

## Not Dead Yet: Monty Python and the Holy Grail in the Twenty-first Century

DONALD L. HOFFMAN

Dead parrots and plummeting sheep, to say nothing of Spiny Norman and the Minister of Silly Walks, are at best unlikely companions for the Knights in Quest of the Grail. All, however, feature in the amazingly diverse, inclusive, bizarre, and absurd repertoire of Monty Python, the comedy troupe that dominated Public Television in the seventies. The brilliantly inventive troupe had predecessors in popular culture (Music Hall skits and the British Christmas Pantomime), earlier smart young university wits (citing Christopher Marlowe might claim too prestigious a heritage, but the successful *Beyond the Fringe* group—Peter Cook, Jonathan Miller, Dudley Moore, and Alan Bennett—surely established a precedent), and contemporary theatre practice and theory (both the waning of “Absurdist” theatre and the growing awareness in England of French theory). They had an easy time playing with Existentialism (placing Mrs. Jean Paul Sartre on a sinking submarine, for example), but some of the great experiments in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* seem to reflect French theory filtered through the practice of French film-makers, like Jean Luc Godard (who made it clear that making a film is a form of film cri-

cism) and Robert Bresson (whose *Lancelot du Lac* seems to have inspired the famous encounter with the Black Knight).

The deconstruction of film tradition, if not film as a medium, begins in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* with the famous mobile credits. The joke of the credits, to which I shall return, involves the ludicrous Swedish subtitles, but the location of the credits alone raises an interesting issue. These silly subtitles were, when the film was released, placed at the end where an audience ordinarily expects to find them these days. The tape and DVD releases place these credits at the beginning. The original placing of the credits at the end accomplished the useful, if accidental, purpose of encouraging audiences to stay until the end of the film and taught them that finding out who did what can be an informative and entertaining exercise. This placement did, however, undermine the stark ending of the film.

With the credits at the beginning, the film ends not merely with a ridiculous joke, but with cameras stopped by an irate policeman and a few sprockets of empty film. While placing the joking credits at the beginning allows the movie to start with a cri-

tique of film tradition, placing them at the end allows a critique of film itself.

Even now the subtitles are funny, but they are funny without resonance, or, at least, without a specific resonance. Most audiences, I imagine, are still familiar with subtitle, despite the relentless marketing of Hollywood product that has rendered foreign films not only unpopular but unfashionable.<sup>1</sup> The Swedish subtitles are not, however, a joke about subtitles in general, but a specific evocation of the time when Ingmar Bergman reigned supreme as the world's most prestigious director of serious films. The subtitles recall a poignantly distant day when serious films in a foreign language could actually attract a significant audience. Monty Python's Swedish subtitles are still funny, but the wit is now generic; it has a specificity lost on and irrelevant to a contemporary audience. As a joke, it's not dead yet, but, unlike the old man in the plague scene, it's not “getting better.”

As the credits get sillier and sillier, a placard announces that those responsible have been sacked; not too long after, we learn of the sacking of the sackers. Silliness again, but in a different register. These comments make jokes not on the tradition of film, but on the process of film-making. With these jokes, the Pythons introduce a more complex comedy that begins to deconstruct the process of creating and sustaining illusion. This sort of deconstruction may have begun with the moment Herod left the pageant to rage in the streets in the York Mystery Cycle, continued with the interruptions of the scripted audience in Francis Beaumont's *Knight of the Burning Pestle*, and gone on to erupt in the blurry distinctions between actors and audiences in Tom Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound*. The fact that this sort of deconstruction of illusion still shocks an audience is powerful testimony to our desire to be deceived.<sup>2</sup>

The film begins with the title in Gothic script: England, 932 A.D. The most

interesting thing about this year is that nothing much happened in it. The Laud Manuscript of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle skips over it entirely, while the Parker Manuscript notes only: “Her for[th] ferde Fry[th]e stan bisceop” (106).<sup>3</sup> Although we may join in mourning the death of Frithstan out of fellow feeling, we are not likely to be deeply moved by it and even less likely to have any notion of who the old fellow may have been.<sup>4</sup> The year 932 is just not memorable; indeed, for Arthurians it is significantly insignificant. It is roughly four centuries too late for an attempt at pseudo-historicism, an attempt to situate the narrative in the period of the Germanic invasions of England against which a possibly historical Arthur may have fought. It is, on the other hand, more or less three centuries too soon for the efflorescence of Arthurian literature inspired by Geoffrey of Monmouth and slightly more than half a millennium too early for a setting appropriate for Sir Thomas Malory, the most direct Arthurian source for the film. At best, it is more or less accidentally halfway between 1469, when Malory claims to have completed *Le Morte*, and 542, when, according to the Vulgate *Queste del Saint Graal*, the Quest of the Holy Grail was undertaken. The joke is a small one, but it reveals a certain perverse intelligence for the Pythons to have arrived at a date so completely certain to reverberate soundlessly, to evoke so clearly associations with absolutely nothing. It is possible that there have been duller years in English history than 932, but there cannot have been many.

