
Killer Decorations: The Killer Rabbit in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*

Andrew Wiebe*

Abstract

This paper assesses the historical accuracy in Terry Jones and Terry Gilliam's film *Monty Python the Holy Grail* that demonstrates how the satirical elements of the film are tied to morality and the Gothic tradition. It examines John Ruskin's Victorian criticism and the marginal decorations within Gothic manuscripts and sculpture. By identifying and displaying their symbolic power as symbols of morality, as adapted in the film, this analysis offers a fresh take on why killer rabbits are found within Gothic manuscripts.

Keywords: Killer, Rabbit, Monty Python, Holy, Grail, Manuscripts, Morality, Vice, Virtue, Decorations, Marginalia, Gothic, John Ruskin, Terry Jones, Terry Gilliam

*College of Arts and Science, University of Saskatchewan
Correspondence: ajw200@usask.ca

USURJ

University of Saskatchewan Undergraduate Research Journal
Volume 9, Issue 1, 2023



© 2023 Andrew Wiebe. This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial 4.0 license. (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

For the cult film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, directors Terry Jones and Terry Gilliam drew directly from historical sources for the film's particular style of satirical humour. The film depicts stories of King Arthur, played by Graham Chapman, and his knights as they perform heroic and amusing feats. More specifically, Gilliam adapts the marginal images found in Gothic manuscripts (1150-1350 AD) for the interpolated scenes that frame the film. Gilliam imitates specific images and their translations into the film, which does not only import the marginalia but also the symbolic values that are linked to the context of the subject. The most vivid expression of this symbolic value in action is the killer rabbit, a symbol of vice caught in a battle of morality. The use of Gothic marginalia suggests that *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is, in fact, a film about morality because the sources that the creators drew from are intrinsically linked to vice and virtue.

The highly influential Victorian author, John Ruskin, outlined what he considered the Gothic tradition in his work *The Stones of Venice*, in which he considered Gothic art to be the expression of creativity and "perpetual change both in design and execution."¹ To Ruskin, the Gothic style is the ultimate expression of creativity because it is based on the individual's imagination and freedom.² Ruskin categorized an extensive range of features fundamental to understanding Gothic, but two particular elements are present: savageness and changefulness. Savageness is the rejection of perfection that is necessary for gothic to exist.³ Changefulness represents the freedom that the artists have to engage in intellectual movement and deny monotony.⁴ Changefulness and savageness require that "there is perpetual change both in design and execution."⁵ Following this logic, the images that Gilliam adapts from the margins of manuscripts are not mere reproductions but an ever-changing rejection of

monotony. Animation itself is a continuous reproduction of unique images that simulate movement, and it is this essence that expands on what Ruskin considered Gothic.

Ruskin's terminology becomes apparent in Gilliam's animated sequences. Gilliam successfully adapts the nature of Gothic because he does not merely imitate and conform but perpetually changes the image. Animation is, in essence, a series of ever-changing images that create the illusion of motion. Gilliam does not only adapt the work, but he also transforms it in a way that adheres to the style of Gothic art. The culture from which the images are drawn extends into the film's interpolated scenes, such as "The Tale of Sir Galahad." This interpolated scene is taken directly from a book of hours, a common type of devotional book intended for daily use, and then set into what Martin Meuwese describes as absurd motion through the act of animation.⁶ The use of an original decoration that does not remain static represents an evolution of the marginalia that gives the art life that is true to the source material.

Similar Gothic images can be found in the margins of manuscripts as early as the tenth century and begin to increase in abundance into the twelfth. Marginal decorations were a creative response that existed as a genre of artistic expression. Art historian Dr. Michael Camille uses the example of the creatures at the edges of a map to describe how we understand marginalia within the context of their creation. Marginalia on a map exist at the edge of what is known, isolated from whatever exists at the center of the page.⁷ To the reader, these decorations may seem to be foreign interpolators to the main subject of the individual page where a reader may find them. The location of a particular interpolator could be within a map or a book of prayer, but they are, in a sense, an interpretation or a response to the subject matter of

¹ John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, ed. Jan Morris (London: The Folio Society, 2001), 139.

² Ruskin, 139

³ Ruskin, 139.

