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Monty Python and the Holy Grail: *Madness with a Definite Method*

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Criticism of any comedy as apparently random as the Monty Python troupe's always runs the risk of being caught up in the very absurdity it analyzes. Professorial seriousness and pompousness were always among the troupe's favorite targets, and when writing about their comedy it is hard to avoid sounding exactly like one of the hapless academics they so loved to skewer. When I look candidly at my first essay on the film from the first edition of this volume, now more than ten years old, I find this apprehension grows on me, for reasons obvious to me and probably anyone who reads the essay now.[1] But it is important to resist such self-consciousness. Succumbing to it out of a fear of appearing humorless prevents analysis of some of the smartest comedy to come out of Britain in the 1970s, and misses the possibility that sophisticated comedy is as carefully crafted as any other narrative form, more so than many. Simply put, that Monty Python's humor is very funny makes it no less worthy a subject of serious analysis.

What I would like to attempt here, without becoming too serious myself, is to analyze one of the more notably consistent of Monty Python's comic techniques, one readily found in some of their television programming and repeatedly used in what is probably their most sophisticated work of all, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*: the juxtaposition of unlikes. Interestingly, given some shifts in academic and critical thinking over the last decade, this technique curiously parallels the concerns of modern medievalists with the ways we try to understand the Middle Ages. Although my position on these questions is not really much different from what it was in my first essay on *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, I will focus here more precisely on one or two of the ways the Python troupe gets its laughs, and suggest how, even more strikingly than I originally thought, they anticipate, parallel, or mock academic concerns about how we recapture the past.

The best way to illustrate the trademark Python juxtaposition of unlikes is to look at the Python television show. In a sketch from the first series, John Cleese plays a terribly earnest television announcer

from BBC "high intellect" programming (a kind of broadcast journalist and a class of programming they repeatedly satirize), who introduces a show called "The Epilogue: A Question of Belief."[2] Cleese is set up as moderator of what we presume will be a debate between two intellectual heavy hitters on the question of God's existence — Monsignor Edward Gay, Visiting Pastoral Emissary at the Somerset Theological College and author of the best seller *My God*, and Dr. Tom Jack, "humanist, broadcaster, lecturer, and author of the book *Hello, Sailor*." But Cleese tells us that rather than debate God's existence, his two guests have decided tonight to wrestle for it, the question to be decided by two falls, two submissions, or a knockout. The studio backdrop then parts to reveal a wrestling ring, where the ringmaster, in a high pitched, nasal, huckster's voice, introduces on his right, "for Jehovah," Monsignor "Eddie" Gay, and on his left, "author of the books *The Problems of Kierkegaard* and *Hello, Sailor*, and Professor of Modern Theological Philosophy at the University of East Anglia, Dr. Tom Jack." The two then start to wrestle, with Cleese providing sportscaster analysis of the match, before the scene changes.

This short sketch nicely illustrates my point in this essay. Theological and metaphysical debates are about as abstruse and rarified as forms of dispute come. By their very nature they involve subtle intellectual distinctions and questions of proof and belief that as a rule cannot be settled finally. Above all, theology and metaphysics are intellectual disciplines. But here, they are unexpectedly juxtaposed with wrestling — and while intending no slight to the complexities of wrestling, compared to metaphysics the sport clearly is not subtle. Rather, it is terribly obvious, and almost altogether physical.

The juxtapositioning of these two kinds of contest is so violent and jarring that it makes us laugh, from surprise and shock as much as from anything else. But the humor is even more subtle — there's a strong satirical edge to the juxtaposition as well. The existence of God is an issue about which many people would like some certainty. And yet as the history of philosophy and theology has shown, these disciplines have been frustratingly unable to answer this extremely difficult question. Sports, on the other hand, almost always produces a clear winner and loser (enough so that when a tie occurs, fans of both sides are often more frustrated than they would be by a clear loss for their side). The sketch thus subtly satirizes a very human desire for certainty — wouldn't it be wonderful if we could answer the question of God's existence as simply as we settle a wrestling match? In fact, Cleese in a voice over at the end of the show tells us that "God exists by two falls to a submission."

