The Animation of Marginal Decorations in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*

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The animated interludes in the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* demonstrate director and animator Terry Gilliam’s interest in and use of images in the margins of Gothic manuscripts. (MM)

Joseph of Arimathea left a most peculiar inscription on the wall of a large, dark cave: ‘Here may be found the last words of Joseph of Arimathea. He who is valiant and pure of spirit may find the Holy Grail in the castle of Aaaaaarrrrrrggghhh….’ The Grail knights are amazed at this strange instruction. Brother Maynard suggests that Joseph died while he was carving the text, but Arthur thinks this unlikely. If Joseph were dying, he wouldn’t bother to carve ‘Aaaaaarrrrrrggghhh’; he’d just say it. Galahad then hits on the idea that Joseph might have been dictating. Bedevere is still wondering whether it could refer to the Camargue, when he discovers something that the others haven’t seen: the legendary monster of Arrghhh (‘a huge, unpleasant, fairly well-drawn cartoon beast’) barring the entrance to the cave. The scene is continued in the animation sequence ‘The Monster of Aaargh,’ in which the terrifying monster devours the brother and pursues the fleeing Grail knights through the cave. A voice-over says, ‘As the horrendous black beast lunged forward, escape for Arthur and his knights seemed hopeless, when suddenly…the animator suffered a fatal heart attack.’ A film shot shows how the artist falls backwards from his drawing table, letting out a yell of ‘Aaaaggh!’ at which point the terrifying cartoon monster turns white and dissolves into thin air. The voice resumes, ‘The cartoon peril was no more…the quest for the Holy Grail could continue.’

**ANIMATION SEQUENCES**

Terry Gilliam, the artist who died at his drawing table, not only drew the five excellent animation sequences in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, he also played several roles and directed the film along with Terry Jones.1 These

five animated interludes by Gilliam have received remarkably little scholarly attention so far, and in consequence, Gilliam’s direct source of inspiration for these funny animations has not been identified. In this article, I would like to point out Gilliam’s sources for the animated sequences and discuss their significance.

Kevin Harty considers Monty Python and the Holy Grail as ‘perhaps the funniest movie set in medieval times’ because it gives free rein to the comic talents of the Pythons. David Day defined their comic technique as ‘the juxtaposition of unlikes.’ Gilliam’s outstanding capacity to cause amusement with his animations is due to his skill in subverting expectations and to his instinct for the humor and the absurd. On the Holy Grail DVD he explains that the unexpected turn in the animation ‘The Monster of Aaargh’ had a very practical cause. He did not know how to end the sequence: ‘so I have the animator—me—have a fatal heart attack. It was just the only way I could get out of a cartoon situation that I painted myself in the corner with.’ The other animated sequences (‘The Quest for the Holy Grail,’ ‘The Tale of Sir Galahad,’ ‘The Tale of Sir Launcelot,’ ‘Season Animation’) are less closely integrated into the film than the sequence ‘The Monster of Aaargh,’ which marks a turning point in the plot. Mostly they function as comic interludes that prevent the movie from becoming tedious.

Take for example ‘The Tale of Sir Launcelot.’ This animation is placed between the scene with policemen inspecting the body of the dead historian and the story of the singing prince who was rescued by Lancelot. This sequence shows in close-up how the words ‘The Tale of Sir Launcelot’ are written and decorated in a pseudo-Celtic style. However, a violent banging causes the pen of the scribe to slip and score through the drawing. The picture zooms out. In his study, a monastic scribe leaps to his feet, startled by the loud noise, and runs out of the room in irritation. As the banging continues the man runs grumbling through a hallway in the style of M.C. Escher with several floors each with stairways and galleries, down and out through the front door. He is now standing in front of his house and sees the sun and clouds doing gymnastics. Both the sun and each of the clouds have two legs on which they repeatedly crash to the ground, only to spring back up into the sky. The man gruffly enjoins them to stop, whereupon the clouds now run away out of the picture, followed by the sun, and the evening falls with the light of sunset. The man mutters ‘bloody weather’ and goes back into his house. Finally, the original picture with the Celtic-looking title reappears. The ‘Tale of Sir Launcelot’ sequence does serve as the introduction to the ensuing adventure of Lancelot in the main film, but in
content it stands apart from it as there is nothing Arthurian about it. Gilliam explains the interpolation of this animation sequence thus: ‘I just liked the idea of a monk who can’t concentrate because the weather is making too much noise.’

