

Coconuts in Camelot: *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* in the Arthurian Literature Course

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Teaching Arthurian literature affords a perhaps rare opportunity for medieval specialists to use the medium of film to interest undergraduate students in a period that is otherwise often considered foreign to their cultural world or concerns. The significant number of Arthurian films in the twentieth century reflects the continuous appeal of the Arthurian legend, a legend whose survival can be attributed to its adaptability, shifting throughout the centuries between elite and popular cultures, and disseminated in different forms through visual, oral and textual traditions. While there has always been a ludic dimension to Arthurian tradition, one postmedieval comedic portrayal of Arthur and his knights, Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, has had a significant impact on how Arthurian material has been adapted on the silver screen.¹ One possible consequence of Twain's comic vision and its early transposition into the newly emerging film medium is that, while Bresson's brooding tale of Arthurian ennui may be the hallmark of the twentieth-century cinematic Arthurian corpus, the film that has come to represent the Round Table's cinematic incarnation in the minds of the generations that now fill the postsecondary classroom is *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, a comic masterpiece that embodies the spirit of Twain's dismissive coinage, "holy grailing."² Student enthusiasm for Monty Python's film contrasts with the noticeably more restrained stance of scholarly opinion which, while rarely omitting to mention the film's existence in discussions of cinematic Arthuriana, has relatively little to say about the actual film. Part of the reason Monty Python's medieval film has not received as much scrutiny as it deserves from medievalists is because it can be perceived as being preoccupied with its own cinematic form. The ubiquity of Kevin J. Harty's comment that Python's film is "not so much a send-up of the Arthurian legend, as it is a send-up of other film versions of that

legend” has perhaps refracted scholarly attention away from precisely how Monty Python does deal with a legend which the film itself presents as distinctly literary.³ By redirecting our attention to the literary scaffolding around which *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is built, Arthurian scholars can encounter the hermeneutic dynamism of this film, a quality which also recommends the film as a pedagogical tool.

Having exposed this film to the alchemy of the classroom, I would like to argue generally for the relevance of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* to the wider Arthurian tradition and, more specifically, for its consequent usefulness as an intertext in the Arthurian literature course.⁴ My ultimate goal is not to argue for *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* as an “Arthurian film,” a dubiously useful category in itself given the liberties most films dealing with the Arthurian legend take with the literary tradition that precedes them. Instead, I aim to reveal the unappreciated relationship between Monty Python’s film and various medieval Arthurian conventions that makes this film ideal for discussing Arthurian literature with undergraduates and raising for them some questions regarding the Middle Ages as a discursive site in contemporary culture. Understanding how *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* draws upon a knowledge of medieval Arthurian conventions reveals that the film is not only a lampoon of earlier films, but also, more importantly, of our notion of the Middle Ages (of which those films are a part). In the university classroom, Monty Python’s “holy grailing” challenges us to come to terms with our own illusions by addressing the ultimate example of idealised medievalism, the Arthurian legend, a feudal fantasy devised in the Middle Ages that continues to haunt the dreams of succeeding eras obsessed with their own sense of disenchantment.

The escapist function of the Arthurian legend and, more generally, the idea of the Middle Ages in contemporary culture can be demonstrated by a brief comment on the constituency of the average undergraduate Arthurian course. A decade ago Maureen Fries observed that, in her own and others’ experience, Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *Mists of Avalon* (1982) had “served, in the past few years since its publication, to draw many students into Arthurian courses” (219). My surveys of Arthurian courses indicate that the same holds true twenty years after the novel’s publication. Despite the common opinion that visual media have produced generations increasingly uninterested in recreational reading, in my own experience many students are drawn to an Arthurian course not so much by their viewing habits—Monty Python’s film and Boorman’s *Excalibur* being the notable exceptions—but rather by their reading habits, particularly their interest in science fiction and fantasy literature. The neomedieval dreamscape of

popular fantasy literature has also produced countless Arthurian offshoots or retellings which are frequently mentioned by budding Arthurian enthusiasts. Along with Marion Zimmer Bradley's influential novel, the works of Rosemary Sutcliff, Parke Godwin, and Mary Stewart quite often form the framework upon which their horizon of expectations is built. Among other things, such works of fiction reflect a broader recurrent nostalgia for early British history, a misty Celtic realm poised between prehistory and modernity in which to scry for the answers to the questions of faith, love, and empire that plague the Western imagination. The disruption of such nostalgia in the classroom, whether through the discovery of Arthur's disputed historicity, through encounters with the many Arthurian tales that fragment their sense of a unified Arthurian legend, or when, for instance, a few students each year must accept that the fairies of Arthurian romance are not, in fact, Great-Goddess-worshipping pagans, constitutes the initial breach of the storytelling illusion, allowing students to discern a "teller," assumptions, and motives behind a tale. Once they are familiarised with the medieval Arthurian tradition, a screening of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* near the conclusion of the course allows students to revisit the question of—to borrow Umberto Eco's expression—how we "dream" the Middle Ages and to reexamine the appeal that the legend of the Once and Future King continues to have for contemporary audiences.