Into this dullest and least Arthurian of years, the Pythons insert Arthur and his coconut horse,<sup>5</sup> a dissertation on the migratory habits of the African swallow, an encounter with the plague, and a commentary on the foundations of British political economy. None of these items has anything to do with the Quest for the Holy Grail, but they do set up a series of references that

recur with increasing silliness in the course of the film, from the question about the velocity of the sparrow at the Bridge of Death, to the recurring strains of the *Pie Jesu* punctuated by monks smashing themselves in the head with planks, to the poignant refrain of the fragile and disposable, "I'm not dead yet." What does not recur is the brief but brilliant commentary on Arthurian politics - from the famous observation that the king is easily recognizable, because he is the only one not covered in shit, to the uncertainty over whether Britain is a monarchy or an autonomous collective. Above all, there is the famous demystification of Arthur's authority when his vision of the Lady of the Lake, her arm clothed in purest white samite, who bestows on him the destined sword Excalibur, is countered by Dennis's celebrated view that "strange women lying about in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government." A less intense critique of the Arthurian system, but one that penetrates deeply into the roots of the definition of Arthur's historical role, is Dennis's elderly companion's response to Arthur's announcement that he is "King of the Britons" with the query "King of the who?" "King of the Britons?" he replies as the inquiry shifts from the governed to the governor and the questioning of kingship as an institution. After all, as the Old Lady points out, she did not vote for him.

These three first scenes are silly in themselves, but, as did the credits, they begin to mock and deconstruct certain film conventions. As the credits parodied the conventions of subtitles and the Swedish chic of Bergman films, the coconut horses attack a prime feature of the medieval cinematic epic, and also undermine the basis of medieval chivalry. There may well have been some compelling practical reasons for cutting out the horses, coconuts are cheaper and easier to train, for example, and the Pythons may not have been particularly expert horsemen. Whatever the reason, there

is a brilliant confusion of genres, as the coconut horse hooves, so effective on radio and soundtracks, are shown to be absurd when made apparent and visual. The device also, whether intentionally or not, cuts to the heart of that notion of knighthood rooted in the *chevalier* and his *cheval*. Once that glorious *cheval* has become a coconut, the basis of aristocratic privilege has been erased, and it is only a short step to Dennis and his Marxist analysis of feudalism.

A few short scenes involving witches, ducks, and God follow, but first Arthur encounters the Black Knight, an episode that, interesting problems of dating aside, is most probably a parody of the battles in Bresson's *Lancelot du Lac*. While the too easily lopped off limbs comically echo Bresson's treatment of battle, particularly in the mass quantities of blood that issue from cavernous wounds, the scene also reduces the notion of chivalric heroism to the very bottom line of absurdity, as the armless, legless stump of a knight screams at his "cowardly" foe to return and fight to the finish. Silly as it appears to be, this deconstruction of a chivalric ethos is as implicitly powerful as Dennis's deconstruction of feudal power. The absurdity at the heart of both chivalry and monarchy is made visible and, consequently, made ridiculous. At the same time, the foreign-language art film also finds itself the target. Like the Swedish subtitles in the opening credits, the Bresson-like dismemberment of the feisty torso punctures the high style artiness of the French film. Ultimately, Bresson and the Pythons may, in fact, tend toward a very similar ideological analysis of feudalism and chivalry, but their methods are as unlike as a comic book from a Sorbonne dissertation.

The encounter with the hyper-heroic Black Knight is followed by the Scene of the Witch Test in which it is proved that a witch weighs the same as a duck, because of course witches are made out of wood, and wood, like a duck, floats. There are logical

flaws here, but they are, perhaps, not greater than the notorious ontological leap in Anselm's proof of God. More serious than the critique of scholastic logic, however, is the realization that a mob intent on murdering witches is more than happy to accept a faulty argument. The victim, however, is equally complicit with the Inquisition. "Fair cop," she says, suspended in her little cage balancing the equal and opposite weight of the complacent fowl. The unruly mob joyously pursues the witch, its faith in logic amply rewarded. And her Inquisitor turns out to be Bedivere, who is dubbed a knight and becomes the first of Arthur's companions on the quest.<sup>6</sup>

The film then takes up the cinematic equivalent of *occupatio* by telling rather than showing Arthur's acquisition of knights. We are shown, as is the feature of pseudo-historical and story book films, the illustrated ancient book whose pages are turned by a manicured hand. We are given nine pages with lovely Gothic lettering on the *verso* and scenes from the film in place of illuminations on the *recto*. As with the Swedish credits, this parody of another feature of film tradition begins as silly and grows sillier by repetition and excess. The nine chapter headings are:

*The Book of the Film*  
*Sir Lancelot the Brave*  
*Sir Galahad the Pure*  
*Sir Robin-the-not-quite-so-brave-as-*  
*Sir-Lancelot...*  
*Who had nearly fought the Dragon of*  
*Angnor...*  
*Who nearly stood up to the vicious*  
*Chicken of Bristol...*



