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**Monty Python and the Absurd Comedy of
Medieval Society**

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ABSTRACT

The Monty Python comic group and their 1975 film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* introduced a new vision of the Middle Ages to popular culture through humour and the absurd. Due to Terry Jones' passion for the Middle Ages, their work reflected this historical period not only in the characters but in their use of carnival comedy, which was originated in medieval times and became an essential element of their humour. This BA thesis provides an analysis of the comic representation of medieval social types in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* along with a comparison between this film and Terry Jones' documentary *Medieval Lives* while considering a historical context with the aim of analysing how the Middle Ages are presented in each work.

Keywords: Monty Python, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, Terry Jones, Middle Ages, Comedy, *Medieval Lives*

El grupo cómico Monty Python y su película de 1975 *Los caballeros de la mesa cuadrada* introdujeron una nueva visión de la Edad Media en la cultura popular a través del humor y de lo absurdo. Gracias a la pasión de Terry Jones por la Edad Media, el trabajo del grupo reflejó esta época tanto en los personajes como en el uso del carnaval, que se originó en el medievo y se convirtió en una parte esencial de su humor. Este TFG ofrece un análisis de la representación cómica de las clases sociales medievales que aparecen en *Los caballeros de la mesa cuadrada* junto con una comparación entre la película y *Terry Jones' Medieval Lives*, siempre teniendo en cuenta el contexto histórico con el fin de analizar cómo se representa la Edad Media influyó en cada trabajo.

Palabras clave: Monty Python, *Los caballeros de la mesa cuadrada*, Terry Jones, Edad Media, Comedia, *Medieval Lives*

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1. Introduction

The aim of this BA thesis is to observe and analyse the representation of different characters of medieval society through Monty Python's humour in two different genres: the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) and Terry Jones' documentary series *Medieval Lives* (2004). *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is a 1975 comedy film that evokes the story of King Arthur and his knights on their quest for the Holy Grail, featuring diverse medieval characters that are placed in absurd and comic situations with the aim of making the audience laugh. *Medieval Lives* is a 2004 television series by Terry Jones, member of the Monty Python, that analyses eight different medieval social groups through Jones' more historiographic point of view of the Middle Ages with the objective of debunking the myths about this period and these characters. In order to analyse these works, it is necessary to first introduce Monty Python as a comedy group and explain how their humour often resided in their use of reality and fiction. The group's comic medievalism, which is present in *Holy Grail*, is linked to medieval forms of humour such as the carnival, which was a very popular manner of irreverent inversion in medieval times as it also functioned as a serious way of understanding the world, but that disappeared with the arrival of the Renaissance. When discussing the Pythons' comic medievalism, it is necessary to mention Terry Jones, who besides having been a member of Monty Python, was also a medievalist with an extended career. Monty Python's comic medievalism, added up to other comic elements such as the use of the absurd and surrealism, defined the humour that characterised the group.

1.1 Monty Python: a brief introduction

Monty Python were a British comedy group formed in 1969 by Graham Chapman, Terry Jones, John Cleese, Michael Palin, Eric Idle and Terry Gilliam. They started their career on BBC with their television program *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969-1974) (McCabe 261-359). Each chapter of the series featured a series of comic sketches written and performed by the troupe and touched on a wide range of topics. Besides their work on television, the comic group also released five films, being *And Now for Something Completely Different* (1971) the first one, which consisted of a compilation of comic sketches previously written and performed for *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. Despite the low success of this first film, they released *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* four years later, inspired in the Arthurian legend to deliver a work set in the Middle Ages with the aim of providing a comic and different version of this period from what the Hollywood industry had done up to that moment (McCabe, 421). But their biggest and most controversial success arrived in 1979 with *Life of Brian*, a film in which the troupe aimed to criticize Christian fanatics through Brian, who lives a parallel life to Jesus Christ's. The plot of this film did not cause indifference among the critics and censors of the time, who found it to be extremely offensive, and even blasphemous (Morgan, 115). *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life* (1983) was their last film together as a group, but their career was not limited to screens: they also worked together in albums, books, and

stage shows (Morgan, 111) both as a group and later on in other individual projects. Monty Python reunited for the last time in 2014 in London for a number of shows.

The sense of humour that characterised the Pythons' works is based on the absurd and the surreal, which is the result of six different styles of producing and understanding comedy. This is described by Terry Jones as "a harmony that was somebody else", referring to "the seventh voice" that was the group (Sacks 2020). When considering this variety of topics and visions in Monty Python, David Morgan (2019) describes the troupe's humour as something that had "odd and surreal juxtapositions, a penchant for twisted violence, and a belief that the human condition is, on the whole, pretty absurd" (13). And, regarding the absurd and the essence of Monty Python, Michael Palin (2019) states that it is "human inadequacy" (101) what characterised their work. This conception of humour as something absurd, irreverent, and surreal in which the only protagonist was comedy is what allowed them to revolutionize the industry. But this film also inspired other creations, such as the 2005 musical comedy *Spamalot*.