In order to understand the pedagogical value of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* it is necessary to shift the scholarly focus away from the cinematic allusions in the film to the literary and historical features of the legend that inspired Monty Python's comic vision of medieval chivalry. While the film obviously gestures towards numerous film genres, including Ingmar Bergman's films, slapstick, swashbuckling adventure, kung-fu films, the musical, documentary, and animation, some scholars have noted that most episodes are in fact borrowed from the general literary romance tradition (Thompson 100). Directors Terry Jones and Terry Gilliam reveal in their commentary on the film that the members of Monty Python were consciously working with medieval literary traditions, stating explicitly that "most of the episodes that were taken really come from medieval stories and lore."⁵

The first task in introducing *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* to a literary course will therefore be to invite students to discern familiar literary plots and narrative devices within the cinematic text. For example, Gilliam makes his comment on the literary background of the film while discussing the Tale of Sir Galahad, a sketch of the chaste knight's "perilous" encounter with a castle filled with "eight score young blondes and

brunettes, all between sixteen and nineteen-and-a-half, cut off in [the] castle with no one to protect [them]” and whose sole occupations are “bathing, dressing, undressing, [and] making exciting underwear.”⁶ Gilliam’s assertion that “there were always these places in the Grail quest, always castles with the most beautiful maidens” and his sense that they are not dealing with “real women” in this scene is easily confirmed by a viewer aware of the many knightly encounters with the sensual fairies of Arthurian romance. The Castle of Maidens that appears in the works of Chrétien de Troyes, Wolfram von Eschenbach, and Malory is but one exaggerated example of the various undefended castles filled with nubile maidens that litter the Arthurian landscape. The play upon the erotic undertones and possibilities of the medical care the knights errant receive from women healers that we see when Michael Palin’s bewildered Galahad is pinned to the bed for an unnecessary and indelicate medical examination by two young women in the film is also hardly a contemporary development. Wolfram von Eschenbach’s urbane description of the officious maidens attending to Parzival in Gurnemanz’s castle is a case in point:

Now I do not know who asked them, but some lovely girls, superbly gowned, came in with due regard for the niceties. They bathed and massaged the marks of the bruises away with their soft white hands. There was small need for him to feel lost or uncared for here, orphaned though he was of common sense! Thus he suffered his pleasure and ease....They offered him a bathrobe but he ignored it, so bashful was he in the presence of ladies. He refused to take it and wrap it around him while they were looking on. The young ladies had to go, they dared not stand there any longer. I fancy they would have liked to see if he had sustained any harm down below, for women are such sympathetic creatures, they are always moved to pity by a friend’s sufferings (94).

Another familiar scenario of medieval Arthurian tradition that can illustrate for students the function of Arthurian romance as a wish-fulfillment fantasy is found in the Tale of Sir Launcelot sketch. Launcelot’s discomfiting discovery that the damsel he set out to rescue from her proverbial tower prison and from the marital machinations of her father is, in fact, a young man named Herbert presents an amusing portrayal of the political and pecuniary interests that dominated medieval upper class marriages and that lurked beneath the gilded surface of the chivalric adventures and courtly love of King Arthur’s bachelor knights. The father’s plan to marry his son off to Princess Lucky in order to obtain her “huge tracts of land” soon changes when he discovers that Herbert’s rescuer is none other than Sir Launcelot from Camelot. He

then attempts to kill his son and, more effectively, dispatches the father of the bride in to order wed his newly-acquired and -orphaned daughter-in-law with the presumed knightly owner of a “very nice castle” in “very good pig country.” On a different note, the history of the father’s own ill-fated Swamp Castle in this scene, a castle which sank twice and then “burned down, fell over, then sank into the swamp,” obviously plays with Geoffrey of Monmouth’s account of another architectural nightmare, Vortigern’s castle.

An additional correspondence between the film and medieval tradition for classes that have considered the source history of Arthurian literature is the allusion to the relationship between the Arthurian legend and Celtic tradition in the figure of Tim the Enchanter. This brief appearance of a Merlin figure in the film introduces the Britonic background of the Arthurian legend. Tim the Enchanter invokes the Welsh provenance of the legend when he directs the knights to the “cave of Caerbannog, wherein, carved in mystic runes, upon the very living rock, the last words of Olfyn Bedwere of Rheged” will reveal the location of the Holy Grail. Sporting scraggy facial hair and a headdress of ram’s horns, John Cleese as Tim looks like a cross between Nostradamus and Cernunnos, the Celtic “Horned God.” His Scottish accent and the insult directed at him by Sir Robin, “mangy Scots git,” relate to the Welsh tradition, immortalised by the *Vita Merlini*, of Merlin as a “wild man in the woods” living in Cumbria, a Caledonian region on the northern borders of Northumbria.

