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The Cool and the Queer in Bugs Bunny's Middle Ages

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In his many time-traveling adventures, Bugs Bunny frequently resides in or returns to the chivalric landscape of the Middle Ages – and is always unimpressed. It is, in his dismissive assessment, a “booby hatchery” (“Knight-mare Hare,” 1955).¹ For this avatar of American cool, the past stands not as a lost Golden Age of idealized romance but as a madcap landscape similar to those of his contemporary adventures: a backdrop against which a pursuit unfolds, with his determined but hapless antagonists finding themselves stymied in their every effort to defeat this rascally rabbit. Bugs’s coolness – as evident in his catchphrases, his metacommentary on the cartoons’ narrative action, and his gender play – assists him in transcending the snares of the Middle Ages. His coolness also accentuates the queerness of other characters enacting outdated gender roles, whether those of the past or of the present.

Bugs Bunny’s every action displays his mid-century American coolness, which he models through a constant air of detachment, irony, and unflappability. Bob Clampett, who directed dozens of Looney Tunes cartoons in the 1930s and 1940s, ventriloquized his understanding of the character: “Some people call me cocky and brash, but actually I’m just self-assured. I’m nonchalant, imperturbable, contemplative. I play it cool.”² Coolness emerged as a distinct mode of self-performance in the twentieth century, as Peter Stearns documents in his definitive study of this style: “Being a cool character means conveying an air of disengagement, of nonchalance [...]. Cool has become an emotional mantle, sheltering the whole personality from embarrassing

¹ Bugs Bunny’s cartoons are available in *The Looney Tunes Golden Collection*, 6 vols., (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros., 2003–08), DVD.

² Bob Clampett, qtd. in Joe Adamson, *Bugs Bunny: Fifty Years and Only One Grey Hare* (New York: Donald Hutter, 1990), 17.

excess."³ Even when he is hounded, hunted, and harassed, Bugs Bunny may lose his temper, he may explode in an emotional outburst, but he rarely loses his cool. By the conclusion of virtually every cartoon in his animated canon, he has controlled the antic situation and ultimately won the upper hand through his never-failing ingenuity. Bugs may occasionally lose a matchup against an adversary – such as when Cecil Turtle and his allies outwit him in a rematch of Aesop's classic turtle-versus-hare race ("Tortoise Beats Hare," 1941; see also "Rabbit Transit," 1947) – but he typically remains coolly in control even in defeat.

Bugs Bunny's most famous catchphrase – "What's up, doc?" – continually underscores his unruffled reaction to a range of perilous situations. His secondary trademark-quip similarly reveal his calm nonchalance, which is evident in his measured response to an antagonist's escalating aggressions: "Of course, you know, this means war," he pronounces with steely precision (e.g., "Easter Yeggs," 1947; "Long-Haired Hare," 1949; "Bully for Bugs," 1953). In one of the cartoons' many running gags, Bugs finds himself lost – "I knew I should've taken that left turn at Albuquerque," he remarks – but no wrong turn leaves him discombobulated for long (e.g., "Bully for Bugs"; "My Bunny Lies over the Sea," 1948). In moments of self-reflection, Bugs occasionally queries, "Gee, ain't I a stinker?," but he rarely regrets his calculated ploys against his foes (e.g., "A Hare Grows in Manhattan," 1947; "The Big Snooze," 1946). Coolness is not conducive to sympathy, as his various catchphrases and his merciless humiliations of his foes collectively demonstrate.

Bugs Bunny's coolness also reflects his understanding of the codes of the cartoons in which he stars, as evident in his metacommentary on their unfolding action. "I do this kind of stuff to him all through the picture," he wisecracks while leading Elmer Fudd off a cliff ("Wabbit Twouble," 1941). Elmer realizes that he is foredoomed to ignominious defeat in his encounters with his leporine adversary, and he rightly complains, "I get the worst of it from that rabbit in every one of these cartoons"; he tears up the studio contract but soon regrets his decision and pieces together the shredded document, with Bugs Bunny proclaiming of his foe, "I love that man!" ("The Big Snooze"). Truly, not even death can foreclose Bugs's eternal coolness, owing to these cartoons' metanarrative construction. When Elmer, in the role of the mythic hero Siegfried, summons a thunderstorm that apparently kills Bugs, he immediately repents and carries the rabbit away in his arms, only for Bugs to wake from death and to correct the audience: "Well, what did you expect in an opera? A happy ending?" ("What's Opera, Doc?," 1957). Both narrative and metanarrative constructions of Bugs's coolness – the "knowing wink" of his storylines and his performances – enable the audience to enjoy

³ Peter Stearns, *American Cool: Constructing a Twentieth-Century Emotional Style* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 1.

the animated antics afoot, as one can never doubt the character's ultimate triumph.