Graham Chapman (left) as King Arthur and Terry Gilliam as "his trusty steed" Patsy in Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones's 1975 film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

*And who personally wet himself at the*  
*Battle of Badon Hill?*

*Sir Not-Appearing-in-this-Film*  
*Together they formed a band whose*  
*names and deeds were to be retold throughout*  
*the centuries.*

And as the page turner prepares to turn the final page, a hairy bearlike claw emerges slowly from the right-hand corner of the frame and closes over the manicured hand. It is again a moment of purely Python silliness, but it reflects film conventions, such as all those storybook pages turned in the classic Disney features from *Snow White* on. Those relentless chapter headings also recall serious film as well, such as the title cards in the silent film era, while also recalling medieval traditions as well in its evocation of the chapter headings familiar from Caxton's *Malory*.

At last, after six scenes of parodic riffs critiquing and reorienting our expectations of the Middle Ages and modern cinema, the

witch test and the book lead to the initiation of the ritual quest, and the knights' approach to the legendary castle of Camelot. Unhappily, this is not the moment of grandeur the knights and the audience may have anticipated, for as Patsy (of the clogging coconuts) points out, "It's only a model" (deconstructing illusion once again) and, after the Round Table knights break into a chorus celebrating themselves as "knights of Camelot / who eat ham and jam and Spam a lot," even Arthur is forced to conclude, "It's a silly place."

Turning from Camelot and riding (concocting?) on, the knights come face to face with God Himself, or, at least, with a wonderful Terry Gilliam drawing of Him, as He sends the knights to find the Grail. This version of the initiation of the quest varies significantly from any of the medieval sources. It may, in fact, fit in quite nicely with many assumptions about the quest as a divine mission, but it is both a little more mysterious and a little less divine in the Vulgate or in Malory, who is the most likely source for the Pythons (although it is more than likely some of the troupe were acquainted with the Vulgate as well). The scene is then more a parody of the audience's expectations than it is of the actual source. What the Pythons have eliminated is the Pentecostal imagery of the first appearance of the Grail at Camelot, the prophecies of Siege Perilous, the Loathly Lady,<sup>8</sup> and all the machinery preparing for the supplanting of Lancelot and his earthly chivalry by his own son Galahad and his new institution of spiritual chivalry. But, since the knights had already turned away from Camelot as a "silly place," they would not be there to see the Grail even if it had appeared. In lieu of this interior setting, God speaks to the questers in an open space that reproduces a certain kind of Moses on Sinai sublimity, but then undercuts that sublimity completely by reducing God to a cartoon.

Now that the Quest has begun, the first

stop is at a castle inhabited by Frenchmen. In the universe of comedy, there is probably nothing as funny as a Monty Python Frenchman played by John Cleese. From his response to Arthur's earnest announcement, "We have come to seek the Grail" ("We've already got one"), to his concluding insult ("I fart in your general direction"), Cleese's amazing accent raises the silly to the stupendous, turns a parody of the French into the birth of a new race of creature, vulgar, pretentious, violent, outrageous, and sublimely comic. The voluble Frenchman, sort of a Cyrano on crack, is funnier than a flying cow, although the Pythons give us that, too, by the end of the scene. Most will agree that this transcendently inane moment has just about nothing to do with the Holy Grail, except... never underestimate the deviousness of Frenchmen (maybe they did have a Grail) or the French origins of the Vulgate quest. The silliness of the scene evokes serious reflections, after all. It certainly calls upon England's traditional difficulty in dealing with France, an issue that probably predates 1066, but was certainly raised to the level of the permanently problematic in that critical year. The scene also suggests that, if you are planning to look for a Grail, you had best begin with the French. Cathars, Celts, Sarmatians, and who knows who else have their supporters as the original keepers of the Grail, but no one has quite gotten around the fact that the earliest texts that claim to be Grail texts are in French. From Robert de Boron to the Vulgate *Queste* to the massive *Continuations*, the Grail Castle is a French Castle. So the silly knights of Camelot may be looking in the wrong place, but they at least started on the right track. They also discover what most researchers into the history of the Grail discover, that one must start with the French, but will be led down a number of disappointing paths. The Grail Quest is the quintessentially French quest, the search for origins, for a transcendent signifier that leads relentlessly

to ruptures, gaps, and the inevitable *mise en abyme*. The search for origins, in other words, dissipates, is as irrecoverable as a "fart in your general direction."