1.2 Speaking Monty Python

1.2.1 Reality and Fiction

The contrast between what is real and what is not plays a very important role in various Python's humoristic pieces, working as a tool for the diverse aims a certain work might have. The television series *Monty Python's Flying Circus* often includes sketches that are set in daily life situations and feature ordinary people as the main characters, presenting, at first, a very realistic scene. However, they soon become absurd, like the "New Cooker Sketch", in which a woman receives a new cooker but, due to administrative issues, the deliverers are unable to install it. Because of the frustration that this situation causes on the woman, she decides to die after finding out they will install her cooker earlier if she does so. These sketches usually aim to criticize certain aspects of life or society, but sometimes they only seek to cause a laugh out of absurd situations, such as the "Dead Parrot" sketch, in which a man tries to return a parrot he recently purchased after realizing it had been dead all that time, but the pet shop owner tries to convince the client that the bird is just resting and not dead.

Regarding the later film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, Elizabeth Murrell (1998), in *History Revenged: Monty Python Translates Chrétien De Troyes's Perceval, or the Story of the Grail (Again)*, points out that Monty Python have combined different historical periods in this film and that this means that the authors did not mean to represent medieval England but rather to make a portrayal of their contemporary society through a medieval setting. Adding up to this, Louise D'Arcens (2014) defends that comic medievalism is "bound up with theories of temporality" due to its historicism (8), meaning that it is just how we view the past and its relationship with the present, also suggesting that artists and creators use the Middle Ages to criticize or represent other periods of time as "the Middle Ages also functions as a commentary on the present" (14). Murrell (1998) also suggests that this way of representing contemporary situations through

the use of the Arthurian legend and medieval England. In *Holy Grail*, this representation of different historical periods through the Middle Ages can be best appreciated in the “Constitutional Peasants” scene (*Monty Python and the Holy Grail* 00:09:00-00:12:11), in which a medieval peasant and his mother discuss social classes and the oppression the lower classes receive from the powerful ones before straightforward questioning the legitimacy of Arthur as King of the Britons since they did not vote for him. It can be argued that the content of the dialogues of this scene are not medieval at all as the ideologies the peasants have are not contemporary to the Middle Ages, especially the concept of democracy, which did not exist at this time.

Holy Grail includes many more of these elements that keep a contrast between what is real and what is fictional. This duality is present thorough the film and it is linked to the expectative the spectator may have about the stereotypes and myths that appear in the film. Ellen Bishop (1990) in *Bakhtin, Carnival and Comedy: The New Grotesque in 'Monty Python and the Holy Grail.'* explains that this contrast between reality and fiction is also one manner in which Monty Python have played with the breaking of the fourth wall in the film, reminding the viewers that what they are watching is not close to reality and that it does not aim to be so in any way. This can be appreciated in scenes such as the final one (*Holy Grail* 01:28:19-01:30:00), when King Arthur and Sir Bedevere are arrested by twentieth century policemen who point out the presence of the camera that is filming them, or on earlier scene in the film (*Holy Grail* 00:32:13-00:32:46) when we are shown the murder of some historian filming a documentary on the plot of the film. This is why it can be argued that the contents and the characters in the film are meant to be closer to the Arthurian legend than to the actual Medieval England as the story is purely fantastic and does not have an historiographic tone.

1.2.2 Medievalism, humour and the carnivalesque

Humour was an essential part of medieval society even though it is rarely taken into consideration when representing the Middle Ages. Regarding this lack of representation of humour in medievalism, D’Arcens (2014) argues that seriousness is mocked in medieval humour, which is something that scholars do not always recognize or take into account as another part of the cultural field, and this is because “humour is difficult to anatomise” (5). One of the most popular forms of humour was the carnivalesque inversion, which was highly linked to the grotesque. Carnavalesque inversion was studied as part of the popular medieval culture by Mikhail Bakhtin. As Bishop (1990) estates: “carnival laughter was a serious way of understanding the world” (50), arguing that carnival comedy and laughter in the Middle Ages had a deep philosophical meaning. It can be argued that the humour in *Holy Grail* preserves this carnivalesque spirit through the depiction of the characters as they initially are pictured as regular medieval people, but then they are put into comic and absurd situations (Austin, 2002). For example, the “Killer Bunny” scene (*Holy Grail*, 01:10:00-01:12:20), in which a rabbit, an animal that is generally associated with fear, is turned into a grotesque monster that kills a number of King Arthur’s knights. Another example of how seriousness is mocked in the film is the “Constitutional Peasants” scene (*Holy Grail*, 00:09:00-00:12:11), in which a

couple of peasants discuss class, democracy and defy King Arthur's legitimacy as a monarch. This combination of ordinary characters and elements, such as medieval peasants, with other features that do not belong to the Middle Ages, like the concept of democracy, is what makes *Holy Grail* an absurd and grotesque comedy that matches the essence of carnivalesque comedy. All of this suggests that the essence of the carnival comedy that existed in the Middle Ages is one of the many elements that characterised Monty Python's comedy.

This type of carnivalesque comedy is present in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. The film features a number of medieval characters in a series of comic, ridiculous situations, which can be understood as part of the basis of the humoristic tone that is present in the film. In the "Constitutional Peasants" scene (*Holy Grail* 00:09:00-00:12:11), as argued by Murrell (1998), the way in which Dennis, the peasant, changes his speech in both content and register is an accurate representation of what the carnival was like in the Middle Ages.