Complementing his coolness, Bugs Bunny's gender play suggests his protean adaptability to a range of identities. The World War II era upended longstanding stereotypes of Western gender, particularly as women found employment in factories while men fought overseas. This reality is noted in several Looney Tunes films, such as when in "Little Red Riding Rabbit" (1944) – an obvious adaptation of the fairytale "Little Red Riding Hood" – the Grandmother character leaves a note on her door informing potential visitors that she is "Working swing shift at Lockheed." One of the most popular tropes of the Looney Tunes corpus is cross-dressing, and Bugs Bunny frequently disguises himself as various incarnations of femininity: southern belle ("Mississippi Hare," 1949; "Southern Fried Rabbit," 1953); devoted fan ("Long-Haired Hare"); Spanish señorita ("Rabbit of Seville," 1940); department-store patron ("Hare Conditioner," 1945); ballerina ("A Corny Concerto," 1943); and elderly woman ("Hare Do," 1948), among many, many more. Concerning the character's gender play, Charles M. Young famously proposed that Bugs Bunny represents "the yearning for psychological health, the unity of opposites, the polymorphous perverse."⁴ Bugs Bunny's core character relies on improvisation, on the possibility of credibly enacting someone or something other than who he is, throughout his rampaging adventures. Eric Savoy, observing the rabbit's uncanny ability to signify both inside and outside the unfolding plots of destructive desire, theorizes that "Bugs Bunny's agency [is] located somewhere outside conventional economies of desire: indeed, his persistent ability to queer the pitch of signification suggests that the rabbit is always already queer."⁵

Yet to identify perversity and queerness in Bugs Bunny's resistant strategies requires a deeper contextualization and questioning of these terms, particularly if we accept the premise that queerness circulates around and against erotic marginalization. For example, Cathy J. Cohen proposes, "At the intersection of oppression and resistance lies the radical potential of queerness to challenge and bring together all those deemed marginal and all those committed to liberatory politics."⁶ From this perspective, it becomes apparent that it is impossible either to marginalize or to liberate this rascally rabbit, and thus it is difficult to label him queer, for he eludes any such binary of ideological Othering. Closer to the mark, Kevin Sandler suggests that the

⁴ Charles M. Young, "Orcytolagus Cuniculus – a.k.a. Bugs Bunny," *The Village Voice* (December 29, 1975): 126.

⁵ Eric Savoy, "The Signifying Rabbit," *Narrative* 3.2 (1995): 188–209 (191).

⁶ Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, ed. Donald Hall and Annamarie Jagose (London: Routledge, 2013), 74–95 (76).

Bugs Bunny corpus "foregrounds the socially constructed nature of gender difference and subjects it to comment: what appears natural cannot help but reveal itself as artifice."⁷ Similarly, Robert McEachern proposes that "rather than allowing a transcendence of gender dichotomies, cross-dressing Bugs Bunny films reinforce the role of masculinity, precisely because they offer no gender dichotomies to move beyond."⁸ The primacy of masculinity that McEachern identifies is evident in the fact that Bugs inhabits a primarily homosocial world, in which his antagonists are mostly males, including such standard foes as Elmer Fudd, Yosemite Sam, and Daffy Duck, as well as such occasional adversaries as Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde ("Hyde and Hare," 1955) and other errant mad scientists ("Water, Water, Every Hare," 1952).