The search for origins is complicated by the siege of the French Castle in the following scene, a siege accomplished by the epic machinery of the Trojan Rabbit, which harkens back to the siege of Troy and forward to Arthur's encounter with Caerbanog, the killer rodent. As before, the prime function of the Trojan Rabbit is to be supremely silly. This, it accomplishes both visually (it is quite a magnificent instrument) and diegetically (since the invaders neglect to get inside the thing). At the same time, the Trojan Rabbit inserts the *matière de Rome* into the *matière de Bretagne*, an amalgamation of periods, persons and genres that is entirely medieval. Think, for example, of the famous anachronisms of *The Second Shepherd's Play* where the Nativity seems to have taken place in the West Midlands, or, perhaps more to the point, of all those echoes of the myth of Theseus in the tale of Tristan: the tribute to the Morholt, for example, which is like that paid to the Minotaur, or the white sails exchanged for black.<sup>9</sup> This free appropriation of materials reflects a thoroughly medieval sort of *bricolage*. In addition, and accidentally or not, there is no ancient legend more implicated in Arthurian history than the story of the fall of Troy. After all, as Geoffrey of Monmouth tells us, Britain was founded by the son of Aeneas, the Trojan prince who escaped the Fall. And London was, after all, referred to as New Troy. Intentionally or not, much of this Troiano-Romano-Britonic tradition is encapsulated in the image of the Trojan Rabbit.

On the other hand, it is a rabbit, isn't it? No tradition remains intact in the presence of the Pythons' quest for silliness. Replacing the Horse by the Rabbit may be the most devastating burlesque of the Trojan legend since Chaucer compared the squawk-

ing of the hens when Chanticleer was captured by the fox to the lamentations of the Trojan women at Pyrrhus' murder of Priam at the Fall of Ilium.

Abandoning the siege, the knights return to the quest, and, following the ancient principle of *entrelacement*, the tale leaves off recounting the travails of the group and focuses for the first time on the individual adventures of one knight. The "Book" returns and brings us to "The Tale of Sir Robin." Although hitherto unknown, it would not be correct to think of Sir Robin as an unsung hero. He is accompanied by his own minstrel who relentlessly burbles the "Ballad of Sir Robin." This ballad may not be specifically derived from Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas*, but its heart and spirit are direct descendants of the utter silliness of Chaucer's pre-*Melibee* performance. Like *Sir Thopas*, "Sir Robin" imitates the remorseless rhymes and rhythms of the form, and, like *Sir Thopas*, "Sir Robin" celebrates the defects of a not too effective knight, whose most successful combat technique is "to bravely run away."

The Pythons then continue yet another tradition, if not an Arthurian one, with its roots in the Middle Ages,<sup>10</sup> and also helpfully contribute to the expansion of the Arthurian company which had been lacking its full complement of cowards.<sup>11</sup> Sir Robin's main adventure involves a three-headed knight, who has no counterpart in Arthurian legend, but may, minus the canine features, owe something to Cerberus. The heads argue never whether to have tea or kill Sir Robin first. They decide to kill Robin and then have tea and biscuits, but fall into dissension about biscuits, and by the time they are ready to kill Sir Robin, they look down to discover, as the minstrel tells us, he had "bravely turned his tail and fled." ~

The jaunty strains of the ballad turn to a reiteration of the *Pie Jesu*, this time in the margins of an animated manuscript, an-

other stroke of Terry Gilliam's genius. The monks proceed liturgically along the foliate curves of the illustration, banging themselves on the head, as they did in the "Bring Out Your Dead" scene, and sort of plunge into white space as their leafy support comes to a final finale. While Gilliam probably did not intend some sort of reference to a leap of faith in this brilliant manuscript joke, there is, in addition to a cynical comment on the monks' lemminglike willingness to follow and imitate the unthinking leaders of an unthoughtout ritual, a kind of innocent faith in the assumption that the leap into the blankness of the page is not, in fact, a leap into mere emptiness. There is, perhaps, also a faith in the vocation and industry of the monks who preserved classical learning in spite of their own beliefs, and a faith that what they labored to preserve will preserve them. The leap into the abyss also brings us back to the *mise en abîme* that continues to thwart scholarly attempts to get to the heart of the Grail business. Modern scholars, indeed, are not unlike these pathetic little hero monks who fall or leap into the blankness of the page, hoping for a revelation that is inevitably deferred, perhaps denied.

It is not inappropriate, perhaps, that the monks fall into the space surrounding the tide of the next episode: "The Tale of Sir Galahad." One would not expect the Pythons' Galahad to be the ascetic knight of the legend, and one would certainly not expect the Pythons to approve of the *Queste's* rigorous ascetic monastic values. Oddly, however, the bizarre, almost anti-*Queste* episode of the lusty maidens luring knights to their castle does have some precedent in the Vulgate. There is an obvious connection to Maiden Castle, a site that figures prominently in the *Queste*, although there do not seem to be a great many maidens in Maiden Castle. There is also an episode in the Vulgate in which, as with the nervous Sir Galahad, a virgin knight is surrounded by desperately lusty ladies. In

that text, Sir Bors finds himself in a castle ruled by an impetuous damsel, who demands that he make love to her. If not, all her companions will throw themselves from the tower with her. Sir Bors declines, disappointing the damsel and, undoubtedly, her plummeting companions.