Gilliam’s animation sequences contain many medieval visual motifs. In ‘The Tale of Sir Launcelot,’ this animation sequence is restricted to the Celtic-style text; the rest of this animation develops in Gilliam’s own style of drawing. However, ‘The Quest for the Holy Grail’ contains a Romanesque Christ and a series of Gothic figures, while ‘The Tale of Sir Galahad’ and ‘Season-Animation’ are also mainly populated by figures which look as though they have been borrowed directly from early fourteenth-century manuscript illustrations. And indeed, this is precisely what has happened.

**Sketches and Their Source**

The screenplay of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* has been published as a book containing the script, including later additions, printed mainly on the right-hand pages, and there are three quires containing stills and color photographs from the film. 6 The left-hand pages are adorned with black-and-white photos from the film, pieces of story-board, and preparatory sketches by Terry Gilliam. These sketches show studies for the animation sequences, and also include ideas not taken up by the film in the end. In Gilliam’s sketches, a boat on a mountain of water—a traditional medieval way of indicating a large body of water—sails with the complete mountain of water to a castle on the right-hand side. This original inspiration testifies to a subtle play on medieval iconographic conventions. Other sketches have been worked out in color, but likewise do not make it into the final version of the film. An example is the drawing of a castle with shutters, a windmill with a cock on top, and, flying in from the right, a giant snail with its eyes on stems. The same is true of the cover illustration of the video, showing King Arthur who appears with a castle and an entire army in a chalice-shaped Grail, nervously peering over the edge. 7 The Grail is held aloft by a large bodiless arm that sticks out of a cloud (fig.1)

Only a selection of Gilliam’s sketches are reproduced in the script, but it is enough to show that he was inspired by early fourteenth-century manuscript illumination. 8 Beside the majority of the medieval-looking sketches is a number. In other places are such notes as ‘612 Amazing Angel’ or ‘112 Monk hearing confession gives absolution doing sign of cross then on last movement kungfu’s the lady’ (fig. 2). These numbers accompanying the sketches reveal
Fig. 1 Cover illustration by Terry Gilliam of the video of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. © London: Methuen Books, 1977 (repr. 1989). Image used with kind permission of the publisher.

Fig. 2 Orientation sketch and notes by Terry Gilliam for *The Tale of Sir Galahad*. © London: Methuen Books, 1977 (repr. 1989). Image used with kind permission of the publisher.
Gilliam's primary source of inspiration, for the figures correspond exactly to the illustration numbers in the standard work of Lilian Randall: *Images in the Margins of Gothic Manuscripts*, which appeared in 1966.

Gilliam's drawings of the castle with the windmill and of Arthur in the Grail are based directly on illustrations in Randall's book. The tower of the castle inclines slightly more, the giant in Randall 212 has yielded way to the flying snail, and the whole composition is a mirror image, but beyond that, the correspondence with the marginal decoration is staggering. Arthur with his knights and castle in the Grail is inspired by Randall 672, an illustration from a psalter in which Mary sits amidst the apostles in a chalice. Randall 112 shows a monk hearing the confession of a kneeling nun (fig. 3), just as Gilliam describes (fig. 2). The last part of his note, '...then on the last movement kungfu's the lady,' is of course not in the medieval illustration, but is typical of the humorous manner in which he manipulates his source material; he sets it in an absurd motion.

**MANUSCRIPTS AND FILM**

In the animation sequence 'The Tale of Sir Galahad,' which precedes Galahad's adventure in the Castle of Maidens, it becomes clear how Gilliam takes various elements from marginal decorations and makes a merry tale from them. The sketch on page 36 shows a line of praying monks on a
tendril, one of whom is bouncing on a spring-board while another dives headfirst into the water. The commentary next to the sketch reads: 'procession of monks stopping & starting; they run down board' (fig. 2). In the animation, an apparently endless line of identical praying nuns, a perambulating variant of the kneeling nun from Randall 112, push each other along and shuffle down a tendril towards the left. The tendril ends in a spring-board, on which the front nun bounces twice, is propelled head over heels, and plummets into the water, whereupon the rest of the line shuffles one place forward. The water, which also has a duck swimming on it, consists of a natural basin in a curling tendril which terminates in a woman's head. For this, Gilliam has used Randall 52, where apes swim in a tendril filled with water (fig. 4). Even the woman's head on the end of the tendril has been borrowed exactly. The duck, however, is adopted from Randall 654.