Humour in *Holy Grail* is related to the absurd and to turning medieval characters into grotesque and absurd ones. Greta Austin (2002) explains how films about the Middle Ages are often a representation of modern western life in period dress, which, according to her, do not always coincide with the expectations the audience has about the Middle Ages. However, elements that match the expectations viewers could have from Arthurian characters and works can actually be found in *Holy Grail*: damsels in distress, poor, dirty peasants, or brave knights that fight until death, but these are presented in comic and ridiculous contexts. Turning those elements into a series of grotesque and absurd scenes manages to break the viewers' expectations, for example, the portrayal of the character of Herbert as a feminine young man, which confuses Sir Launcelot as he initially thought Herbert was a woman, uses the breaking of gender expectations as a way to cause laughter (*Holy Grail*, 00:47:36-01:00:00).

Considering this vision on comic medievalism, it can be argued that Terry Jones (2004) in *Medieval Lives* preserves the same sense of humour that can be found in his previous work with the Monty Python. This can be observed, for example, in the way he portrays the stereotypical version of each medieval character he deals with. To do so, he dresses up as said character being faithful to the stereotype with a comic tone. This means that the Middle Ages are not only present in his work through the settings and the contents but through the use of humour as well.

1.2.3 The Medieval Python: Terry Jones as a medievalist

Terry Jones (1942-2020) was a member of the Monty Python comic group and Oxford-educated medievalist. In addition to having directed various films aside his work with the Pythons, he has hosted various history documentaries such as *Ancient Inventions*, *The Crusades*, *The Barbarians* or *Medieval Lives* and written various children's books as well as more academic books about Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400): *Chaucer's Knight* and *Who Murdered Chaucer: A Medieval Mystery* (Morgan, 8-9). In these works, Jones often presented new points of views about the Middle Ages, such as his revisionist version of Richard II, who he argues was not a tyrant and that the vision that is usually given of this king is distorted and not looked at in context (Saul, 39-41). It was also his knowledge about the Middle Ages and about the Arthurian legend what motivated the Pythons to create *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), a comic film about King Arthur's quest for the Holy Grail which he co-directed with Terry Gilliam and in which his ideologies and views of the world are often present (Palin, 57). His later documentary series *Medieval Lives* (2004) uses an historiographical tone to provide a new approach to medieval society. In this documentary series, Jones deals with eight different medieval social groups in order to debunk the myths about each of them. His career positions him as a respected scholar and humourist, proving that "making people laugh and making people think are not incompatible" (Palin, 58).

2. The Absurd Comedy of Medieval Society

In order to examine Monty Python's comic representation of medieval society, this section includes the analysis of six medieval characters that are present in both *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* and *Terry Jones' Medieval Lives*: the peasant, the monk, the damsel, the minstrel, the knight and the king. In order to carry this analysis out, I have used the book version of *Medieval Lives* and, since it includes eight social types, the selection made for this analysis corresponds to the relevance they had in the film. Despite being the same characters, each work portrays them in a different way. Because of this, it is necessary to consider that the context in which *Holy Grail* presents medieval characters is not the same to the one in *Medieval Lives* as the latter has an historiographical background and the aim of educating while *Holy Grail* is a comic film that does not need to have any historical accuracy. This is why the portrayal each work does of the same social groups differ from each other; while *Holy Grail* presents an absurd and grotesque version of the characters with the main purpose of causing a laugh, *Medieval Lives'* main concern is to inform the spectators about the role of each character in the Middle Ages.

2.1 The peasant

Medieval peasants are often presented in modern media as poor and ignorant people who were enslaved by their lords, living an absolutely undesirable life. However, these representations of the Middle Ages are not always completely accurate. As argued by Georges Duby (1999), it was not uncommon for medieval peasants to live in autonomous collectives (225). This suggests that peasants were not necessarily slaves or servants who worked for a lord but that could have been more independent and self-sufficient than it is usually thought or presented in the different representations of the Middle Ages. Duby (1999) also states that medieval peasants were not always oppressed by the higher classes but that they were not completely free (248). So, it can be said that peasants in the Middle Ages were not enslaved people that had no freedom but that they still did not enjoy the rights and freedoms the upper classes did. However, that's a very common and cliched view of them. And it is precisely that kind of stereotype that provides the basis for the humor in the Pythons' representation of peasants.

Monty Python and the Holy Grail provides a version of medieval peasants in which they are merely a group of poor, dirty people that work like slaves for their lord and whose only reason to be is to collect mud when they are not questioning the system. In the "Constitutional Peasants scene" (*Holy Grail* 00:09:00-00:12:11), King Arthur comes across a couple of peasants who are collecting filth and questions them about the lord he assumes they are working for. He is surprised to see that these people do not only not have a lord but that they are also part of an "anarcho-syndicalist commune" and that Dennis, the first peasant he encounters, questions and mocks the legitimacy of Arthur's kingship. Dennis also shares a political speech that is not contemporary to them, as it is highly inspired by Marxism and anarchism, as it can be seen in the way Dennis defies Arthur's legitimacy as king: "King, eh! I expect you've got a palace and fine clothes and courtiers and plenty of food. And how did you get that? By exploiting the workers! By hanging on to outdated imperialistic dogma, which perpetuates the social and economic differences in our society!". It can be stated that these peasants show no respect for King Arthur by the way they refer to him and question his authority, arguing that they never voted for him to be king. Greta Austin (2002) argues that films about European Middle Ages tend to reflect the anxieties and preoccupations of their creators about this period rather than provide an accurate representation of it.