Within this male world, Bugs must occasionally fend off a female adversary such as Witch Hazel (e.g., "Broom-stick Bunny," 1956), but his romantic interests – which should be a key indicator of the character's potential queerness – lean decidedly toward the normative, even as much as we must question what can be considered "normative" in a world populated by talking rabbits, ducks, and pigs. "Bugs Bunny Rides Again" (1948) stresses the heteroerotic, if interspecies, nature of Bugs's amatory pursuits. In this violent Wild West narrative, he tricks Yosemite Sam onto a train departing from town, discovers it is populated with bathing beauties traveling to Miami, and then successfully maneuvers to switch places with his foe. As the cartoon concludes, he cries out, "So long, Sammy, see you in Miami," while displaying the many lipstick kisses on his head. In other instances, the humor of an episode hinges on Bugs's anti-eroticism, such as when Elmer Fudd receives a Slobovian rabbit named Millicent from his uncle, who will pay him \$500 to take care of her. Elmer therefore encourages Bugs to romance Millicent, and Millicent willingly agrees. "Give to me large kiss," she demands in her Eastern European accent, but Bugs offers a range of substitutes to ward off her advances, including a goldfish and an electric fan, as he also admonishes her, "Women don't chase men in America" ("Rabbit Romeo," 1957). A cartoon world embraces an intriguing world of unexpected romance, and Bugs occasionally finds himself attracted to surprising partners, including a mechanical lure in the likeness of a female rabbit designed to entice greyhounds to chase after it ("The Grey Hounded Hare," 1949). Whether human bathing-beauties, an overweight and demanding Slobovian rabbit, or a mechanical representation of a rabbit, Bugs's potential romantic partners stress the heteroerotic nature of his attractions. Furthermore, Bugs may occasionally

⁷ Kevin Sandler, "Gendered Evasion: Bugs Bunny in Drag," in *Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation*, ed. Kevin Sandler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 154–71 (170).

⁸ Robert McEachern, "Gender Twouble: Bugs Bunny, Cross-Dressing, and Patriarchy," *The Mid-Atlantic Almanac* 3 (1994): 1–12 (2).

play queer, such as when he queens it up as a hairdresser for Rudolph, a red, furry monster in a Frankenstein-inspired storyline: "My stars, where did you get that awful hairdo? It doesn't become you at all" ("Water, Water, Every Hare"). Looking at such instances collectively, Bugs may exploit queerness to advance his strategies, yet his unflappable cool, for the most part, aligns with his erotic attraction to a range of characters coded female.

Bugs's adventures in the medieval past include the shorts "Rabbit Hood" (1949), "Knights Must Fall" (1949), "Knight-mare Hare," "Knighty Knight Bugs" (1958) – the only Bugs Bunny cartoon honored with an Academy Award (Best Animated Short, 1959) – and "Prince Varmint" (1961). Several other adventures, although not explicitly medieval in their setting, similarly transport him to a classical or simply ill-defined past, or allude to medieval narratives in their titles, including "Buccaneer Bunny" (1948), "Rabbit of Seville," "Roman Legion-Hare" (1955), "Ali Baba Bunny" (1957), "What's Opera, Doc?," and "Hare-Abian Nights" (1959). The plots of these shorts resemble those of his modern adventures, in which Bugs must outmaneuver an enemy or enemies, often by hoisting them on their own petards. In "Rabbit Hood," Bugs, attempting to steal a carrot from the king's carrot patch, clashes with the Sheriff of Nottingham, even tricking him into building the sheriff's dream home in the king's rose gardens and then, impersonating the king, clubbing the sheriff with his scepter. In "Knights Must Fall," Bugs's chief adversary is not Sir Lancelot but Sir Pansalot, whom he dispatches through ever-increasing acts of medieval violence. "Knight-mare Hare" begins with Bugs reading *Tales of Knighthood and Gallantry*, languidly sitting in a hair-drying chair until an apple falls on his head, and he awakes to find himself transported into the medieval past. Meeting his first foe, the Black Knight, Bugs puns on his famous line – "Eh, what's up, Duke?" – and is threatened, "Surrender, varlet, thou art the prisoner of my lance." He vanquishes first the Black Knight by tripping his horse, then a fire-breathing dragon by spraying it with a seltzer-water sprayer, and finally "Merlin of Monroe" by conjuring him into a horse, before returning to the present day. "Knighty Knight Bugs" depicts King Arthur addressing his court – "Noble Knights of the Round Table, ever since the accursed Black Knight captured our singing sword, evil times hath befallen us" – with the cowardly Sir Osis of Liver wailing, "The Black Knight has a fire-breathing dragon!" Bugs, in his role as court jester, agrees – "Only a fool would go after the singing sword" – and so the king sends him on the quest against the Black Knight/Yosemite Sam. In "Prince Varmint," Yosemite Sam is recast as Sam the Terrible, a Viking invader, and Bugs Bunny decides, "I suppose I'll have to dispose of the little monster"; he bribes Sam's accomplice, an elephant, with peanuts, and the elephant chases the antagonist away.