Many of the juxtapositions in Monty Python's humor are made much funnier by the anachronism of the two things being put together. Take for example "The Attila the Hun Show."[3] This sketch from the second season starts off with Cleese's voiceover of clips from old Hollywood costume spectaculars, in which he talks of the various barbarian leaders ravaging the Roman Empire in the fifth century, of whom "none surpassed in power and cruelty the mighty Attila the Hun." The scene then cuts to "The Attila the Hun Show," in which we see Cleese as Attila in black leather armor, long hair and mustache, running in slow motion into the arms of Carol Cleveland in a leopard skin bikini, while cheesy sounding background music by "The Hunlets" warbles on about how "all you need is just a little love." Next, Attila — rather like Dick Van Dyke — comes into his blandly decorated suburban home, the only nod to "Hunnish" style a pair of crossed spears on the wall, and gives a present to his two children, Jenny and Robby Attila the Hun — a severed head. Cleese then mugs a huge smile into the camera, saying that he wants his

kids to "get aHEAD," followed by a conspicuously canned sounding laugh track.

Again, the humor here depends on the juxtaposition of unlikes—fifth century savagery and violence placed up against twentieth century sitcom banality — and the disjunction between the two gets most of the laughs. But as with "The Epilogue," there is a strong satirical edge here as well — the Python troupe seems to be making fun of the capacity for conventional situation comedy to go for laughs while remaining completely oblivious to the more alarming implications of its subject matter. And the sketch also perhaps ridicules our attempts to imagine or recreate the past. When we in the present try to recapture the essential nature of past figures such as Attila the Hun, we always end up recreating them in ways that reflect our own prejudices, desires, and stupidities. We cannot escape anachronism in our re-creation of the past because we inevitably create the past in our own image.

This anachronistic juxtaposition of unlikes is a major feature of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. It can be found hilariously in the confrontation between Arthur and Dennis the peasant. This scene begins with Arthur, wonderfully played by Graham Chapman as a sort of vexed royal straight man, riding over the crest of a hill crowned with a standard that seems to consist of a wagon wheel on top of a pole with a human body stretched over it. (Perhaps as punishment? In any case, the situation is presumably uncomfortable and even fatal. We see the same standard in the film's first scene.) In the camera's foreground two peasants (one of them Dennis, played by Michael Palin, and the other by Terry Jones in drag) are kneeling in the mud, gouging at the ground with sticks and piling up "filth." The angle of the shot changes to show Arthur riding up behind Dennis as he trudges along, pulling a heavy cart. Thanks to the scene's blocking, Dennis and Arthur stand framing a distant castle. Both these

shots are ideologically loaded. Their setups in each case present the laboring peasants in the foreground with a symbol of authority placed behind and slightly above them, the standard (and Arthur) in the first shot and the castle in the second.

The scene develops to identify this ideology. Arthur mistakenly accosts Dennis as "old woman," asking who the owner of the castle is. At this point, perhaps because of the scene's setup, but as much because we all have certain ideas (variously derived) about how peasants behaved in the Middle Ages towards their betters, we expect Dennis to show some deference. Dennis is, however, anything but deferential in his response. Instead, he tells Arthur that he and his companion are part of an anarcho-syndicalist commune. Dennis also objects to Arthur's automatic treatment of him "as an inferior," and he accuses Arthur of "exploiting the workers" and "hanging on to outdated imperialist dogma." The conflict intensifies as Arthur becomes increasingly exasperated with Dennis's torrent of quasi-Marxist rhetoric, which grows more impudent and abusive with the arrival of reinforcements. In the middle of their argument, the other peasant intrudes, saying, "Dennis, there's some lovely filth over here." Then, being informed that Arthur is her king, she wants to know how he got to be king — she "didn't vote for him."

Arthur, his eyes turned heavenward, launches into a description of how he received his kingship by the supernatural sanction of "the Lady of the Lake, her arm clad in the purest shimmering samite," who lifted Excalibur "aloft from the bosom of the water, signifying by divine providence" that he, Arthur, "was to carry Excalibur." As he speaks, a choir of angelic voices begins to sing in the background. While Dennis' abrasive repulsiveness makes Arthur a sympathetic character here, Arthur is, nonetheless, abruptly cut short by Dennis' derisive squawk, followed by one of the funniest

lines in the movie: "Strange women lying in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government: You can't expect to wield supreme executive power just because some watery tart threw a sword at you!"