In other scenes, such as the one of the witch trial (*Holy Grail* 00:17:22-00:21:26), peasants are portrayed as a bunch of ignorant people whose only joy in life is to burn witches. In this scene, a group of peasants try to persuade Sir Bedevere to burn a woman they have dressed up as a witch. Sir Bedevere begins to question the peasants about methods to know if she is an actual witch and, even though those questions are presented as a logical conversation, they are completely absurd. For example, their argumentation on how, since witches burn, it means that they are made out of wood and, therefore witches float. However, the peasants are not able to respond to all of the questions or struggle to do so. Meanwhile, King Arthur is observing the trial and he is the one who concludes that the woman would be a witch if she weighed as much as a duck. This argument, despite being absurd, is taken as valid and the woman is weighted on a

large scale with a duck, and, since she weights as much as the animal, the villagers take her away to burn her. This logical exchange King Arthur and Sir Bedevere maintain is too complex for the peasants' level of understanding and they do not show any interest in taking part in this as they only want to burn the witch, which seems to be their only entertainment, meaning that medieval peasants are not very cultured or intelligent and easy to distract and keep entertained. Overall, the witch trial scene turns out to be a series of absurd exchanges between the characters that turns something as serious as the burning of a woman into a comic scene.

In an earlier scene (*Holy Grail* 00:07:00-00:09:00), a man walks around a peasant village with a cart, which he uses to collect dead people. The peasants that inhabit this place are filthy and, by the way they treat their deceased family members, it can be guessed that they are too used to deal with death. It can also be observed how they are surrounded by disease and that death can also be seen as a relief for them when the man who carries the cart stops to talk to a man who is trying to throw in a family member who is not dead yet, so they hit him in the head and throw him in the cart. In that moment, King Arthur passes by, not paying attention to these peasants, who assume that he must be a king because he is not filthy like they are. This suggests that these peasants in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* are aware of social statuses and of the fact that they occupy a low place in society but that they are resigned and do not even think of ascending socially.

Despite the image that *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* shows of medieval peasants, Terry Jones's later *Medieval Lives* (2004) argues that peasants did not always live surrounded by dirt, death and poverty and that, in fact, they lived in decent houses and had a good life quality through this period in Britain (19). He also suggests that peasants were also able to change their social status for a better one, usually through marriage or through joining the Church (31-32). Jones (2004) also states that the stereotypical image that is usually given of medieval peasants being ignorant slaves partially comes from narrations and descriptions of the Peasants Revolt in 1381, even though this event can also help with the understanding how the contemporaries view and portrayed these peasants, it does not mean that they are completely true (15-17). In fact, through the analysis of this event, Terry Jones (2004) concludes that peasants were more aware of the politics and the social situation they were going through than it is usually thought. It is also stated that the organization and their strategies to protest, such as destroying certain places in which they stored records, does not match the stereotypical image of an uncultured, illiterate and ignorant peasant, so it is suggested that they might have known more things than it is usually thought or considered (17-18). Their ability to organize themselves to protest to claim improvements in their lives shows that medieval peasants were conscious of their social status and did not conform to being treated with no dignity. This suggests that peasants were not always as ignorant as we would expect even though they received a limited education and this was controlled by the Church (31). Jones (2004) also explains that medieval peasants did have some knowledge about the law, the system and often organized themselves without the need for a lord. This happened because their lords were often away at war, which meant that they had to organize and administrate their own work (20-21). Terry Jones (2004) concludes that medieval peasants did not always

have an awful life but that it did often depend on the higher classes of society, even if peasants revolted against them.

This vision of medieval peasants that Jones (2004) provides in *Terry Jones' Medieval Lives* does not entirely match with the portrayal of peasants in *Holy Grail*. However, Jones (2004) does suggest that this knowledge peasants had of the laws and their society sometimes allowed them to live somewhat out of the system. He argues that this way of peasants organizing themselves and not working for anyone but themselves –in a way– was not the most common thing to encounter and it was not either an anarcho-syndicalist commune, but it can be argued that it might resemble the way peasants live in the film. It can also be noted that, in both representations of medieval peasants, these are aware of their social status and the place they occupy in society. However, in *Terry Jones' Medieval Lives* (2004), peasants are more connected to people from other social statuses, while this is not seen in *Holy Grail* as the peasants appearing in the film live away from society and show little to no connection with the rest of social classes. Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider the fact that the aim and context of these two works is very different and that *Holy Grail* does not seek to provide an historically-accurate version of medieval peasants.

2.2 The monk

The Middle Ages are known for having had a huge influence of the Church, something that is often present in the modern representations of this time through religious characters such as friars and monks. However, there are many different versions of these last ones in post-medieval representations of the Middle Ages that go from kind men who are devoted to God to corrupt, rich men who promoted violence against heretics. According to Derek Pearsall (2012), medieval monks did indeed profit from their work and many religious orders became rich thanks to this, but he also argues that it was rare for monks to interact with people as they spent most of their time being cloistered (65). Because of this, it can be said that medieval monks were probably not very invested in social affairs and did not care that much about other sections of society. Pearsall (2012) also argues that monks were actually not strict followers to their own doctrines and values, implying that they held a huge power that allowed them to continue with their lifestyle (67). Due to their cloistered lifestyle that, in a way, isolated them from the rest of the population, it is probably unlikely that the lower classes felt any kind of connection to these monks. On top of this, medieval monks lived lives that did not resemble what they preached in terms of morality and their vow of poverty, which distanced them even more from the rest of the society, especially from peasants. Adding up to this, Duby (1999) suggests that most of the information and documents that are used to study the Middle Ages have been produced by monks who lived in this period of time (293). This means that the ones that held the most knowledge were monks, which would inevitably influence the medieval society and the records that we have today about the Middle Ages and about the monks themselves.