Bugs Bunny's medieval shorts share numerous motifs, such as the notoriously bad puns that constitute much of their humor. In "Rabbit Hood,"

Bugs's violent knighting ceremony for the Sheriff of Nottingham unleashes a cavalcade of puns, including "Sir Loin of Beef," "Baron of Munchausen," "Milk of Magnesia," and "Quarter of Ten." In "Knight-Mare Hare," more such medieval puns and verbal humor abound: "Sir Oh of Kay," "Earl of Watercress," "Sir Osis of the Liver," "Knight of the Garter," and "Baron of Wooster-cester-shister-shyster-schuster-schuster-shiste-shire." Yet such puns afford more than the opportunity for quick laughs, as they allow Bugs to bring his brash style of American coolness to the past. In "Knight-Mare Hare," he lists his friends, riffing on the names of African-American jazz musicians: Duke of Ellington, Count of Basie, Earl of Hines, Cab of Calloway, Satchmo of Armstrong. Against the mostly white backdrop of so many of his adventures, Bugs Bunny's journey to the medieval past offers the punning opportunity to show his appreciation of black culture, and he also threatens the Black Knight: "Look, Sir Rup of Figs, don't go around insulting my friends, or I shall get me a can opener and open thee up like a can of solid pack tomatoes." Given the casual racism of some of Bugs's adventures in contemporary America, his citation and defense of African-American entertainers in the medieval past demonstrates the ways in which time does not march uniformly into a more progressive future.

To accentuate Bugs Bunny's infallibly cool performance, the medieval cartoons deploy Errol Flynn as a touchstone of modern cinematic masculinity. Flynn, known for such medieval and swashbuckling adventures as *Captain Blood* (1935), *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), and *Crossed Swords* (1954), serves as an appropriate real-life foil for Bugs, for both the actor and the cartoon character evince a similar jaunty coolness. In "Knights Must Fall," when the crowd boos Bugs as he prepares to joust with the haughty Sir Pansalot, Bugs wisecracks, "You're expecting maybe Errol Flynn?," as he then proves himself Flynn's equal in dispatching his antagonist. In "Rabbit Hood," a tubby and dimwitted Little John proclaims several times, "Don't you worry, never fear, Robin Hood will soon be here" – only for Robin Hood to fail to arrive. As the cartoon concludes, Robin Hood finally appears, through a live-action shot of Errol Flynn calling out, "Welcome to Sherwood." Bugs, shocked, denies what he sees: "No, that's silly. It couldn't be him." It is indeed Flynn, but as the preceding storyline has demonstrated, Flynn's Robin Hood is unnecessary in a comic landscape where Bugs can successfully outwit any foe. Of course, Bugs is often preferred over a range of Hollywood actors, such as when Elmer Fudd plays a celebrated Vaudeville star and passes by Al Jolson and Bing Crosby to choose the rabbit as his sidekick ("What's Up, Doc?," 1950), testifying to the transtemporal appeal of his coolness.

As Bugs Bunny's coolness stands as his defining characteristic, his adventures in the medieval past demonstrate how this coolness relies on queering his adversaries rather than on any inherent queerness in himself, even when