The juxtaposition of unlikes is clear here: the dialogue offers two radically different ideas about where the right to rule derives from, each drawn from very different periods in history. Arthur's is the more authentically medieval of the two: he claims to rule by supernatural sanction, reflected by the intervention of the Lady. This is not surprising: medieval political theory saw a reflection of the divine order in the structuring of the monarchical state. As Dante puts it, "When mankind is subject to one Prince it is most like to God and this implies conformity to the divine intention, which is the condition of perfection" (13). Dennis' reply is of course thoroughly modern: political power "derives from the mandate of the masses, not from some farcical aquatic ceremony." As with "The Epilogue" and "The Attila the Hun Show," the juxtapositioning of these two ideas is startling and funny. But the humor becomes much sharper by the presence of anachronism in the juxtaposition. Dennis refers to Arthur's ideas as "outdated." But in the Middle Ages, they would not seem outdated at all, and so Dennis's dismissal of them seems that much more bizarre and jarring. The satire also becomes more incisive. I am putting this crudely, but generally speaking, Marxist theory has tended to see in the "exploitative" medieval social order an earlier form of economic organization later transcended by capitalism, as capitalism would be transcended by communism. There is a sort of self-congratulatory positivism in this stance: we who live at the end of history can afford to patronize a past we have transcended by imagining it any way we want to. Having Dennis anticipate the worker's utopia in this way satirizes the modern tendency to create a past that bolsters our current political self-satisfaction (rather ironically, given the course of political history since the movie came out in 1975).

There are other free standing gems of this kind in the movie — such as the Rambo-esque juxtaposition of modern military hardware and medieval religious relics in the scene involving the Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch with its biblical instruction manual, the Book of Armaments. A much more complicated series of these juxtapositions involves the film's "self-referentiality" — its tendency to call attention to itself as a fictional narrative being made about King Arthur and the Middle Ages more generally, but in our own technologically sophisticated present.

One example of this self-referentiality occurred in the first advertisements for the film: the original 1975 poster for the film proclaimed that it "sets movie making back 900 years." The anachronistic absurdity of the joke — there was no film 900 years ago — nevertheless zeroes in on a very real modern desire to know the past: *if* film making technology had existed in the Middle Ages, wouldn't it now be possible to know that distant time and place much better than we currently do? Film, after all, shows us things as they really are; it is as close as we have come to a truly transparent medium of representation. The problem with this wish, though, is that film is no less crafted than any other narrative mode — and like any such mode, it will show traces of its fictional, manufactured nature in various ways. In films about the past, bad costumes, historical inaccuracies, or stilted, archaic dialogue might be some of the more noticeable features of the film's manufactured nature. Film itself, by the use of camera shots, lighting, and other technical aspects of the "language" of film, will also show up the created nature of the movie. To heighten the sense of realism in the film, movies about the past usually try to avoid these problems by paying very close attention to the minutiae of

period representation (as with *The Last of the Mohicans* and *Gladiator*). *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, though, does just the opposite. Despite a very sophisticated and even evocative visual style, from the film poster on, this film calls attention to its fictive nature by continually juxtaposing the Arthurian illusion with the means necessary to produce it.

The most notorious of these incidents involves the coconut shells, which anyone who has ever seen the film will always mention the first time it comes up in conversation. The film proper starts off (after the fiasco of the credits subtitled in Swedish) with the appearance of large white uncial letters against a black background, reading "England 932 A.D.," accompanied by a rolling flourish of heroic music. The writing and the sound set up an (extremely apprehensive) expectation that the scenes that follow will be "medieval," whatever that means. We have the date, and we have the place (to most Americans, anyway, England and the Middle Ages usually go together); if we have ever heard of the Holy Grail, we know the film has something to do with King Arthur — so we are set up to expect some version of the medieval. And the film cunningly plays on these expectations: there is swirling mist blown on a sighing, ominous wind (England is gray and foggy, right?), and then that cryptic standard from the later scene with Arthur and Dennis appears. It is cryptic, but nonetheless it feeds our preconceptions: people were tortured and executed in the Middle Ages all the time, and while nailing them to wagon wheels and sticking the whole affair on a pole may not be authentic, the scene achieves its intended effect. Then the most important thing happens: we hear the horse's hooves clopping for a second or two before we see what is really making the noise. Most people seeing the movie the first time probably expect to see a knight, on a horse, come out of that mist — few

ideas modern people have about the Middle Ages are more omnipresent than the image of the knight. He best represents our mixture of awe at the barbaric splendor of the Middle Ages and revulsion at its violence and hierarchy. But what comes on screen is of course King Arthur and his squire, both on foot, with the squire clicking two coconut shells together to make the sound of the horse's hooves.

