notably those by Parke Godwin and Marion Zimmer Bradley, present Morgan in this fatal maternal role, which, however, Boorman fails to treat as sympathetically as they do. Yet—to return to the title of this article—Boorman shows more tellingly than any filmic auteur since Butler that he knows how to handle a (this) woman.

His handle, as opposed to the mainly marginalizing and reductive techniques of his predecessors, is to take the conflation of Morgan/Morgause seriously as a main threat to Camelot and to restore the magical power with



Mad Madam Mim from Wolfgang Reitherman's 1963 full-length animated feature version of *The Sword in the Stone*.

which this figure was originally invested. How Boorman thus gives form rather than, as had been usual previously, accident to her longing for power and the revenge it enables may best be seen by examining the film, and particularly the figure of his Morgana in it, through the current critical concept of the “gaze.”

Developed out of psychoanalytic and linguistic insights, adapted to the uses of various critical schools such as feminist, Marxist, and cultural materialist, the gaze is most often associated with the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who defines it as part of “the scopic field,” in which it is “outside [me]”: “I am looked at,” which “is to say, I am a picture” (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 106, quoted by Payne 217). “The gaze, then, is what emanates from the [object viewed], capturing the viewer,” so that—as further formulated by the linguist/psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva—“the viewer is not a free observer” but herself an “object of viewing” (Payne 217).

Lacan's “gaze” is intimately allied to his concept of the mirror-stage in child development. The infant, seeing its reflection in “the mirror (or equivalent) ... intellectually anticipates and identifies with the image of what it will become,” a “dialectic of recognition and misrecognition” since

such an image involves alienation, an identification "with something ... by definition, IMAGINARY and OTHER [sic]." This identification produces "transitivism ... [the child's] characteristic combination of identification and aggression": "The child who strikes another claims to have been struck; the child who sees another fall bursts into tears," laying the foundation for "the identification of slave with master, of seducer with seduced" (Macey 346). Such an identification, such a double process, lies at the heart of Boorman's movie, in which Morgana is never a free observer but captive by what she sees (or mis-sees): herself a picture, she at the same time becomes the object of sight for the gaze of the filmgoer.

For Morgana, Boorman invents a brief but telling *enfance*, or meaningful childhood. We first see her as a hypersensitive child of perhaps seven (significantly the age of reason), gifted with the Celtic sight, a sixth sense allowing her to intuit presciently the moment of her father's death. Unlike Boorman's Igrayne (Ygraine)—the mother with whom, at this stage, she most identifies (in Lacan's terms the mirror "equivalent")—she is undeceived by Uther, repeating her previous assertion, "My father is dead," as she fixes the disguised Uther with a gaze as baleful as his own. As the king, ignoring her, seizes and roughly takes her mother in a rapist's embrace, she solemnly and almost dispassionately surveys the scene, just as when, her father's corpse returned to his usurped family, she solemnly performs the service of closing his eyes. Uther complains at Igrayne's childbed with Arthur, "she watches me with her father's eyes!" Verbally as well as visually she assesses Merlin as he takes the infant Arthur away: "Are you the mother and the father of the baby now, Merlin?"

Meeting the now grown Morgana in the woods at Arthur's *al fresco* wedding, Merlin echoes Uther's earlier comment: "You have your father's eyes!" Her response reminds him that both of them are supranatural, as she asserts their kinship as magic creatures and asks if he will teach her his craft. At the moment when he embraces her, Boorman shows us Arthur and Guinevere also embracing as their wedding concludes—a visual counterpointing of two ultimately treasonous relationships, a mirroring which will produce further tragic intersections. This tragic potential is furthered by Morgana's encouragement of a distorted view of arguably innocent or neutral events such as her encouragement of Guinevere to notice Lancelot publicly, or her urging on a drunken Gawain a condemnation of the lovers' relationship as adulterous before the assembled Table Round. The latter event immediately precedes Morgana's victory over Merlin, which will eventually become a victory over Arthur. Having decided to leave a court and a world to which he no longer belongs, the seer taunts Arthur's step-sister about the littleness of her skills: "bat wings, snake skins!" and—in

braggadocio?—shows her a Lancelot and Guinevere, lovers for the first time, naked in the forest as Arthur approaches. As the latter thrusts Excalibur between the sleeping lovers, Morgana superimposes the image of her mother and Uther over their figures, while Merlin with his staff tries to pronounce her destruction: "I consign you to oblivion!" But his spell fails, leading to the loss of Excalibur—now seen as impaling Merlin, and so confusing the old man that he is easy prey for Morgana. Entrapping him by the same spell he used to deceive her mother's sight, which she announces she is taking from him, and taunting his impotence as that of a fool, as nothing, as no man, she vows as she entombs him to "find a man and give birth to a god!"

