Monty Python and the Quest for the Perfect Fallacy

Identify the logical fallacies in the following dialogue by name.

Various Peasants: Witch! A witch!

First Peasant: We have found a witch--may we burn her? [Various calls to burn her.]

Sir Bedivere: How do you know she is a witch?

Peasants: She looks like one. [Various calls to burn her]

Sir Bedivere: Bring her forward.

Accused Girl: I am not a witch! I am not a witch!

Sir Bedivere: But you are dressed as one.

Accused Girl: They dressed me up like this. And this isn't my nose; it's a false one.

Sir Bedivere: Well?

Second Peasant: Well, we did do the nose.

Sir Bedivere: The nose?

Second Peasant: And the hat, but she's a witch. [Yeah, burn her!]

Sir Bedivere: Did you dress her up?

Peasants: No. No. No. No. No. Yes. Yes a bit. Well a bit. A bit. A bit. She has a wart.

Sir Bedivere: What makes you think she's a witch?

First Peasant: Oh, she turned me into a newt.

Sir Bedivere: A newt?

First Peasant: I got better.

Second Peasant: Burn her anyway! Burn her!

Sir Bedivere: Quiet! Quiet! Quiet! Quiet! There are ways of telling if she's a witch.

Peasants: Are there? What are they? Tell us!

Sir Bedivere: Tell me, what do you do with witches?

Peasants: Burn them!

Sir Bedivere: And what do you burn apart from witches?

Second Peasant: More witches!

First Peasant: Wood!

Sir Bedivere: Wood! So why do witches burn?

First Peasant: 'cause they're made of . . . wood?

Sir Bedivere: Good! So how do you tell if she is made of wood?

Peasants: Build a bridge out of her!

Sir Bedivere: Ah, but cannot you also make bridges out of stone?

Second Peasant: Ah. Yeah.

Sir Bedivere: Does wood sink in water?

Peasants: Nah, it don't. Nah, it . . . floats. It floats! Throw her into the pond!

Sir Bedivere: What also floats in water?

Peasants: Bread! Apples! Very small rocks! Cider! Grape gravy! Cherries! Rum! Churches! Churches! Lead!

King Arthur: A duck.

Sir Bedivere: Yes, exactly. So logically...?

Peasants: If she weighs the same as a duck. . . she's made of wood.

Sir Bedivere: And therefore. . . ?

Peasants: A witch? A witch! She's a witch! Burn her!

Sir Bedivere: We shall use my larger scales!

[Various cries]

Sir Bedivere: Remove the supports.

[Various cries]

Accused Girl: It's a fair cop.*

Sir Bedivere: Who are you who art so wise in the ways of science?

Arthur: I am Arthur, king of the Britons.

*[British slang, i.e., arrest].

Text from *Monty Python's Quest for the Holy Grail*: Scene 06. Dir. Graham Chapman. Perf. Terry Gilliam, Terry Jones, Eric Idle, et al. National Film Trustee Company, Limited, 1974.

ACTIVITY

If you weigh the same as a duck, then, logically, you're made of wood and must be a witch. Or so goes the reasoning of Monty Python's Sir Bedevere. Obviously something has gone wrong with the knight's reasoning. With a partner (or in a small group), try to identify as many of the following logical fallacies in the knight's reasoning.

Logical Fallacies: KEY TERMS

1. **Oversimplification**: A drastically simple solution to what is clearly a complex problem:

   Ex) *We have a balance-of-trade deficit because foreigners make better products than we do.*

2. **Hasty generalization**: In inductive reasoning, a generalization that is based on too little evidence or on evidence that is not representative:

   Ex) *My grandparents eat bran flakes for breakfast, just as most older folks do.*

3. ***Post hoc, ergo propter hoc***: "After this, therefore because of this." Confusing chance or coincidence with causation. One event coming after another does not necessarily mean that the first event caused the second:

   Ex) *I went to the hockey game last night. The next thing I knew I had a cold.*

4. **Begging the question**: Assuming in a premise something that needs to be proven:

   Ex) *Lying is wrong because people should always tell the truth.*

5. **False analogy**: Making a misleading analogy between logically unconnected ideas:

   Ex) *If we can clone mammals", we should be able to find a cure for cancer.*

6. **Either/or thinking**: Seeing only two alternatives when there may in fact be other possibilities:

   Ex) *Either you love your job, or you hate it.*

7. ***Non sequitur***: "It does not follow." An inference or conclusion that is not clearly related-to the established premises or evil:

   Ex) *She is very sincere. She must know what she's talking about.*

CONNECTION TO *The Crucible*

During times of hysteria (the Salem witch trials, the Red Scare, etc.), people often lose sight of logic and reason. Examine each of the following quotes and try to identify the logical fallacies.

1. *ACT II: Scene 2*
   HATHORNE: Now, Martha Corey, there is abundant evidence in our hands to show that you have given yourself to the reading of fortunes. Do you deny it?
   MARTHA: I am innocent to a witch. I know not what a witch is.
   HATHORNE: How do you know then that you are not a witch?

2. *ACT III*
   DANFORTH: In an ordinary crime, how does one defend the accused? One calls up witnesses to prove his innocence. But witchcraft is *ipso facto**, on its face and by its nature, an invisible crime, is it not? Therefore, who may possibly be witness to it? The witch and the victim. None other. Now we cannot hope the witch will accuse herself; granted? Therefore, we must rely upon her victims"

   *[Latin meaning "by that very fact"]