This scene is wonderful because it almost impudently insists on the importance of getting the sound of a medieval icon right, even if it denies us (for a while, anyway) the visual representation of that icon. The Python troupe displays a sort of comically misplaced fussiness with getting one detail right while failing to see that leaving another out tends to make the exercise rather pointless (except as self mockery, at which it succeeds brilliantly, of course). And the scene virtually shouts out, "This is a movie, and what's more, a very silly movie that will continually call attention to the fact that it's a silly movie and nothing more. Deal with it."

The scene is perhaps the most memorable example of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*'s tendency to undercut its illusion by juxtaposing it with the means for creating that illusion. But there are others. One that is especially funny occurs late in the film, as Arthur and his knights are being chased around by the Black Beast of Aaaaarrrrgghh. The sequence is of course animated in Terry Gilliam's wonderful "mock illumination" style, although the Beast itself looks like one of the flabby, rounded grotesques from the animated sequences in the TV series. The narrator (Michael Palin) solemnly intones that the heroes would certainly have perished had not the animator suffered a sudden, fatal heart attack, whereupon the scene cuts briefly to Gilliam having a seizure, then back to the Beast vanishing from the cartoon. Again, illusion is juxtaposed with the means of creating it.

It is probably far too grave to refer to this particular kind of juxtaposition as a theme in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. But it probably is not being too serious to refer to it as a major feature of the movie's plot, such as it is, especially considering a thread that starts around halfway through the film, after the failure of the Trojan Rabbit ploy. An elderly, tweed suited, spectacled man, referred to in a subtitle only as "a famous historian," comes on screen to explain Arthur's subsequent strategy for taking the castle. This man is a cartoon example of the sort of academic the Monty Python troupe regularly satirized on television. He looks like the stereotype of the British academic, and sounds like one, too: his English is carefully correct, he has the right accent, and he speaks and gestures with the sort of animation academics famously bring to lectures about subjects most people cannot get that worked up about. Then there is a drum of horse's hooves, followed by the appearance of a knight on a real horse, in full armor, who flashes between the camera and the historian and cuts him down with a single stroke.

The brutality of this scene is shocking but also funny: the historian's explanation is simply unnecessary to follow the film's plot, and we mourn him no more than we might any other big mouth interrupting an amusing story. His wife, or daughter, or some other middle aged female relation is upset, though, and she appears on screen standing over his body before the story moves on to the "Tale of Sir Robin." The narrative again briefly alludes to this new subplot several scenes later, when the episode of the Knights Who Say "Ni" is followed by a brief shot showing the same woman standing over the historian's body with several policemen, plainly telling them what happened. The policemen next appear standing by the shrubbery plot of the Knights Who Say "Ni," following the explosion of the Holy Hand Grenade and

alerted to its sound. They appear again after Arthur outwits the Bridge Keeper, shaking Lancelot down as he leans with his hands against the roof of their squad car, the static and scratchy voices of their radios providing the shot's only sound. And their final and most important appearance is of course in the film's last scene, when their car pulls up in front of Arthur's advancing army. The last shot is of Arthur being led away in handcuffs, obliterated finally by a policeman's bark of "that's enough" and his palm covering the camera.

These last juxtapositions of the film's "outside," the means and circumstances of its production, with its fictional medieval "inside," very amusingly tie the film up. When *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* was first released, I remember hearing more than one person remark that the ending was something of a disappointment, and I always wondered if there were any more appropriate way the Python troupe might have ended it. But I have always concluded there was not. In an interview taped at the time the *Fawlty Towers* videotapes were released, John Cleese remarked that people staying in hotels are always under the illusion that they have some ownership of their room, when in reality there is a host of staff who constantly want to get in that room, for various reasons. The situation with *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is humorously similar: the makers of the medieval fiction may want to have their world, their room, all to themselves as a sort of imaginary space, but modernity intrudes in spite of their best efforts. Sometimes they have to use coconuts to make the sound of horses if they cannot get the real thing; sometimes the animators keel over and die; sometimes the cops break in and stop the party, especially if the film has knights on the set running around killing historical consultants. The film thus satirizes not just particular views and ideas that we have of the Middle Ages, but the modern obsession with mak-

King Arthur and his knights encounter one of the Knights Who Say "Ni" in Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones's 1975 film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail.*

ing and holding them at all. The film seems to say that the enterprise of historical recreation simply cannot be maintained.