Like Sir Bors, the Pythons' Sir Galahad remains chaste despite temptation, and the ladies remain unsatisfied, but alive. The effectiveness of the scene, in part, depends, most likely, on a certain misrecognition of the medieval depiction of women. While the medievalists among the Pythons should know that there are a number of aggressive women in medieval literature, it seems a good deal of the comedy of the scene depends on the simple fact that the castle of women is also a castle of horny women. As its complement, the comedy also depends on the presence of non-horny men,<sup>12</sup> which does have a precedent in the original, but is comic here where it is not, or at least not intentionally so, in the original, because the chastity is not based so much on an ascetic ideal as it is on the men's squeamishness; Galahad seems less chaste than frightened. Gawain, as one might expect, is quite ready for action, but dissuaded by Galahad. There are then elements of this deceptive Grail Castle that can be traced to the original, but the Pythons have no precedent for the castle as a lure, a conscious snare set out for Grail knights. Like the Bat Signal well known to denizens of Gotham, the ladies of the castle have their Grail signal all set to deceive knights. Naughty, naughty Zoot claims responsibility; she also claims the needs to be spanked by the knights, a penitence the other ladies eagerly claim the right to share. Alas, these knights are unable or unwilling to satisfy either desire: lust and justice are equally unfulfilled.

The quest continues with a visit to a craggy gentleman who prophesies the Bridge of Death and an encounter with the famous Knights Who Say "Ni" and who

are, for inscrutable reasons, in serious need of a shrubbery. The first episode, which calls itself "Scene 24" is, if you are counting, actually scene 13.<sup>13</sup> It is almost redundant of the Pythons to call attention to the episodic structure of the narrative. It is in no small measure a structure that reflects the origins of the Pythons in television sketch comedy and it is easy enough to view the film as a series of sketches roughly grouped around a theme. What the Pythons do, however, is incorporate a deconstruction of their method within the film. "Scene 24" interrupts sequence, even an episodic sequence, and calls attention to the arbitrary nature of these sequences. Episodes could be shuffled, reorganized, rearranged with no loss of meaning, and possibly an increase in texture and suggestion for the new and accidental arrangement. It is a gesture toward the sort of experimentation of Italo Calvino or Julio Cortázar. Again, however, this parodic post-modernism of the Pythons remains anchored in the Middle Ages, where episodic structures are not uncommon, especially in chivalric romances, and, as students of manuscript tradition can attest, episodes are migratory, can change position at the whim of a scribe. As so often happens, the Pythons are most surprising when they are most medieval.

Subject as well as technique might be seen as a reflection of medieval tradition. While neither a monk nor a Loathly Lady, the Loathly cave dweller does prophesy and give obscure directions like so many of the white hermits in the Vulgate *Queste*. The explications are less complex and the moral dimension pretty much neglected, but insofar as they operate as plot devices the Pythons' craggy caveman serves the same purpose, to simultaneously surprise and predict—by the time the prophesy comes to be fulfilled we have pretty much forgotten it was made. On the other hand, the Knights Who Say "Ni" serve no purpose at all, except to be enormously silly and to re-

mind us yet again that in the world of Monty Python anything can happen.

Returning to the book, we take up "The Tale of Sir Lancelot," one of the more extended sequences. While there is no specific precedent for this sequence, the basic plot is familiar. It is the tale of the princess locked in a tower and forced to marry against her will. Into her lonely life, a hero arrives to rescue her from her sad and lonely fate. It is that sort of story the Pythons tell us, except that the sad and lonely princess turns out to be Prince Herbert. And Sir Lancelot is confused. This gender-bending moment does, in fact, have some precedent in medieval texts, particularly in Malory. The pseudo-seduction in which Lancelot hastens to aid what he thinks is a lamenting woman only to discover the whining Prince Herbert has a sort of precedent in Lancelot's encounter with Sir Bellus, who is surprised to feel a beard when he embraces what he thought had been his paramour. Fortunately, the Pythons' Lancelot discovers his error before he accidentally embraces the unappetizing Prince Herbert. The cross-dressing Prince may also owe something to the episode when Lancelot forces Dinadan to dress as a woman at the conclusion of the Tournament at Surluse. Neither of these precedents, however, does quite the damage the Pythons do to the pattern of the romance. The Prince is not so much unmasked as massacred: the Prince tries to escape by making a ladder of the bedsheets. Lancelot slices them to let the Prince plunge to an uncertain, but certainly unhappy, fate. In this rough dismissal of the transgressive prince, the Pythons raise issues of cross-dressing and deviance, only to ruthlessly restore a brutal heteronormativity. On the other hand, the masculine norm may be undercut by its own excess, for Lancelot's subsequent escape involves a sweeping slaughter of the wedding guests. It is hard to explain why bridesmaids splattered with the blood of decapitated relatives

is funny. And perhaps for many it isn't. But one does react to the excess and the sheer outrageousness of the slaughter as if it were funny, and it may be so, perhaps, because it is so uncalled for, so unreal, and so over the top. Lancelot cancels the threat of homosexuality (effeminacy perhaps) represented by Prince Herbert (and Sir Belleus in Malory<sup>14</sup>) by first assisting in the Prince's murder, and then by senseless slaughter. The butchery at the banquet, in a way, restores his reputation for heroism, for machismo, but at the same time destroys it. By being so much the macho hero, Lancelot drains the concept of both sense and sensibility.