Medieval monks play a secondary yet very remarkable role in *Holy Grail*. These monks accompany King Arthur and his knights in their quest for the Holy Grail and they are initially presented as cultured men who are loyal to their king and to God. Monks are first introduced in the film in an early scene (*Holy Grail* 00:16:37-00:17:18), but they do not interact with other characters as they are reciting “Pie Jesu” while hitting themselves on the head by way of penitential discipline or mortification of the flesh. This suggests that these medieval monks do not take part in the lower classes’ affairs despite living among them and leading an apparently similar life of poverty. Also, these monks do not seem to be interested in material possessions as they wear simple and humble clothing and wear no shoes. Despite this, it can be observed in a scene towards the end of the film (*Holy Grail* 01:12:00-01:15:00) how monks take part in violent acts which they justify through faith and their own interpretation of the religious texts. In this scene monks are also finally seen interacting with other characters: King Arthur and his knights and they are presented as part of the expedition which is searching for the Holy Grail. They are asked for help in battle by King Arthur when they are unable to defeat the Killer Bunny. The monks do not question their aims to cause harm and they hand “The Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch”, a mockery of a contemporary weapon that is aimed to destroy enemies, to King Arthur after explaining its functioning. Once they have defeated their enemy, there is one last apparition of the monk when they ask him to translate an Aramaic text but he ends up being eaten by The Black Beast (*Holy Grail* 01:15:11-01:17:11). This also suggests that monks are the ones who hold the most knowledge and that they are cultured men who mostly serve to cultural or academic purposes for the higher classes.

In the documentary series *Medieval Lives*, Terry Jones (2004) provides a slightly different version of medieval monks, presenting them as men who, in theory, isolated themselves from the world and followed a series of strict rules to live their lives in poverty. However, this was a reality only in the beginning of monasticism (88-89), as they eventually became rich, which caused people to hate them for not obeying their own rules and having profited from the lower classes’ money. This is because one of their main sources of money consisted of getting paid for praying for other people’s sins, such as the king’s war crimes (91-92). This suggests that medieval monks were extremely despised by the majority of the population in medieval times and that, therefore, they would not be a relevant part of their lives. He also states that monks were often ridiculed or the subjects of jokes in medieval England due to their violent ways towards people, which did not match the ideals and moral they defended (87-88). This indicates that the population, especially the lower classes, was aware of the role monks were supposed to play in their society in contrast to the positions they actually held.

Once taken this into consideration, it can be concluded that *Holy Grail* provides a slightly different version of medieval monks than the one that appears in *Medieval Lives*. This is because the film, due to its comic tone, ridicules the figure of the monk while *Medieval Lives* presents them in a more serious way and shows how monks were an essential part of medieval society due to the power they held. This influence can only be guessed in the film through the interactions between the monks and King Arthur.

2.3 The damsel (in distress)

The damsel in distress is one of the most famous medieval archetypes and it is frequently included in artistic representations of the Middle Ages, such as the 1870 painting *The Knight Errant* by Millais or the *Sleeping Beauty* tale. But, even though damsels in distress are highly popular among post-medieval works set in the Middle Ages, it does not mean that they are completely accurate portraits of what a medieval damsel actually was. However, this does not mean that damsels in medieval England were completely free to enjoy complete freedom as men did. Their sexuality, for example, was often highly restricted and presented as something negative. This is because of the influence that the Church had on everyone's lives, something which affected women in a negative way. According to Duby (1999), the medieval religious authorities imposed their moral on maidens and marriage, arguing that, as it is said in the Bible, God did not create men and women equally thus the latter was inferior (293). So, it can be stated that, despite of not being usually interested in being rescued by some heroic knight, medieval damsels were not always completely free in certain aspects and that they did not enjoy all the privileges men did due to the influence and control of the Church. Also, according to Duby (1999), it is true that medieval damsels were sometimes kidnapped by men, but that these kidnappings were often planned by the woman's own family or by her husband if they wanted to get rid of her for different reasons such as receiving the damsel's part of some inheritance or not having to spend any money on her wedding (304-305). So, it can be argued that, even though there is some truth behind the archetype of the damsel in distress, actual medieval damsels were not heroically rescued as most of these kidnappings had been planned by the men who had control over most of their decisions as, in the Middle Ages, women were dependent on men to decide on the relevant aspects of their lives.