One final indisputable example of an intentional allusion to Arthurian literary tradition by Monty Python appears at the very beginning of the film and may be harder for students with a limited knowledge of the Middle Ages to recognise. Referring to the date 932 CE that appears at the moment the action begins, the directors comment that their choice of date is a specific reference to the anachronistic tendencies of medieval Arthurian tales. Drawing students’ attention to the anachronism inherent even in medieval accounts of Arthur introduces the idea of Arthur not as a manifestation, but as a fabrication of the Middle Ages. Following the examples of medieval predecessors, the movie dresses its tenth-century knights in the garb of another age; in this case, that of the fourteenth century. Such claims by the directors only serve to confirm what class discussions also demonstrate, that *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* addresses a literary Arthurian tradition, even as it presents itself as what Rebecca and Samuel Umland term an “intertextual collage” made up primarily of heterogeneous cinematic discursive codes (67).

The episodic form of the movie, a reflection of Monty Python's typical collage approach, is one feature that has misled critics looking for a direct relationship between *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* and medieval accounts of the Grail quest. This assemblage of sketches and gags leads even director Terry Gilliam to comment that their film defies the conventional notion of a "feature film." Yet, as Rebecca and Samuel Umland argue, "the film does have a unity, although it is unconventional, with 'title pages' that signal a new sequence. Its unity is encyclopaedic, that is, it is organised topically" (64). For the medievalist this observation draws attention to a resonance between the film's form and some formal issues confronting students new to medieval literature and Arthurian tradition. The episodes that make up Monty Python's Grail quest are, in fact, given a sense of narrative poesis by a plot device, the Book of the Film. The hand turning manuscript pages with chapter headings and titles that introduce the Knights of the Round Table, not to mention Gilliam's gestures towards medieval illumination in the animated interludes, reminds the audience of the literary tradition behind the film, even as the notion of a Book of the Film humorously inverts the causal relationship.⁷

Moreover, while medievalists may recognise that encyclopedic and topical forms are common tendencies in medieval writing and manuscript production generally, this narrative approach seems particularly appropriate to demonstrate for students the largely episodic nature of the medieval Arthurian corpus, in which Arthur's court often functions merely as a backdrop for the chivalric adventures of individual knights errant. Students familiar with Malory and acquainted with scholarly discussions concerning the discrepancies between the eight tales that fragment the work's comprehensive unified vision of the Arthurian legend would be particularly sensitive to this aspect of Arthurian tradition. Even students reading excerpts of Malory along with other works in the romance tradition can encounter various, often contradictory, versions of the same tale, thereby forcing them to confront the question of whether there can be said to be one story of King Arthur or, rather, a collection of stories predicated upon a notion of King Arthur. The concept of the Once and Future King as a pretext for storytelling, rather than the (instinctively more unified) object of storytelling, is taken to its extreme in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. The final frustration of the knights' attempts to obtain the Grail shifts the audience's attention away from the gratification of a conventional resolution that brings the various strands together, forcing us to acknowledge that what is most important in the Grail quest is not the object, but the journey itself.

Finally, a comment by director Terry Gilliam on the film's formal association with medieval Arthurian traditions can also serve as a catalyst for a class discussion on literary form as socially specific and the viability or potential of transhistorical comparisons. While asserting that the sketches and gags that constitute *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* complicate its status as a feature film, Gilliam suggests that this approach does, however, correspond to what he deems a medieval *Weltanschauung*, a unique mentality capable of blurring the lines between reality and fantasy which have long since calcified in the Western imagination. Thus, he insists, the way they made the film, "jumping from ideas and different forms of reality is not an unmedieval way of thinking." Gilliam's remarks—although he may be less of an authority on things medieval than Terry Jones, co-director and author of a rather iconoclastic scholarly study of Chaucer's Knight in the *Canterbury Tales*—raise the intriguing possibility that the forms we tend to identify as postmodern could perhaps best suit contemporary creative explorations of medieval works of art, stemming as they do from a world and mindset anterior to the eras that have come to define the conventional terms of Western consciousness and European art.⁸ As Wlad Godzich observes, "Many a student of the Middle Ages has been struck by what he perceives as uncanny structural similarities between contemporary popular culture and various aspects of medieval life" (74).

Monty Python's postmodern toying with the audience's expectations for medieval heroes, and the Arthurian topos in particular, becomes most evident once students recognise the degree to which the medieval Matter of Britain informs and frames the film's farcical sketches. Much of the humour of Monty Python's Grail quest stems from the use of incongruity. The film's play with traditional literary conventions in terms of plot and tone introduces a broader metafictional commentary on the significance of the Middle Ages for contemporary audiences. One clear theme running through *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* on both the micro- and macrocosmic levels is the notion that medieval Arthurian traditions have produced a horizon of expectations, one that Monty Python delights in dismantling. Those scholars who have examined *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* concur that part of the film's strategy is to expose our penchant for romanticising our heroes and ourselves, a strategy that reveals how our attempts to grasp the Middle Ages are always already tainted by our modern concerns (Day, Thompson). A class discussion about some of the most obvious ways in which Monty Python toys with our expectations for the Knights of the Round Table in the various sketches can lay the groundwork for this final broader consideration of the metafictional issues raised by the film.