From this parodic romance interlude, the tale returns to the Grail quest. Like that primordial quest narrative, the "Tale of Culhwch and Olwen," the film makes use of the structure of the intercalated quest. The Grail knights do, in fact, return to the Knights Who Say "Ni" bearing the desired shrubbery. As this sort of story demands, the fulfillment of one quest merely motivates the initiation of another quest, so the Knights are requested to perform another quest, which is to fetch another shrubbery ... "a little higher and to the left." They are, however, spared this arduous task when the Knights Who Say "Ni" (now the Knights Who Used to Say "Ni") are reduced to helpless lumps by the sudden speaking of the unbearable word (apparently the reckless use of "it").

*Entrelacement* reigns as Sir Robin returns, an ill-fated professor, whose accidental and anachronistic death brings contemporary policemen into the Arthurian corpus, is recalled, and Terry Gilliam provides a glorious interlude based on the Duc de Berry's *Book of Hours*. The famous Limburg brothers illustrations are parodied, but also imitated with a certain affection. It is a subtle manuscript parody that is also a manuscript tribute.

The manuscript tour through the seasons leads into the encounter with Tim the Enchanter and the film's closest approach to

the cliché image of medieval knights, the dragon fight. There are, in fact, few dragon fights in Arthurian literature, but there is the story of St. George which, for England, in particular, fixed the image of the knight for the later Middle Ages, although the later Middle Ages in this case should probably be defined as the Age of Victoria. While there are few dragons in Arthurian literature, the Questing Beast plays a significant, if largely inscrutable, role in Arthurian legend, primarily in the prose *Tristan* where he is pursued by Palomede. There is also the enigmatic Welsh kitty, the Cath Pulag, that seems to have engaged in battle with Arthur somewhere in Switzerland. It seems unlikely, however, that these obscure beasts were the direct sources of the extraordinary creations of the Monty Pythons, the deadly Caerbanog and the Beast of Arrghhh. Like Cath Pulag, the killer kitty, Caerbanog appears to be a cuddly little rodent, continuing the rabbit theme introduced in the device of the Trojan Rabbit. He is, however, a deadly Killer Rabbit who returns us to the grim comedy of gore and corpses. The Beast of Arrghhh allows Terry Gilliam at last to exercise the power of the pen in imaging a truly fanciful monster. He is a cartoon, but an exuberantly grotesque creature, with hints of Cerberus, Argos, Hydra, and other mythical monsters. He also, in a wittily post-modern sort of touch, inscribes the death of the artist into the work of art. The beast is named Arrghhh because before his plot is complete, before his story is entirely drawn, the artist himself dies and his final spasms scribble the monster into scraggly fragments and name him in his dying gasps, "Arrghhh."

Escaping from the monster, the knights arrive at the Bridge of Death. This is the same bridge that had been prophesied in Scene 24, which was, of course, Scene 13. Riddles and questions have always been a crucial motif in Arthurian legend. Indeed, the entire quest, with its origins in Chrétien's *Perceval*, depends on the answer to the

question, "Whom does one serve with the Grail?" Questions and riddles are, then, implicated in the very earliest texts of the quest. They are rarely, however, connected with peculiar ridges that throw visitors in crevasses and threaten them with questions, such as "What is the capital of Assyria?" "What is your favorite color?" "What is the airspeed velocity of an unladen swallow?" The last question in a masterpiece of farcical *entrelacement* loops back to the initial discussion of the coconut horses and the theory of the migration of coconuts via African swallows. The questioner at the Bridge of Death is unprepared for Arthur's question, its legitimacy prepared for a dozen or more scenes earlier, "African or European swallow." The questioner unprepared for this question cannot answer, so he himself, in the venerable tradition of the trickster tricked, plunges to his own death. The remaining questers cross the bridge in safety.

But not before the questers are interrupted by a new peril, one unknown to the original Knights of the Holy Grail, but familiar to anyone exposed to the mammoth epics of the sixties, or anything shown in Italy, the dreaded "Intermission." The epic Hollywood film of the fifties, like *Around the World in Eighty Days*, is probably the model for the sudden intrusion of the "Intermission" notice in the midst of the challenge of the Bridge of Death. Those old epics did, however, usually have some sense of when a break would be appropriate. While the Pythons seem less likely to have had an Italian model in mind, it in many ways seems more apposite. The sudden, unexpected, intrusive "Fine Primo Tempo," to which Italian audiences are subjected, parallels the absurd timing of the Pythons' "Intermission." It is shocking and absurd, coming, as it does, in the midst of an episode that could easily have been allowed to complete itself before the break, and that is also situated something like three-quarters of the way into the film. As with the subtitles