⁴ Ruskin, 139-141.

⁵ Ruskin, 139.

⁶ Martine Meuwese, "The Animation of Marginal Decorations in 'Monty Python and the Holy Grail,'" *Arthuriana* vol. 14, no. 4, (2004): 49-50.

⁷ Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 14.

the page. Further, the monsters at the edge of a map exist at the edge of what is known, representing the danger beyond what can be mapped.

This adaptation of marginalia may be further explained with rabbits as a focal point as symbols of cowardice. The idea of the killer rabbit is an expansion of the allegorical symbol for cowardice. Cowardice can be seen in a variety of forms but notably in the *Series of Vice and Virtue*, a façade, on the Notre Dame Cathedral. In this façade, a rabbit defeats a fleeing knight.⁸ The juxtaposition of vice and virtue on a cathedral is evidence of the Gothic imagination in which the rabbit is a clear symbol of the vice, cowardice. Numerous examples of marginalia inspired the film's art. For example, in the liturgical book, the *Pontifical of Renaud de Bar*, an illumination depicts knights besieged by rabbits with one rabbit loading a Trebuchet. The Monty Python troupe modernizes marginalia and builds upon the Gothic tradition to develop the iconic killer rabbit. These decorative features come together and are extended and adapted to form a live-action scene where medieval humour is brought to life through the unconventional monster that devours some of Arthur's knights. This seemingly ridiculous scene, however, is faithful to the medieval artistic tradition and is a serious symbol that embodies the lack of morality that Arthur's knights express—they are cowards and therefore succumb to their foe. The killer rabbit is defeated using moral elements, the holy hand grenade of Antioch, provided by church figures, and a parody of religious scripture. This use of religious elements emphasizes a symbol of virtue. Rabbits are not only deadly enemies in marginalia but symbolic of cowardice, a trait associated with morality.

The film itself is driven by morality by using the opposition of vice and virtue in action within the killer rabbit scene. Religion and morality are a part of medieval life, and the process of adaptation carries these moral elements. The rabbits themselves are found on the pages of religious texts building an implicit connection between the moral and contemplative elements and the decorations since

they are all found within the same space. The film's overall message may not be to avoid vice, but the symbolic value of the rabbit suggests that these elements are operative regardless of the creator's intent. The film acts as an extension of Ruskin's interpretation of Gothic and brings the rabbits found in the corners of various religious texts to life.

The film's faithful adaptation of the Gothic artistic tradition incorporates morality through the depictions of vice and virtue. Gilliam's animations draw inspiration from medieval manuscripts, and not only faithfully adapt the gothic style but honour the symbolic values associated with the images. The killer rabbit is not just a rabbit but also a symbol that expresses cowardice and moral deficiency. Ultimately, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is a film about morality because Gilliam authentically adapts Gothic marginalia from within the cultural framework of medieval ethics. A scene that may seem silly or ridiculous is in a film may in fact give the reader insight into medieval morality.

⁸ Parker, Alan and Mick O'Shea, *And Now for Something Completely Digital*, (New York: Disinformation, 2006), 66.

Bibliography

- Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, *Pontifical of Renaud de Bar*MS 298, fol. 41r.
- Camille, Michael. *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Hourihane, Colum. *Virtue & Vice: The Personifications in the Index of Christian Art*. Princeton, NJ: Index of Christian Art, Dept. of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University in association with Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Meuwese, Martine. "The Animation of Marginal Decorations in 'Monty Python and the Holy Grail.'" *Arthuriana* vol. 14, no. 4 (2004): 45–58.
- Montreal, Bibliothèque de Verdun, *Bréviaire de Renaud de Bar* MS 107, fols. 89r-141v.
- Monty Python & the Holy Grail*. Directed by Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones, performance by the Monty Python Comedy Group. 1975; London, *Python (Monty) Pictures*. VHS.
- Parker, Alan and Mick O'Shea. *And Now for Something Completely Digital*, (New York: Disinformation, 2006).
- Randall, Lilian M. C. *Images in the Margins of Gothic Manuscripts*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1966.
- Ruskin, John. *The Stones of Venice*. Edited by Jan Morris. London, England: Bellew Publishing, 1989.