The third nun springs on the board noticeably more enthusiastically than her predecessors, with the result that she is flung right over the basin and into a medieval-looking initial 'G.' This belongs to the title 'The tale of Sir Galahad,' which contains the tableau already alluded to from Randall 112—the monk hearing confession from the nun and granting her absolution (fig. 3). The flying nun collides with the head of the confessing nun and then falls
under the tendril. This blow to the head causes the confessing nun to somersault five times over the cross-bar of the letter ‘G’ and come to a standstill upside down, her habit slipping to reveal her bare backside. The monk says ‘hmm’ at the sight of the nun turned upside down and puts his hand in the same position as before, now touching her bare bottom instead of her head. Apparently, Gilliam did not after all pursue the idea of the monk performing martial arts, preferring a bawdy joke.

'The Quest for the Holy Grail' opens with naked trumpeters (a cross between Randall 433 and 543) who stand with their heads between their legs playing their trumpets—literally—anally. Then two identical mirror-imaged angels with a portable organ come flapping their wings, rising from the bottom to the top of the picture, followed by little souls borne up in a cloth, and a Romanesque Christ, his hand raised in blessing, set in a mandorla surrounded by sunbeams. Trumpeting angels rise through the picture, and then comes the title picture containing the text, with medieval initials: 'The Quest for the Holy Grail,' which is hoisted up, rattling, by a winged holy woman on the right and yet another angel with a portable organ on the left (fig. 5). The angel with the organ, which repeatedly appears in this animation, is taken from the margins of an Arthurian Lancelot en Prose manuscript, reproduced in Randall 3 (fig. 6).
Fig. 6 Angel with portable organ, from Lancelot en Prose, Flanders or North France, first quarter of fourteenth century (Manchester, John Rylands Library, Rylands Fr.i, fol. 82r). Used by Terry Gilliam for The Quest for the Holy Grail. Image used by permission of the John Rylands University Library, Manchester.

Fig. 7 The summer, scene from Terry Gilliam's Season Animation. © Terry Gilliam 1975.
The 'Season Animation' precedes the episode of 'Tim the Enchanter' and, like 'The Monster of Aaargh,' shows the Grail knights in cartoon form. Heavily laden (see Randall 68), the knights make their way through a forest, passing behind a hillock in which the monster of Aaargh appears briefly with its eyes rolling. In the background we hear Sir Robin's tune. Beyond the forest they meet Lancelot and Galahad at their campsite and there is much rejoicing. Then a head attached to a tendril blows the sun away and the mountain at which the expedition has arrived is covered with ice. Because of the frozen conditions they are forced to eat the minstrels of the so-called 'Brave Sir Robin,' and this too is a source of joy.

A year passes: a shepherd in a brown coat sits with two sheep on a snow-covered mountain with a bare tree. Then spring comes and the snow disappears, leaves appear on the tree and the man takes off his coat. In the summer the shepherd lies out full length on the ground; suddenly it is winter again, and he is buried in snow; only then comes autumn, the leaves withering and falling from the tree in whole branch-loads. One of these branches falls on the head of the shepherd. To the left of this ever-changing scene of shepherd, sheep, and hill stands a rather odd house with a tower on the right and an upper level suspended in the air, resting on a tree to the left (fig. 7). This peculiar construction is based on Randall 633, where Samson causes the Philistine house to collapse (fig. 8). Both the tower on the right and the

Fig. 8 Samson causes the Philistine palace to collapse, from Book of Hours, Liège, c. 1300 (London, British Library, Stowe 17, fol. 122v). Used by Terry Gilliam for The Tale of Sir Galahad. Image used by permission of The British Library, London.
hovering upper floor are identical. However, the marginal decoration depicts on the left not a tree but a tall pillar at which Samson is pulling. A second pillar which stands against the tower in the medieval illustration is likewise absent in the animation.