at the beginning of the film, this is the sort of reference that has nothing to do with the Arthurian legend, but with the conventions of film. The absurdities of cinematic practice, American, English, Swedish, and, in this case, Italian, are called attention to. These sorts of devices, while not precisely derived from Brecht's theatre, are clearly alluded to Brecht's theory, a theory the Pythons surely knew. His famous, if ambiguous (*i.e.* multi-valenced) theory of the *Verfremdungseffekt* would embrace precisely these sorts of devices that shock us out of our cinematic complacency to force us to consider the nature of film and demystify the medium. This demystifying could be Marxist, serious, and revolutionary, or, as in the case of the Pythons, it could be silly. As the Pythons make clear, however, beginning with the brilliant social analysis of Dennis the peasant, it is entirely possible to be very silly and very Marxist simultaneously. Indeed, if the condition of man under capitalism is essentially alienated and absurd, silliness becomes the most appropriate and accurate response.

The Pythons, then, are true Brechtians and true Marxists not in spite of their silliness, but because of it. Even if the object of their demystification is trivial (such as the cinematic Intermission), it provides the basis for the questioning of systems and media that are too often assumed to be eternal and unchanging. Teaching us to laugh at an oddly placed intermission is a minor triumph. Teaching us to see through the absurdities and deceptions of conventions (conventions that include intermissions, and extend to other media events, like press conferences and Tom Brokaw) is of considerably more value. Silliness may not win the war, but it's not a bad way to begin the battle.

The battle begins to begin in earnest once the Pythons more or less cross the Bridge of Death. They arrive at a Grail Castle. While we are spared the endless explications that Perceval's sister inflicts on the Grail knights





King Arthur and his knights seek advice from the Mighty Wizard Tim in Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones's 1975 film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

and their readers in the *Queste*, the Pythons approach the castle by sea in a mysterious dragon-shaped ship. The ship may look a little more Scandinavian than Norman, a bit more suited to Beowulf than Bedivere, but it, nevertheless, recalls the magical ships which recur in the *Queste*. When the ship arrives at the last of the illusory Grail Castles, it turns out to be occupied by the marvelously silly Frenchmen we encountered at the beginning of the film. They remain absurd, and they remain a dead end.

In this relentless circling to return to the beginning, perhaps the essential meaning of a "cycle," the film ends with a deconstruction of film more absolute than the Swedish nonsense at the beginning. The motif of the lecturing professor, the twentieth-century Academic murdered by the

tenth-century Lancelot, returns in the arrival of the police investigating his death. The last frames of the film are the hand of an infuriated policeman blocking the camera in a move familiar from contemporary investigative documentaries. The investigation and the quest<sup>35</sup> both end abruptly, both incomplete and cancelled by the constable's hand.

The Pythons are primarily playing with the anachronism of the intrusion of the twentieth century on the fifteenth, and commenting on the chronic violence inherent in the practice of chivalry, commenting as well on the ironic lawlessness of a quest dedicated to the recovery of a spiritual order. This inconclusive conclusion is, however, a strange replication of the original quest narratives. From Chrétien's uncom-

pleted *Perceval* on to the extraordinary regenerating series of incomplete conclusions (Manessier, etc.) that followed, it is almost a feature of the Quest that it remains unachieved.<sup>36</sup>

The conclusion of the Pythons' quest narrative is abrupt and shocking, although the end may not be the end. Those Swedish credits at the beginning of the VHS and DVD followed the view of the canceling hand when the film was originally released. This change in order, moving the credits from the beginning to the end, is almost certainly an order determined by producers who feared that audiences would be enraged and impatient with a list of credits (however hilarious) being placed in such a shocking position as the beginning of the film. There are some advantages to getting the audience into the action sooner, but they are more than outweighed by the brilliant abruptness of the film ending with the interruption of the police and the canceling, censoring, hand of ultimate authority. This Brechtian refusal of a complacent climax comments on the insidious easiness of the traditional Hollywood film. It is an ending, however, that is probably far more accurately medieval than the Pythons may have had in mind, for it reminds us that the Quest is a process more than a goal.

It may be an accident that the meaning of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* seems so accurately to reflect in a modern context that sense of the quest as an ongoing process, a becoming, but what is true is that this silly film is by no means a trivial one. It remains strangely true to its origins, and, as it touches both irreverently and poignantly on issues of justice, violence, and desire, it remains amazingly funny and pertinent nearly thirty years on. In its interpenetration of the medieval and the modern, the Pythons vitalize and question both. They give new life to the Middle Ages and at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the film makes one powerful statement

about the Pythons and about the quest for the Holy Grail. Both the Middle Ages and the Monty Pythons retain their potential to entertain and delight. Like the energetic, life-affirming, plague-resisting ancient, the Middle Ages and the Monty Pythons are demonstrably "not dead yet."

## NOTES

1. A change in this perspective may have been accomplished by the remarkable success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, which achieved, somewhat surprisingly, both critical and popular acclaim.