the plot focuses determinedly on a man's posterior. The opening scenes of "Knights Must Fall" depict Bugs's desire to treat Sir Pansalot's rear end as a trash dispensary for uneaten carrot tops. Developing this theme, Bugs pokes Sir Pansalot in the posterior with a needle, and after the final climatic battle, he stands triumphant as "The Smiling Rabbit: Dealer in Used Armor" amid a veritable junkyard of discarded gear. He can now dispose of his carrot top in the rear of a suit of armor, as he did to Sir Pansalot in the cartoon's opening. Is a cartoon rabbit jabbing a knight in the posterior with a needle a parody of sodomy? Such a reading might appear to overinterpret this act of comic violence, but Bugs employs a similar tactic in "Bunny Hugged" (1951), in which he works as the mascot for the wrestler Ravishing Ronald, whom the announcer tellingly refers to as a "denatured boy." Overt references to homosexuality are rather rare in the Looney Tunes catalog, but occasional lines, such as when Yosemite Sam enters a Wild West saloon and shouts, "And I ain't no namby-pamby" ("Bugs Bunny Rides Again"), alert viewers to the ways in which queer themes are adumbrated in the purportedly innocent and kid-friendly world of mid-century American animation. Bugs deploys queerness in the medieval world of Sir Pansalot as he does in the modern world of "Bunny Hugged": to demonstrate the inherent folly of attempting to outwit him, as he always keeps several steps ahead in the machinations afoot.

In his adventures set in the past, Bugs's American coolness refuses to recognize the mores of yesteryear, yet his adversaries face the likelihood of the queer effects of time. Certainly, Bugs's coolness includes a knowledge of the literary past of the Renaissance, as evident in his (mis)quotation of Richard Lovelace's "To Althea, from Prison," as he taunts his adversary, "Iron bars do not a prison make ... but they sure help, aye, doc?" ("Acrobatty Bunny," 1946).⁹ In this telling moment of literary allusion, Bugs deploys the past incorrectly yet still prevails in his objective to vanquish his antagonists, proving once again the meta-cartoon truth that the audience recognizes: this rabbit can bend time, history, and narrative to his purposes. It should be noted as well that Bugs's coolness is rooted in and advances the values of the United States. In "Knights Must Fall," Bugs's strategies result in the dragon that guards the singing sword sneezing in a tower armory; the tower then lifts off and now resembles a rocket, testifying to this patriotic rabbit's contribution to the space race and the victories that can be achieved against America's contemporary adversaries.

Bugs Bunny's journeys in the Middle Ages demonstrate the inherent superiority and queering force of American cool over medieval values, even the most romanticized value of chivalry. Chivalry rarely appears in the Bugs

⁹ Lovelace's poem reads, "Stone Walls doe not a Prison make,/Nor Iron bars a Cage"; see Richard Lovelace, "To Althea, from Prison," in *The Poems of Richard Lovelace*, ed. C. H. Wilkinson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1930), 78–9, lines 25–6.

Bunny Middle Ages, yet in an intriguing irony, Bugs espouses this virtue in one of his modern-day adventures, "Mississippi Hare." "Chivalry ain't dead," chirps Bugs, and in this short feature, he dons female apparel in his battle against Colonel Shuffle, a poker-playing southern dynamo resembling a cross between Yosemite Sam and Colonel Sanders. Bugs relies on the chivalry of a by-standing southern gentleman to defend "herself" from Colonel Shuffle's attacks, but this helpful gentleman receives quite an eyeful when Bugs's dress is torn and he spies a bunny's tail instead of a woman's buttocks. This scene, a cartoon precursor to Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992), hangs on the comic effect of a bunny's tail signifying the queer pitfalls of chivalry, leading men to confront the possibility of bestial desires, even if their eventual response, like this unnamed chivalric figure's, is simply to walk off the paddlewheel boat into the muddy waters of the Mississippi. "Oh, well, we almost had a romantic ending," wisecracks Bugs, but in this instance, chivalry demands the performance of an increasingly impossible masculinity, one which, in the end, even an impish bunny can demolish with a quick, queering twitch of his cottontail. The "Rabbit of Seville" features a similar bunny tail scene, in which Elmer Fudd realizes that an entrancing señorita merely disguises his frequent foe, with the next round of violence soon erupting.

Bunny tails, in this and so many other instances, are queering, not queer. These twitches and other such emasculating moments testify to the protean force of American cool, which conquers all medieval and transtemporal manifestations of resistance to the rabbit who embodies it. Considering the queerness of Bugs Bunny's Middle Ages, then, we are left with the vision of a comic landscape ripe for the ridicule of American coolness, and woe to the animated adversary who unthinkingly tries to adapt medieval values to the modern world.