That man, of course, is Arthur, that "god" Mordred. Enchanting Arthur's gaze, she makes him believe she is Guinevere (a nice spin on the traditional trope which makes Lancelot perceive Elaine as Guinevere). To his horror as Arthur regains his senses after their sexual intercourse and perceives her rightly, she responds, "I could kill you, brother, but I want you to live, to see our son be king!" As Morgana gives birth to Mordred under a lightning-filled sky (one thinks of Frankenstein's beginning), she herself—in an anatomically bizarre, indeed impossible feat—pulls the child from her own womb. That same lightning turns Arthur into the Wasteland King, with whom he is thus conflated, leading into Boorman's unique and desacralizing version of the Grail Quest.

The brilliant montage with which he precedes and accompanies that Quest shows Morgana's raising of Mordred as avenger of the family feud and putative Round Table destroyer. His sole effective opponent is Perceval, here restored to his original role as Grail hero. Perceval's first partial and then full sight of the icon—and providential escape from the horrible deaths imposed by Mordred and his followers which doom his fellows to hanging, exposure, and, in the most gruesome of the many unspeakable images of this segment, eye-pecking by vultures (the ultimate loss of the power of the gaze?)—enables him to achieve the vessel and return it, along with its contents, to his king, whose image rather than Christ's he has seen and recognized as savior. With the subsequent return of Excalibur by a Guinevere who has been guarding it for him, Arthur—revitalized—calls back to quotidian life an equally restored Merlin.

In a capacity never before—to my knowledge—suggested in Arthurian story, Merlin now serves as the destroyer of Morgana, who either in her own person or that of her avatar, the Lady of the Lake, has traditionally bested him. As earlier, Boorman's effects center around the problematic nature of the gaze. Invisible in the camp of a Mordred now preparing a decisive stroke against Arthur, Merlin seeks out Morgana, who, in her command



Helen Mirren as Morgana and Robert Addie as her son Mordred in John Boorman's 1981 film *Excalibur*.

of the deceitful possibilities of sight by the Other, still seems beautiful and (not surprisingly, in view of her erotic reputation) still lies voluptuously in bed. Telling her she has "used up all the magic you stole from me to keep yourself young," he tempts her to say the charm by which she earlier defeated him and assured her own power: a task accomplished with difficulty, as she is by now as befuddled as he was when she obtained it from him. Finally retrieving his charm, he causes her to breathe it forth as the deadly mist which will destroy both her and—by confusing his attack—her son. Its magic soon spreads to Mordred's headquarters, where he has ironically just informed a confederate that his mother will prevent any hindrance of his army's vision. Rushing to her, the son discovers the mother as the loathsome hag she has been—underneath her bespelled appearance—all along, so divested of her ageless beauty and magic power that the revolted son chokes her to death.

Morgana's career in Boorman's film thus ends as a distorted mirror to its own beginning, by the bedside of a woman besieged by an aggressive

male; but this time, rather than the watching child she is herself the powerless (and here old) woman, the object of violent male incursion rather than the gazer upon it. Nor does she retain her traditional role in the traditional tableau with which the movie ends: one does not sense her presence among the three indistinct and white draped royal women on the boat which bears Arthur away. Yet Boorman's version of Morgan serves as no other film has—even the interesting Butler *Yankee*—to restore Morgan Le Fay to Arthurian history. For that he has utilized fully the technique of the gaze, his Morgana observing and observed with a malice and a desire always hungry and never fulfilled, and serving eloquently as an objective correlative to the illusion which is her only weapon, as a woman, against a male dominant and hostile world. As a feminist critic, I look forward to a more sympathetic version to match the powerful male-friendly vision Boorman offers, but meanwhile we must, all of us, see *Excalibur* as the thoughtful—and worthy—object of contemplation it is.

Note

I owe particular thanks to Kevin J. Harty for helping me with specific problems, especially finding a copy of the 1931 *Butler Yankee*, and my son Jeb Stuart Fries, whose enthusiastic love for the movies and fecund conversation about them helped to make my own work on this paper so much easier.

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