2. This sort of deconstruction is similar to the work of Penn and Teller in a slightly different medium.

3. "In this year, Frythstan the Bishop died."

4. The notes do record the tradition (via Bede) of Frythstan's death in the act of prayer (II, 136). This tradition was most likely not a factor in the Pythons' decision to choose 932 as the date of the narrative.

5. The opening scene is also, as McCabe has noted, remarkably beautiful. He comments on the "visual splendor" of the scene and adds a perceptive commentary on the opening: "But amongst the grey skies and dark, satanic hills, amid the early morning fog, lies the heart of the movie, its humor and its subversion. Into such a visually redolent background, complete with a suitably ornate orchestral score, the Pythons send a noble king ... and a guy named Patsy hanging two coconut shells together to make up for the lack of a horse. This one scene typifies the nature of the movie and, indeed, a good deal of Python humor. It is not so much parody as the constant undercutting of expectation: knowing the route but taking the surreal off-ramp" (55).

6. Again by a circuitous route, the Pythons have echoed a traditional element of the Arthurian tradition. Bedivere (along with Gawain/Gwalchmai) is one of the earliest heroes to be associated with the King.

7. The Battle of Badon Hill is hardly an obscure reference for Arthurians, but it is another allusion to key features of the legend, in this case to one of the few actual historical battles in which (an) Arthur may have participated.

8. Could the witch be a much reinvented version of the Loathly Lady?

9. The similarities are developed in detail in Sigmund Eisner's *The Tristan Legend*. While his speculations on how those elements arrived in Cornwall and into the story of Tristan have not met

with wide approval, the similarities are certainly there.

10. "The Tournament at Tottenham" would also be an example of this anti-heroic and mock-heroic tradition and usefully complements the high-style Chaucer with a more popular example.

11. One might argue for a precedent in the figure Malory names Sir Brewyns Saunz Pitee. While not quite as egregious a coward as Sir Rohin, he shares his penchant for running away. Sir Brewyns has the habit of trampling fallen knights a few times and then fleeing on the speediest horse in Christendom.

12. Men unwilling to take advantage of available women are almost always comic characters in English literature. There is even Biblical precedent. Joseph running barely clothed from Potiphar's wife heads a comic tradition that culminates, if it does not conclude, with Fielding's Joseph Andrews.

13. To be precise, it is chapter 13, according to the listing on the DVD.

14. There is also the even more complicated situation of Sir Lavain, which is investigated by Gretchen Mieszkowski; see esp. pp. 45–47.

15. A similar, if subtler, connection is made between quest text and inquest by Howard R. Bloch (108). In the film, the climax cuts between the failed end of the quest and the beginning of the investigation and inquest into the death of the contemporary professor.

16. The Vulgate Quest is, of course, a significant exception to the rule, but if it was intended to impose closure on Quest narratives, to provide a final and unarguable conclusion, it was not a success.

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## 13

### *The Arthurian Legend in French Cinema: Robert Bresson's Lancelot du Lac and Eric Rohmer's Perceval le Gallois*

JEFF RIDER, RICHARD HULL, AND  
CHRISTOPHER SMITH; WITH MICHAEL CARNES,  
SASHA FOPPIANO, AND ANNIE HESSLEIN

This essay seeks to explain the common significance of the Arthurian legend for Robert Bresson and Eric Rohmer and to situate *Lancelot du Lac* (1974) and *Perceval le Gallois* (1978) within their bodies of work. We begin by considering the place of the Arthurian legend in modern French culture and go on to discuss the legend's appeal to these directors. The second part of this essay identifies the uniquely "Bressonian" and "Rohmerian" elements of the two films. The essay's third part explores the directors' reasons for adapting two literary models, the *Mort Artu* (or *Mort le Roi Artu*)<sup>1</sup> and Chrétien de Troyes's *Conte du Graal*,<sup>2</sup> and suggests why they diverged widely from these models in the conclusions to their films.

The Arthurian legend fascinated both Bresson and Rohmer. Bresson began laying plans for *Lancelot* as early as 1953 and had drawn up a detailed outline for the film by 1956 (Prédal, "Bresson" 6; A[mengual] 55;

Estève, *Robert Bresson: La passion* 75; Sémolué 203–4; Ehrenstein 103; Reader 116–17). Rohmer, who had taught Chrétien de Troyes's *Conte du Graal* to his students while he was a high school teacher, adapted the story for television in 1964. He filmed illustrations from "thirteenth-, fourteenth-, and fifteenth-century manuscripts, and then add[ed] a commentary which explained the story" (Tesch-Savage 51). Dissatisfied with the result, he began planning the film version of the romance, which he realized fourteen years later (Tesch-Savage 51; Magny and Rahourdin 10; Angeli 34; Tortajada 116–20). Both films were thus long-term projects conceived years before they were realized, and both were kept alive until the directors were able to raise the money to make them.<sup>3</sup>

Bresson and Rohmer were attracted to these Arthurian projects by the strangeness of the Arthurian world for modern audiences, especially for modern French audi-