There can be no better example of Monty Python's ludic assault on traditional knight errantry than the unfortunate Sir Robin the-not-quite-so-brave-as-Sir-Launcelot. Sir Robin's troubles stem not so much from the many monsters he almost fights, but from the minstrels who accompany him everywhere. The minstrels, presented here as the traditional celebrators of knightly prowess, highlight the horizon of expectations established in Arthurian romance in their song introducing Sir Robin:

Bravely bold Sir Robin, rode forth from Camelot.
 He was not afraid to die, O brave Sir Robin.
 He was not at all afraid to be killed in nasty ways.
 Brave, brave, brave, brave Sir Robin!

While Sir Robin's increasing discomfiture as the song continues on to elaborate the "nasty" forms his death might take begins to show us the fantasy and hyperbole of an imaginary realm in which all Arthur's knights (save the occasionally surly Kay) seem to be the epitome of perfection, it is the resumption of the minstrels' song when Sir Robin rejoins King Arthur as he faces the Knights of Ni that drives home the constructedness of Arthurian *aventure*. The minstrels' song—whose lyrics now reflect Sir Robin's deeds, even as they resume the same tone and melody that introduced his intentions as "brave" Sir Robin—highlight the artifice by placing an antihero on an aesthetic plane that can only speak in terms of excellence:

Bedevere: My liege, it's Sir Robin!
 Minstrel: [singing] Packing it in and packing it up,
 And sneaking away and bugging up,
 And chickening out and pissing off home,
 Yes, bravely he is throwing in the sponge.

The fact that the literary tradition governing knightly behaviour in Arthurian romance can often reduce the knightly hero from a subject to a convention is nowhere better illustrated than in Sir Robin's encounter with the Three-Headed Knight in scene ten.⁹ Here we witness 'Art' in conflict with 'Life' as the minstrels presume to speak for Sir Robin, while Sir Robin's subjective response deflects the conventional narrative trajectory that the minstrels represent and attempt to initiate:

All Heads: Halt! Who art thou?
 Minstrel: [singing] He is brave Sir Robin, brave Sir Robin, who—
 Sir Robin: Shut up! Um, n-n-n-nobody really. I'm j-j-j-ju-just, um, just

passing through.

All Heads: What do you want?

Minstrel: [singing] To fight and—

Sir Robin: Shut up! Um, oo, a—nothing, nothing really. I, uh, j-j-just just to um, just to p-pass through, good Sir Knight.

This conflict between the conventional representation of chivalric knighthood and the subjectivity contemporary audiences might expect in a character is taken even further in King Arthur's encounter with the Black Knight. In this sketch it becomes increasingly apparent that Arthur faces not a character, but a plot device. The knight, identified only by the colour of his armour, is a common feature in numerous romances—such as the Black Knight in *Le Chevalier au Lion* and the Red Knight encountered by the naïve Perceval in various versions of his Grail quest—in which such a figure can represent an abstract test of knightly courage, only later personalised (and thereby complicated) by the revelation of the knight's identity.¹⁰ Even more relevant to this sketch are the nameless knights wandering around the mysterious forests of King Arthur's realm whose sole function appears to be to act as obstacles for the hero. The Black Knight in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* recalls, for example, the nameless knight guarding the ford in *Le Chevalier de la Charrete*, whose reasons for forbidding Sir Lancelot passage are never mentioned. As Arthur's frustrated attempts to recruit the silent and impassive Black Knight and his eventual battle with the knight demonstrate, the Black Knight is capable of no dialogue save that which initiates and escalates a battle:

Arthur: You fight with the strength of many men, Sir Knight.

[pause]

I am Arthur, King of the Britons.

[pause]

I seek the finest and bravest knights in the land to join me in my court at Camelot.

[pause]

You have proved yourself worthy. Will you join me?

[pause]

You make me sad. So be it. Come Patsy.

Black Knight: None shall pass.

Arthur: What?

Black Knight: None shall pass.

Arthur: I have no quarrel with you, good Sir Knight, but I must cross this bridge.

Black Knight: Then you shall die.

The Black Knight's oft-quoted lines denying his situation as he is systematically dismembered by King Arthur—"Tis but a scratch...Just a flesh wound...I'm invincible"—highlight not only the extreme violence of knightly adventure we often gloss over, but also reveal, once again, a character trapped within the logic of a literary convention. The Black Knight's exclamation, "The Black Knight always triumphs!" when he is literally on his last leg reminds us of how our expectations are shaped by tradition. Referring to himself in the third person, the Black Knight speaks of himself as a fictional character governed by a particular horizon of expectations; in other words, he is not a narrative agent so much as a convention.