**Modern Miniaturist**

These examples illustrate how Terry Gilliam's approach and technique is comparable to that of a miniaturist. The method of this modern artist, like that of many of his medieval predecessors, can be reconstructed. In an interview Gilliam explained his approach to the animations in *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, and it can be assumed that much the same applies to the animations in *The Holy Grail*: 'I was always looking for free things, so I'd go to the library. There's a lot of dead painters and a lot of dead engravers, so we could use that stuff, start playing with it. I guess that's where my art education came from. I'd go down to the Tate, look through the collections, photocopy things and start moving it all around. The style developed out of that, rather than there being any planning. I never analysed the stuff, I just did it the easiest way. I could use images that I really loved. I could cut them out and move them about.' And: 'I was working in a field of about thirty inches, which is big, because they're just pieces of paper. You'd be constantly trying to get rid of the shadows and packing things underneath the backgrounds... I'd also be doing the artwork, rushing down to Atlas Photography in Regent Street, where I was getting all these pictures from art books photographed, and they'd blow them up to the size I wanted. Then I'd cut them out and colour them in with felt-tip markers, then I'd airbrush a body, and so on.'

Gilliam's orientation sketches and notes may be compared to the terse instructions that a miniaturist would scribble or sketch next to the place where the illustration was to be executed; here too, changes were still possible. Gilliam adopts some motifs unaltered from his source book, but others he varies, combining elements from various illustrations or adapting his model to his own story-line. Using Randall's book, Gilliam is able to make use of illustrative motifs from various types of manuscripts. Thus the swimming-pool and its concomitant tendril with female head comes from a psalter which was produced in Ghent around 1325 (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Douce 6). The monk hearing the nun's confession, the shuffling nuns and the imaginative architecture are drawn from a book of hours from Liège, c. 1300 (London, British Library, Stowe 17). As well as other religious manuscripts, there is also a motif taken from an early fourteenth-century North French *Lancelot en Prose* (Manchester, John Rylands Library, Rylands
Fr. 1); the angel with the portable organ, then, comes from an Arthurian romance, and ends up in an Arthurian movie. Medieval miniaturists likewise borrowed from sundry sources anything that took their fancy.13

Gilliam's creations remain strikingly true to their medieval models, to the extent that it is possible to recognize the style, period and provenance of the source in the animations. While all the illustrations in Randall's book are printed in black and white, Gilliam has assembled a wide spectrum of colors for his animations. In addition, he has had to adapt and combine a number of details. Without copying literally, Terry Gilliam has succeeded admirably in recreating the atmosphere of the originals.

**REANIMATION OF MARGINAL DECORATIONS**

Marginal decoration often represents figures in improbable or impossible situations, parodies patterns of behavior (apes 'aping' human conduct), turns the world upside down by means of role reversal (hares catching the hunter), and is fond of *obscena* like bare bottoms and of anticlericalism. Gilliam's flying nun and bare-bottomed nun fit very well into this category. As Lilian Randall writes in the introduction of her book on Gothic marginal decoration: 'An element of humor was seldom absent, in the rendering if not in the theme, and the aim was both to divert and to elaborate...The frequent juxtaposition of unrelated themes in a totally incongruous context heightens the chaotic effect.'14 Marginal figures were generally independent of their immediate context, thus adding a diverting note to the over-all program of decoration.15

The five animation sequences in the feature film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* operate in a manner comparable to the marginal decoration in a manuscript. Sometimes they have a structural function, introducing a new episode in the film ('The Quest for the Holy Grail,' 'The Tale of Sir Launcelot,' 'The Tale of Sir Galahad'), just as marginal illustrations often appear at the beginning of a new section of text, yet are free-standing merry interludes which have little significance for the development of the main film. Gilliam confirms this when he states on the *Holy Grail* DVD: 'I was never certain how the cartoons fitted in other than that they were just little rest points from the other stuff, and visually they're quite different.' In this, Gilliam's absurd sense of humor corresponds closely to the often comic images in the margins of medieval illuminated manuscripts.