Damsels, as one of the most relevant characters of modern medievalizing representations, are an essential part of the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. They are introduced in the scene of "The Tale of Sir Galahad" (*Holy Grail* 00:36:10-00:43:10) as damsels in distress. Sir Galahad, while searching for the Holy Grail on his own, comes across a castle that seems to keep the Grail. But, to his surprise, he does not find the Holy Grail inside this castle but a group of beautiful young women who live there on their own and use the image of the Holy Grail to attract knights into their castle to then ask them to help them out. However, these damsels are not in distress at all and they are mainly interested in sex, something that does not match with the idea of the damsel in distress that the knights seem to have, but that refers to a popular kind of sexual story of the Middle Ages (Hopkins, 14-15). This reflects how the Pythons' previous knowledge and education influenced their work. At the end of this scene, and despite being previously described as "chaste", Sir Galahad, finally gives in and stop resisting the ladies' charms, ironizing about the nature of this character. However, he is finally interrupted and rescued by Sir Launcelot. In terms of visual representation and characterization, it can be argued that damsels in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* are close to the stereotype of the medieval damsel as they are presented as extremely feminine and to be in

need for a brave knight who will help them. And, unlike many other characters that appear in the film, they also look clean, delicate and they do not show any interest in anything that might happen out of their castle.

But there is another representation of the damsel in distress archetype later on in *Holy Grail* which can be seen in “The Tale of Sir Launcelot” (*Holy Grail* 00:47:36-01:00:00) when the knight responds to a call for help from someone who is locked in a tower and is being forced to get married against their will. Because of this, the knight assumed this person was a damsel, but when he arrived at the castle where this person was locked up and violently murdered many of the people who were attending the wedding, Sir Launcelot found out that the person who was asking for help was a prince and not a damsel. This soon made Sir Launcelot change his mind on helping this person out and soon started talking to the king, who shared his disgust about his feminine son and decided to marry Launcelot to the bride instead after having made the prince fall off the tower. This prince, Herbert, like the damsels from the previous scene that has been discussed, is portrayed as an extremely feminine and delicate person, which is the main source of humour in this scene as the breaking of gender expectations is what causes this situation to become completely absurd.

A similar representation of medieval damsels can be found in *Terry Jones’ Medieval Lives* (2004). Terry Jones (2004) explains how it was very common to find women who were being forced by their families to get married to Norman men after the conquest but that many of these women refused and resisted to get married, sometimes even having to hide in nunneries (168). He also states that medieval damsels did not meet the standards of the archetype of the damsel in distress and that, if they ever needed to be rescued, they “infuriatingly failed to live up to our stereotype” (166), explaining that there is evidence of women being abducted, but that sometimes they planned their own abductions in order to choose their own husband after they had become widows (172). This vision on medieval women positions them in a much better place than what is usually considered as they are pictured as somewhat free and independent people rather than just another possession of men. Also, according to Terry Jones (2004), medieval damsels were able to earn their own money without the permission of their husbands by running their own businesses (183-184). This means that these women could be completely independent from men as they did not have to economically depend on them. He also explains how medieval damsels enjoyed culture and literature and that this is one of the main reasons why we can find many medieval tales about other women enjoying their sexuality and having affairs with knights out of marriage, which was actually similar to what happened in real life (176). These women are presented as cultured people who did not usually spend their free time around men but with other damsels, meaning that, since they enjoyed their hobbies on their own, there was a whole world of culture meant for women and that they were free to also enjoy their privacy or to share it with whoever they wanted.

After having discussed this, it can be argued that medieval damsels in *Holy Grail*, as they are represented through humour, differ to the more historically accurate ones that appear in *Medieval Lives*. While the damsels in the film are comic characters who are only interested in sex, the damsels in the documentary

series are more complex, show more preoccupations and make a more complete portrayal of what damsels were in the Middle Ages and their role in society.

2.4 The minstrel

Medieval minstrels are usually pictured as mere entertainers for kings and knights. But medieval minstrels actually played various and more important roles in the court. This is explained by Linda Zaerr (2012), who states that minstrels performed in a “wide range of venues” and that their job adapted to various different needs (52). This was a response to their patrons’ demands. Regarding this, Murrell (1998) argues that medieval kings and knights could easily change their entertainers and the contents they introduced in their performances, which were mainly oriented to flattering their masters, according to what they wanted to hear. This means that medieval minstrels, depending on those who paid them to perform, were some kind of disposable tools used to cover their patrons’ needs for entertainment. However, and even though they are usually pictured as lower-class men who served the upper classes, minstrels in the Middle Ages were much more than that. According to Zaerr (2012), minstrels did not only perform and entertain their patron but they might have also collaborated with them in their performances or even taught them. This can be due to the minstrels’ need to be cultured people in order to then produce poetry, music, or any other kind of artistic piece to entertain their patrons. So, it can be said that minstrels, instead of being simple, disposable entertainers of kings and knights, were important cultural agents of the Middle Ages.

Minstrels in *Holy Grail* are always seen following their knights or kings, but they are not always portrayed as loyal to their interests, which causes their knights not to be pleased with them and their ways of providing entertainment. For example, in the scene of Sir Robin (*Holy Grail* 00:32:50-00:35:41), he can be seen accompanied by a group of minstrels who, to entertain him, sing about him and about many possible and painful ways in which he could die in battle, which starts to cause some evident discomfort in Sir Robin while he is facing a dangerous situation he is terrified of: a three-headed knight that is planning on killing him in the forest. And, instead of being useful for the possible fight with this knight, Robin’s minstrel tries to make him fight against this knight. However, Sir Robin escapes the danger and his minstrels begin to sing a song about how he “bravely ran away”, continuing to flatter their master, which contrasts with Sir Robin’s cowardice. This scene, as argued by D’Arcens (2014), seeks to parody the songs of great deeds, which were aimed to narrate someone’s success in the battlefield rather than recording their lord’s failure. Since the main purpose of medieval minstrels was to entertain and flatter their masters, the parodic tone in which minstrels are portrayed in *Holy Grail* also implies that they do not fulfil this task and bother their master instead. Considering this, it can be argued that minstrels in *Holy Grail* are a grotesque parody of actual medieval minstrels as they represent the essence and main functions these people had in the Middle Ages yet they do so in a satiric way in order to cause laughter.