The final example of Monty Python's play with Arthurian conventions, the Tale of Sir Launcelot, bears a more oblique relationship to Arthurian literature. Nevertheless it emphasises the self-reflexivity in the film which continuously reminds the audience of the traditions that inform our assumptions. The Tale of Sir Launcelot presents a hero very much aware of the "genre" with which he is associated.¹¹ After his squire Concorde has been struck by an arrow bearing Herbert's note, Launcelot must negotiate a reality that continually confounds both his and the audience's aesthetic and narrative expectations:

Concorde: Message for you, sir.

Launcelot: Concorde! Concorde! Speak to me! [reads] "To whoever finds this note: I have been imprisoned by my father, who wishes me to marry against my will. Please, please, please come and rescue me. I am in the Tall Tower of Swamp Castle." At last! A call! A cry of distress! This could be the sign that leads us to the Holy Grail! Brave, brave Concorde, you shall not have died in vain!

Concorde: Uh, I'm—I'm not quite dead, sir.

Launcelot: Well, you shall not have been mortally wounded in vain!

Concorde: I—I—I think I c—I could pull through, sir.

Launcelot: Oh, I see.

Concorde: Actually, I think I'm all right to come with you, sir—

Launcelot: No, no, sweet Concorde! Stay here! I will send help as soon as I have accomplished a daring and heroic rescue in my own particular...[sigh]

Concorde: Idiom, sir?

Launcelot: Idiom!

Sir Launcelot's greatest feat in this sketch lies not in his swordplay in Swamp Castle, but rather in his heroic perseverance in maintaining his "idiom" in the face of a peculiarly unconventional adventure. In it, the damsel in distress turns out to be a man, and Launcelot is almost appropriated as a son-in-law by the lord of Swamp Castle. Launcelot's refusal to follow the miraculously-recovered Concorde on foot away from the horrors of a wedding feast turned Broadway chorus, attempting, instead, to act in his "idiom" by swinging on a chandelier, clearly invokes the swashbuckling of Errol Flynn. Nevertheless, the brutal and indiscriminate violence that characterises Sir Launcelot in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is not an inappropriate commentary on the ubiquity of violence in Arthurian tradition and, more specifically, on the Sir Lancelot of literary tradition in particular. John Cleese's Launcelot offers an explanation of his behaviour to Herbert's father which cannot help but remind Malory readers of Sir Lancelot's part in the deaths of Sir Gareth and Sir Gaheris, a fatal negligence that turns Sir Gawain against him and that hastens the downfall of the Round Table: "...I'm afraid when I'm in this idiom, I sometimes get a bit, uh, sort of carried away."

An exploration like this of how the plot of the film disrupts audience expectations through incongruity and through frequent references to its own aesthetics teaches students on a basic level to confront their own assumptions and perceive the constructedness of the conventions that govern even contemporary hero tales. From the first to the last sketch, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* frustrates our attempts to "willingly suspend our disbelief" through a continuous metafictional commentary. The opening dialogue between Arthur and the soldiers in scene one immediately sets the stage for this erosion of literary ideals by presenting a King Arthur whose ability to act out his majestic role is compromised by his pathetic props:

King Arthur: Whoa there!

Soldier #1: Halt! Who goes there?

Arthur: It is I, Arthur, son of Uther Pendragon, from the castle of Camelot.

King of the Britons, defeater of the Saxons, sovereign of all England!

Soldier #1: Pull the other one!

Arthur: I am,...and this is my trusty servant, Patsy. We have ridden the length and breadth of the land in search of knights who will join me in my court at Camelot. I must speak to your lord and master.

Soldier #1: What? Ridden on a horse?

Arthur: Yes.

Soldier #1: You're using coconuts!

Arthur: What?

Soldier #1: You've got two empty halves of coconut and you're bangin' 'em together.

Arthur: So? We have ridden since the snows of winter covered this land, through the kingdom of Mercia, through—

Soldier #1: Where'd you get the coconuts?

The soldier's preoccupation with the coconuts undermines Arthur's grandiloquent tone and presents King Arthur and chivalry as a construct composed of various key elements. The substitution of coconuts for actual horses forces the audience to participate in the storytelling process by allowing the sound of the coconuts to substitute metonymically for the horses' hooves. Monty Python's insistence on exposing the artifice of storytelling, on constantly calling attention to the film as a fiction based on other fictions, permeates the text. The repeated references to the swallow issue in the sketches about Sir Bedevere and the witch, and the Bridge of Death, force the audience to recall this initial scene long after we have accepted the coconut-bearing squire in the interest of maintaining our storytelling illusion. The self-reflexive references to the Book of the Film noted earlier, and to the actual film, as in the Narrative Interlude prior to scene twelve, force the audience's awareness of the process in which it is engaging:

Narrator: Sir Launcelot had saved Sir Galahad from almost certain temptation, but they were still no nearer the Grail. Meanwhile, King Arthur and Sir Bedevere, not more than a swallow's flight away, had discovered something. Oh, that's an unladen swallow's flight, obviously. I mean, they were more than two laden swallows' flights away—four really, if they had a coconut on a line between them. I mean, if the birds were walking and dragging—

Crowd: Get on with it!