Sometimes, however, the narrative of the main film continues in the animations ('Season Animation,' 'The Monster of Aaargh'), which is also a phenomenon that may occur in the illustrations in the margins of
manuscripts. Thus, in an animated sequence the Grail knights come to meet Lancelot and Galahad, take their leave in a most practical manner from Sir Robin's minstrels, and escape by the skin of their teeth from the terrible monster of Aaargh thanks to the sudden death of the artist. His sudden heart attack at the same time marks the end of all animation in the film.

Gilliam not only had a perfect understanding of how medieval marginal decoration functions; he also set to work himself as a miniaturist and thus continued a tradition whose origins lie in the Middle Ages. That he based his work on the richly illustrated book on Gothic marginal decoration by Randall testifies to his competence in the subject: Randall's study is to this day the standard work. The nature of his medium made it possible for him to bring a new dimension to the medieval sources. Gilliam was able to set the Gothic marginal decorations in motion, and used this new possibility in a manner entirely in keeping with the spirit and humor of his medieval predecessors, thus breathing new life into their creations.

Terry Gilliam obviously liked to poke fun at the animations in Monty Python and the Holy Grail: 'because if you can make fun of them and to the end of that process you still like them, respect them, love them and are interested in them, then they're really worth believing in and being intrigued by it. Humor is a great test, as well as a great defense.'

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NOTES

This article is an elaborated version of my Dutch article, 'De animatie van margedecoratie in "Monty Python and the Holy Grail,"' Madoc. Tijdschrift over de Middeleeuwen 12 (1998): 2–13. Translation by Graeme Dunphy to whom I extend my warm thanks.

Here follows a synopsis of the film, with the animation sequences in parentheses and italics: The year is 932 A.D. King Arthur is gathering knights with the intention of setting up court at Camelot. There God gives them the commission to seek for the Holy Grail. (The Quest for the Holy Grail) The knights set off together and are ridiculed and humiliated by a mocking French knight. A modern 'famous historian' informs us that the knights of the Round Table have decided to continue the quest for the Grail separately; he is promptly hewn down by a passing mounted knight. The knights now experience various adventures. The not-so-brave Sir
Robin is confronted by a gigantic knight with three heads, and takes to his heels. (The Tale of Sir Galahad) Galahad is tempted in the castle of maidens, from which he is rescued in the nick of time by Lancelot. Arthur has to satisfy the impossible demands of the knights who say ‘Ni.’ Meanwhile, the police have arrived to inspect the dead historian. (The Tale of Sir Launcelot) Lancelot boldly rescues a singing prince. Then the Arthurian knights are reunited. (Season Animation) They narrowly escape the jaws of the monster of Aaargh (The Monster of Aaargh) and cross the treacherous Bridge of Death. The knights who are still alive sail to the Grail Castle, but are prevented from reaching the object of their sacred quest by the police, who arrive with blaring sirens to arrest them.


3 Terry Gilliam, Animations of Mortality (London: Methuen, 1978) gives a selection of Gilliam’s animations. However, it contains no examples from Monty Python and the Holy Grail.


5 In October 2001 a two-disc DVD came out, including such extras as Terry Gilliam’s sketches, information on the locations, trailers, weblinks, and a voice-over audio-commentary by the Python team.


7 The DVD cover shows the same drawing as on the video, but the Pythons have been pasted on the figures in the Grail. Terry Gilliam thus takes the place of King Arthur.

8 Donald L. Hoffman assumes that the ‘Season Animation’ is based on the Duke de Berry’s famous Book of Hours, illuminated by the Limburg brothers in the fifteenth century, but the style and the motives in the ‘Season Animation’ clearly point to early fourteenth-century manuscripts. See ‘Not Dead Yet: Monty Python and the Holy Grail in the Twenty-first Century,’ in Harty, ed., Cinema Arthuriana, p. 144 [136–48].

9 Hoffman describes the scene as monks banging themselves on the head, but it clearly concerns nuns and there is no question of flagellation (p. 142). Furthermore, they do not plunge ‘into the white space’ but into the water. Hoffman seems to have missed the point of this animation.

10 On the techniques of miniaturists, see Jonathan J.G. Alexander, Medieval Illuminators and their Methods of Work (New Haven and London: Yale University


13 See for example Alexander, *Medieval Illuminators*.