Terry Jones's *Medieval Lives* (2004) explains how medieval minstrels were men who had many functions in a court and how those functions were mostly artistic, but they were heavily conditioned and influenced by political interests as they had to please their king and his knights and that they did so by performing their songs of great deeds which praised the king's and knights' achievements in the battlefield, often exaggerating those, never saying anything negative about them (39). In the book, he also suggests that these characters were more important than people may think as they were highly linked to not only political interests but also to the military world and sometimes even played roles in the battlefield (36-39). However, he also implies that medieval minstrels usually belonged to the lower classes, but that, due to minstrels directly working for higher-class men, minstrelsy was often an option for poor people to try to have a bigger income (44). Taking this into account, it can be argued that *Medieval Lives* portrays medieval minstrels as lower-class men who directly served their masters with the aim of entertaining and flattering them through poems, stories, songs or other kind of performances that often dealt with their lords' great accomplishments.

Even though *Holy Grail* does not provide an in-depth developed character of the medieval minstrel it can be observed that their main function was to entertain and serve their knights and it is not specified whether they occupy a high or a low place in society. The film depicts medieval minstrels as men who depended on their lords to survive and, to please them, minstrels performed songs that flattered their masters. However, these minstrels are not producing songs of great deeds but parodying them through an ironic situation in which they are praising their master for his bravery, Sir Robin, yet he is seen cowardly running away. In contrast, Terry Jones's *Medieval Lives* (2004) presents these characters through an historiographic point of view, portraying them as people who had a low social status despite directly working for the upper classes. These minstrels' function in court was to entertain and flatter their patrons through different artistic performances such as songs, poems or storytelling. However, they were not free to include what they wished in these performances as they could never say anything negative about their masters. Considering this, it can be stated that the minstrels in *Holy Grail* differ from the ones in *Medieval Lives* due to the tone in which each is portrayed: while *Medieval Lives* aims to provide a more historically-accurate version of medieval minstrels, *Holy Grail* depicts them in an ironic and satirical way with the purpose of making the audience laugh.

2.5 The king

Kings are placed at the top of medieval society in the different representations of the Middle Ages. And, regarding this, the concept of monarchy and kings, according to David Matthews (2015), is idealized in many post-medieval works about the Middle Ages, arguing that these representations place monarchy as something wanted by most part of the society as it would keep the peace and order of the country (29). But, looking at a historiographic version of a medieval king, Nigel Saul (2012), in his depiction of King Richard II (1377-1399), argues that he did not look for the common good as he only cared about people honouring him. (41-42) He also explains how Richard II held all the power and did not let anyone else take part in the

decisions he made. Taking this into account, it can be said that the post-medieval representations of medieval kings often tend to idealize and mythicize this figure, which probably was not as close to the rest of society as it is usually pictured.

King Arthur is probably the most famous medieval character of all time and he has been featured in many works that were inspired by this legend. His legend was originated by the need of embodying a series of ideas and feelings, such as kingship, social identity or leadership that are not restricted to medieval versions of King Arthur but that also apply to the more contemporary representations of his legend, like in films (Fulton, 1-11). This suggests that the Arthurian legend inspired many kings and knights as well as influenced the British population as it meant the creation of a national identity as the idealization of his court and his figure as king is a key element of the Arthurian literature (Fulton, 388). King Arthur is also the first character that appears in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (*Holy Grail* 00:04:00-00:6:55), and he does so while riding an imaginary horse while his assistant, Patsy, bangs two coconuts together to produce the sound of a galloping horse. As soon as they reach a castle, Arthur introduces himself and asks to see the lord of said place, but he is questioned about his imaginary horse and the origin of the coconuts instead. This leads to a conversation on how some swallows must have been the ones that brought those tropical fruits to England. Finally, Arthur gives up and leaves to continue his task of looking for knights that will want to join him. Because of his use of language and his ability to reason and to provide somewhat coherent arguments, it can be said that King Arthur is represented as a cultured man who is using these abilities to be recognized as a king. This portrayal of King Arthur, as argued by Murrell (1998), is just a new version of the one that was produced by Chrétien de Troyes (c. 1130- c. 1180), which, according to the author, can be perceived in the ways Arthur interacts with the different characters and in the storyline itself. Also, considering that King Arthur is a mythological and literary figure that represents an ideal king and the spirit of chivalry through his legend, the fact that he is seen galloping on an imaginary horse throughout the film turns the serious figure that he represents into an absurd and ridicule character. However, Arthur is not the only king that appears in *Holy Grail*, as another king is featured in “The Tale of Sir Launcelot” (*Holy Grail* 00:47:36-01:00:00). This second king is portrayed as a man with little culture and whose main interests and goals are to improve socially and politically, which can be seen in the way he treats his own son, Herbert, forcing him to get married to a wealthy damsel so that they could have a better place to live in.