Narrator: Oh, anyway. On to scene twenty-four, which is a smashing scene with some lovely acting, in which Arthur discovers a vital clue, and in which there aren't any swallows, although I think you can hear a starling—ooh!

This insistence on drawing attention to the production of the story is taken to its logical conclusion when the knights are saved from the "cartoon peril" in the cave guarded by the deadly bunny because "the animator suffered a fatal heart attack." The final

scene in which the knights are rounded up by contemporary policemen, and which ends abruptly when a police officer attacks the cameraman still filming the scene, completely shatters any tenuous illusions we may still cling to about this Grail quest.

The officer's patronising attack on the cameraman—"All right, sonny. That's enough. Just pack that in"—is by extension an attack on the audience, reminding us quite literally of the lens we have been using to view this story. Such metafictional moments force an awareness of ourselves as consumers of this particular kind of tale and ethos, demanding a reevaluation of the appeal of the Arthurian legends. A brief scene, but one perhaps touching a raw nerve for scholarly Arthurian enthusiasts, highlights the various audiences drawn to the Arthurian story. Scene nine features an historian recounting Arthur's story for a "Picture for Schools" when he is stabbed to death by a passing knight riding, one must note, the only real horse seen in the film. Although the academic was identified in the credits of Monty Python's original screenplay as "the historian who isn't A.J.P. Taylor," the more generic title "Historian" in Python's final product has been perceptively dubbed an "academic Everyman" by Day.¹² Audiences can savour the poetic justice of this extermination of a pedant by a manifestation of the very violence so unproblematically celebrated in Arthurian literature. Nevertheless, it is, ironically, the attack on the historian, the institutional storyteller as it were, which precipitates the police investigation that aborts the attack on Castle Aaaagh, the Grail quest and, ultimately, the film. While the storyteller is compromised by his simplistic and idealised approach to the chivalric world, the tale begins to unravel when he is eliminated. Thus, Monty Python presents us with a paradox, mocking our desire for the conventional images and ethos that constitute the Arthurian legend while participating, to a degree, in the illusion. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* forces us to reassess the appeal of these stories, even as it acknowledges their charm, because we are neither able to be completely swept away by the fantasy nor able to dismiss it entirely.

Monty Python's comic assault on the Grail quest ultimately raises the issue of medievalism, inviting students to ask questions concerning the function of the Middle Ages as an imaginative site for contemporary society. The film presents two popular, but conflicting, visions of the Middle Ages. The Middle Ages are either the abject, primitive Other in our myth of progress; or we worship the era as a glorious Golden Age of chivalry in our myth of social degeneration. Thus, in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* we have the definitive representative of an idealised pre-industrial society, King Arthur, riding about in an intentionally exaggerated context of all the aspects of

medieval life that we like to think we have overcome for the most part in the West: the Plague, rampant poverty and social injustice, unmitigated physical suffering, the theological and institutional oppression symbolised by self-mortification, witch-hunting, and superstition. The collision of these two opposing visions in the film renders each more apparent as a construct functioning within a particular ideological system.

Monty Python not only juxtaposes our images of the Middle Ages, but the film also stages a confrontation between medieval and contemporary value systems which forces us to examine our attraction to the utopianism embodied by the Arthurian mythos. King Arthur's encounter with Dennis the mud-farmer, a member of an "anarcho-syndicalist commune," demonstrates the implicit feudal values of the noble warrior society celebrated in Arthurian romance (and in many contemporary social fantasies), values which are antithetical to contemporary Western sociopolitical beliefs. Unlike the world of medieval romance, which is populated predominantly by the estates that fight and pray (along with noble and Otherworldly women), Monty Python's vision of the Middle Ages presents the workers conveniently ignored in chivalric fantasies:

Dennis: What I object to is that you automatically treat me like an inferior.

Arthur: Well, I am king!

Dennis: Oh king, eh, very nice! And how d'you get that, eh? By exploiting the workers! By 'anging on to outdated imperialist dogma which perpetuates the economic and social differences in our society. If there's ever going to be any progress with the...

Arthur: Shut up, will you? Shut up!

Dennis: Oh! Now we see the violence inherent in the system.

Arthur: Shut up!

Dennis: Oh! Come and see the violence inherent in the system! Help, help! I'm being repressed!

Arthur: Bloody peasant!

Dennis: Oh, what a give-away. Did you hear that?

This sketch not only locates Arthurian literature within a framework of political and social values we may be inclined to ignore otherwise, but it also emphasises for students the function of the legend or myth as a political tool. Monty Python's commentary on the Lady of the Lake and Arthur's sovereignty debunks the mysticism that bolsters such imperial ideology:

Arthur: I am your king!

Woman: I didn't vote for you.

Arthur: You don't vote for kings.

Woman: How do you become king then?

Arthur: The Lady of the Lake...[angels sing]...her arm clad in the purest shimmering samite, held aloft Excalibur from the bosom of the water, signifying by Divine Providence that I, Arthur, was to carry Excalibur. [singing stops] That is why I am your king.