Perhaps it is not surprising that *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is concerned with how the means of fiction impact on its matter: that "the somehow may be thishow," in Browning's phrase. Narrators in various media have been mulling over this problem for centuries. Such a concern is even less surprising in a story about King Arthur, for storytellers have been adapting the Arthurian materials to their own purposes since the Middle Ages — altering the legend to suit their own times and circumstances. Malory combines the medieval French focus on Lancelot and Guenevere with the native English treatment of Arthur as a warrior king, to produce the story of an ideal, chivalrous society standing as an example to his own politically fragmented mid-fifteenth

century world. Tennyson writes of a Round Table maintained by united faith in the vision of an ideal leader, an act of will he feared the British Empire of his own day was growing incapable of.

Graham Chapman's Arthur is similarly a man who, in some sense, is let down by the frivolity of his followers and his environment. He is as earnest and serious as we expect Arthur to be, but his Camelot disappoints him, if not us. When he prepares to visit his court, the scene cuts to the knights of the Round Table dancing the Can Can on banqueting tables, playing drums on each others' helmets, and singing about knights in Camelot who eat Spam a lot. Turning to his followers, he says in disgust, "Let's not go to Camelot. It is a silly place." This is truly an Arthur for the post–Vietnam political and social cynicism of the 1970s:

individuals may be fine, but collective institutions disappoint.

Rather surprisingly, and interestingly, this technique of juxtaposing anachronistic unlikes focuses on issues that professional medievalists were only beginning to be aware of when I first wrote on *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* ten years ago. At that time, scholars of medieval literature such as Lee Patterson, David Aers, and Sheila Delaney were actively debating the then tottering methods of the "patristic school" represented by critics such as D. W. Robertson, Jr., which sought to interpret medieval texts according to the models of medieval Biblical exegesis.[4] Patterson and the others essentially argued that patristic scholarship was based on a politically conservative, perhaps even reactionary, idolization of the Middle Ages as an historical period free of textual ambiguity, when the meaning of texts could be neatly discovered by application of a prevailing interpretive template controlled by the medieval church. Rather than try to replace this conservative approach with one more liberal, these scholars argued for a criticism that frankly admitted its ideological motivations and preconceptions even as it used them to interpret the past. As Aers put it, "To acknowledge this [one's ideological stance and the effects it has on one's criticism] is to acknowledge severe problems. But these are simply unavoidable, and they are best confronted openly" (2). Here was a medievalism that tried to acknowledge its means even as it used them to recapture the past, a juxtaposition not unlike that deployed to humorous effect in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

In the decade since, this historiographic sophistication has become much more the norm in medieval studies, not just in literature but in history, enough so that a medieval historian like Norman Cantor can write a fairly popular book on the subject —*Inventing the Middle Ages*. Even more remarkable may be the way this awareness of how means condition product is now all over the historical map. For example, it is of central concern in books on the personality of Hitler, such as Ron Rosenbaum's *Explaining Hitler*, or to the issues of Holocaust denial raised by the David Irving libel trial. But then, this conflict is perhaps not so surprising after all. In both these areas, the political basis of historical interpretation is glaring, much more so than in medieval studies.

I do not wish to suggest for a moment that the Monty Python troupe had any intention of critiquing historiography when they made either their TV series or *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. To do so would be giving them a sort of intellectual prescience that probably gives them too much credit in one sense and denies them too much in another. It would certainly make them sound like very serious drudges, and would take a lot of the fun out of looking closely at their work. But the way their work parallels (for lack of a better word) the concerns of historians and other academics is interesting. When the troupe satirizes the ways we know the past and our motives in doing so, they seem to be treading the same intellectual path or one very similar to that which the serious academics whom they satirize have since trodden. That the Python troupe got there first is a wryly funny comment on the frequent obtuseness of academic critics, and also the way that witty comics can brilliantly identify the same issues academics do — treating them with a humor and lightness of touch never found in professional criticism. But any critic who has thoughtfully read Swift or Chaucer, or carefully watched *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, should not be surprised to find his subject anticipating him.

NOTES

1. Day, "Monty Python and the Medieval Other" 84–92.

2. "Sex and Violence." *Monty Python's Flying Circus.* Written and performed by Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones and Michael Palin. 1969. (Videocassette, vol.1 in the collected series. A&E, 1999.)

3. "The Attila the Hun Show." *Monty Python's Flying Circus.* Written and performed by Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones and Michael Palin. 1970. (Videocassette, vol. 10 in the collected series. A&E, 1999.)

4. Probably the best discussions of this problem are still Patterson's *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature,* and the essays collected by David Aers in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology and History.*

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