Dennis: Listen, strange women lying in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government. Supreme executive power derives from a mandate from the masses, not from some farcical aquatic ceremony.

Arthur: Be quiet!

Dennis: Well, but you can't expect to wield supreme executive power just because some watery tart threw a sword at you!

Arthur: Shut up!

Dennis: I mean, if I went 'round saying I was an emperor just because some moistened bint had lobbed a scimitar at me, they'd put me away.

The juxtaposition of Dennis the peasant's crass scepticism and discourse with King Arthur's rather Malorian depiction of his claim to sovereignty—robbing the legend of the high seriousness it requires, as Roberts points out, by removing the water by degrees (151)—becomes even more pertinent when one draws the students' attention to the ways in which the Arthurian legend has been used in various political agendas throughout literary history.¹³

Monty Python's humorous portrayal of the contradictory appeal of a feudal myth for contemporary society participates in a broader satirical tradition that responds to romance ideology by staging a confrontation between romantic ideals and the realism of the mundane world. Along with Graham Chapman's King Arthur and his knights, audiences of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* find their romantic expectations undermined, their myths dismantled. Instead of the brave mounted warriors of chivalric legend, we find an assortment of bumbling nitwits, skipping about a desolate landscape to the sound of banging coconuts, whose battle cry is quickly replaced by shouts of "Run away! Run away!" Instead of a monarch who epitomises regal perfection, we find a king who beats anarcho-syndicalist peasants and says "Ni" to an old woman in a quest to obtain a shrubbery, a king who is omniscient enough to know about African and European swallows, but seems unable to count to three. These

images may strike us, as they have various scholars, as a uniquely postmodern commentary on the Arthurian legend. One may even be tempted to conclude with critics like Bishop and Day that Monty Python's transhistorical antics communicate nothing so much as the limits of our own visions. Yet, over four centuries before Monty Python's knights confused coconuts with horses, Cervantes' famous knight was tilting at windmills. Margaret Reid's commentary on *Don Quixote's* relevance to the Arthurian tradition illustrates its pertinence for our discussion of Monty Python's "holy grailing":

Nevertheless this novel is the most salient commentary that has ever been written on the extravagances of the [Arthurian] romances, although in France and England the bombast and absurdity was not carried to such lengths. In the conduct of the hero, in the romance of Cervantes, this absurdity and extravagance is shown in a fantastic chimera, which, like a child's soap-bubble, bursts as it touches the ground of reality. Here, through the medium of the brain crazed with reading chivalric romances, inns become castles; windmills with long arms, giants; a flock of sheep, a vast army; and ridiculous contests, glorious victories for knight-errantry (245).

Moreover, just as Monty Python, like Cervantes, shows what Reid defines as the "weaknesses and absurdities of the romantic world, held suspended between heaven and earth" (245), so, too, does Monty Python's Arthur, like Don Quixote, manage somehow, in spite of this revelation, to display a certain nobility. In his commentary on Graham Chapman's portrayal of King Arthur, Terry Gilliam marvels at Chapman's ability to maintain his dignity in the movie, acting as a "solid centre for all the silliness." An observation by Roberts offers a partial explanation for this aspect of Monty Python's Arthurian vision:

It is the essential insight of Python that the whole world is a silly place, and that the works of Monty Python are populated by characters who struggle manfully with the task of maintaining seriousness in the face of such absurdity. Whilst this makes a figure such as Arthur the butt of a great many jokes, it also endues him with a curiously heroic quality (152).

The curiously heroic quality Monty Python's King Arthur displays, I would argue, is his truly Quixotian determination to stay within, to borrow Sir Launcelot's phrase, his "own particular idiom."

In his commentary on Monty Python's approach to the Arthurian legend and the Middle Ages Terry Gilliam claims the troupe intended to make fun of what we fear,

such as violence and death, and that which we hold dear, the stories of our heroes. He proposes that the great test and the great defence of our values is to “take the thing we love most, rip it apart, and see what happens.” Gilliam concludes, “If you can still respect them [the things we love] at the end of the process, then you can believe in them.” Monty Python’s vision of the Arthurian legend, stripped of its enchantments, still speaks to us because it offers the same lesson learned by the Grail knights of the ancient tales: that the most important part of the quest is the journey itself. The story of the Grail, after all, as Godzich points out, is a story which itself never truly ends, always deferring the definitive vision and conclusion we seek:

Monty Python and the Holy Grail, because it is a film which consciously tries to place itself within the context of the Grail cycle, deals with the hermeneutic issue of the meaning of its own production because that question is inherent to [the Grail cycle]. And since this question belongs to what Huxley used to call *philosophia perennis*, there is properly no answer which allows itself to be summarised. It is for this reason that the Grail cycle is a cycle, properly unfinished and interminable...[Any] end can only be temporary, and therefore it is always arbitrary (81).

The quest for the Grail has always been, in part, about the necessarily endless progress toward self-definition and self-knowledge, for the fictional Grail knights as for the authors who created and audiences who enjoyed these tales. In an Arthurian literature course the knowledge we may gain concerns ourselves as the interpreters and tellers of the old tales whose “idiom” and message somehow still relate to our dreams of the future. Put another way, Monty Python’s “holy grailing” fits into the study of Arthurian literature much as Kay the Seneschal fits into Arthur’s court. Both characterised as scornful and himself ridiculed, Kay’s uncouth tongue has often linked him, according to the *New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, to the Old French term “gab,” primarily meaning “mockery.” Yet even though he frequently serves as a foil for the heroic protagonists of romances from Chrétien onwards, this enigmatic character remains a part of the Round Table to the extent that, in a curious twist, Kay is identified in the Vulgate and later adaptations, including Malory, as the foster-brother of King Arthur himself. Kay’s value lies in part in the fact that his incongruous unchivalric behaviour and mocking tongue serve to educate both Arthurian characters and, by extension, audiences. Kay disabuses them of their potential pretensions and provokes them to be worthy of the “idiom” to which they aspire. Similarly, even as it mocks our chivalric fantasies, Monty Python’s exuberantly flawed contemporary Grail quest helps students of Arthurian literature better comprehend both the complexities and

sublimity of the Arthurian legend, as well as our own ongoing fascination with the Once and Future King.

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Notes

1 Siân Echard offers some less well-known examples of medieval ludic and parodic treatments of the Arthurian legend. Raymond Thompson, in particular, addresses how the ironic tradition that exists from Chrétien de Troyes on to Thomas Berger is manifested in Arthurian films.

2 Rebecca and Samuel Umland presents a comprehensive chapter on the numerous film adaptations of Twain's novel, suggesting the appeal of Camelot for the artists experimenting with this new storytelling medium. The authors also observe the relationship between Twain's dismissive spoof, "holy grailing," and Monty Python's film (63).

3 See Harty, *The Reel Middle Ages*, 7. Also see Harty's entry on the film in *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, as well as "Cinema Arthuriana: Translations of the Arthurian Legend to the Screen," "Filmic Treatments of the Legend of King Arthur," and "Teaching Arthurian Film," "The Arthurian Legend on Film: An Overview" and "Lights! Camelot! Action!—King Arthur on Film." Aside from occasionally gesturing to Bresson, neither Harty nor any other scholar has seen fit to elaborate precisely which Arthurian films Monty Python is supposed to be addressing. Since the proximity of production makes Bresson's film an unlikely influence, I argue that Monty Python is responding more generally to cinematic medievalism than pointedly to earlier, specifically Arthurian, films—with the notable exception being the 1967 *Camelot* based on the Lerner and Loewe musical. The focus of this article will be the literary aspects of the film; however, I believe the major cinematic references for Monty Python's film are Ingmar Bergman's dark medieval dreamscape, *The Seventh Seal*; the swashbuckling of Errol Flynn's *The Adventures of Robin Hood*; and more indirectly, the various Western-influenced medieval films of the fifties and sixties.

4 Given that this article is the product of my having taught *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* as a part of a survey of Arthurian literature, I would like to acknowledge the students of those courses, whose observations and questions have surely helped to shape my own views on the film. In particular, Alyssa MacLean's work on theories of humour and Monty Python's film has contributed to my views on the implications of

Python's play with convention.

5 All references to the directors' commentary in this article are from my personal transcript of Analog track 2 on the Criterion laser disc, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1992).

6 All citations of the screenplay in this article are from the *Monty Python and the Holy Grail: Film Script* transcript by Adam Jones et al.

7 For more on the significance of the idea of the book in the film as an analogue for the medieval past, see Osberg and Crow.

8 From a scholarly standpoint the differences between the medieval world or worlds and the "modern" eras that followed must be qualified so as not to perpetuate the traditional tendency to obscure the many ways in which intellectual, artistic and sociopolitical achievements in the Middle Ages shaped the modern world. In a classroom setting which deals with texts that appear at least superficially familiar, however, students must also learn of the disparities between modern approaches, informed by the philosophical, aesthetic and psychological developments of the past centuries, and the medieval mindset.

9 Interestingly, the most compelling knights of Arthurian tradition are those knights, epitomised by the Grail knight Perceval, who must learn from their mistakes.

10 In other cases, the bachelor knight's assumption of coloured armour can be an escape from identity and the attendant problem of subjectivity in a world in which professional ideals and personal desires often conflict.

11 Monty Python's *The Official 'Unofficial' Monty Python and the Holy Grail Screenplay* (Final Draft March 20, 1974, transcribed by Grue) reveals that Launcelot was originally scripted to use the word "genre" where he uses the term "idiom" in the film.

12 See *The Official 'Unofficial' Monty Python* final credits.

13 Schichtman and Carey offer a variety of essays on how the Arthurian legend has been put to political use. In fact, Terry Gilliam observes in the directors' commentary that the legend of King Arthur is particularly appealing for British comedy, whose fascination with the undermining of authority derives from the failure of the British Empire.

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