Medieval Lives presents a slightly different version of medieval kings as they are portrayed through an historiographic perspective. Terry Jones (2004), paraphrasing the 1966 western film, classifies English kings in the Middle Ages in three categories: “the good, the bad and the ugly” (190), and explains how these kings held all the power but used it in different ways. For example, he argues that while Richard I would have not cared about England if it had not been a great source of money to sponsor the crusade, Richard II was not interested in war at all and that he was a much better king than other historians consider. And, because of this, he defends that Richard II is a king that has not been treated in a fair way by history, which has always portrayed as a cruel and evil monarch instead. According to Nigel Saul (2012), Terry Jones presents a revisionist version of Richard II, portraying him as a king that deserved a fairer treatment

and that “we should try to judge Richard’s achievement in the light of contemporary expectations of kingship for the common good” (39). Terry Jones (2004) defends that King Richard II should be judged in context, which can provide a more accurate view of his reign (205-206). However, Nigel Saul (2012) argues that Richard II’s kingship “stressed the power of the prerogative and emphasized the submissiveness of the subject” (42), which means that Richard II might have not been as great as Jones (2004) presents him. Moving on to an “unmentionable king”, Jones (2004) introduces King Louis the First, arguing that he is a king that has been erased from history because he was a Frenchman who invaded England for a second time in its history (191). Louis claimed himself King of England through his marriage and by the support he received from the barons (192), but none recognized him as the rightful monarch once he was defeated, therefore, he never appeared in history books. This implies that, even though the concept of democracy did not exist in the Middle Ages, the support from certain sections of the society, especially the upper classes, was an essential requisite for a man to be king. Adding up to the relevance of the supporters of the kings in the Middle Ages, Jones (2004) deals with the power and limitations these men had. He argues that, up until the Norman Conquest in 1066, kings were elected and that, because of this, they could be replaced by a new one (195). But, even after the Norman Conquest, he argues that kinship eventually became again “not quite so personal”, meaning that the kings needed the support of others in order to effectively rule their country (197). Regarding power and rulers, it is necessary to consider the views on their relationship with the Church as the kings that Terry Jones (2004) presents in *Medieval Lives* are also portrayed as men who were very close to the Church. This is the reason why they got themselves in violent missions in the name of God, like Richard I (1157-1199), who invested huge sums of money in the crusades. In *Medieval Lives*, it can also be seen how the Church is constantly being related to kings, power and the rules of succession to the throne of England (193). This suggests that medieval kings and some of the decisions they made were often influenced by the Church.

Considering all of these different visions on medieval kings, it can be argued that, in a way, both King Arthur and Richard I, as they are presented, tried to please God through violence and cruelty and that both monarchs were also more focused on their personal goals than in actually ruling their countries and that, in both cases, they did not have the success they had initially expected. But there are more similarities between King Arthur and the story of King Louis that is presented in *Medieval Lives* (2004) such as Arthur proclaiming himself King of the Britons after having gone through some mystical ceremony and only receiving the support of his knights, which is similar to the reign of King Louis, who was mainly supported by the barons yet he was not recognized as King of England once his reign ended. The non-recognition of King Arthur as king of the Britons by the peasants, who claim that they never chose him as their ruler, resembles the idea of elected kings that is presented in *Medieval Lives*, as it is argued that a man needed the support of the population in order to be king. However, *Holy Grail* provides a satirized version of King Arthur in which his role as a king is made fun of and even ridiculed while *Medieval Lives* has a more historiographical tone, presenting medieval kings through a more historically accurate point of view.

2.6 The knight

The majority of the representations of medieval knights today are not necessarily inspired by the actual Middle Ages. This is explained by Matthews (2015), who argues that modern representations of the Middle Ages portray knights and chivalry through Victorian culture (24). This means that, most times, the portrayal of medieval knights in different pieces of art and media is derived from the romanticized image that was produced in the Victorian era. However, chivalry in the Middle Ages was not so similar to the modern representations of knights: the chivalric moral was mainly based in the loyalty to their king and to God – who would forgive their sins in the moment of their death–, on being honored, respected and feared (Duby, 352-353). A kind of knights that needs to be considered when discussing and understanding this is knights Templar as they are one of the most relevant and representative chivalric characters of the Middle Ages. Duby (1999) argues that these warrior monks are the best representation of the chivalric spirit as they only lived to fight for Christ while leading very simple lives away from material possessions and temptations (349). However, Duby also argues that medieval knights belonged to the upper classes and were rich men who had many material possessions that would prove their position in society (353). Considering this, it is necessary to discuss the one of the most popular versions of medieval knights among medieval and contemporary representations of the Middle Ages: King Arthur’s knights of the Round Table. Similarly to King Arthur’s role, their aim in the Arthurian literature was to represent different values and ideas while idealizing chivalry and Arthur’s court (Fulton, 1-11). The romances about Arthur’s knights often deal with love (Fulton, 145) and with “chivalry’s potential to restore and to destroy the social order” (Fulton, 166), providing an image of medieval knights that is based on honour and power.

Contemporary representations of the Middle Ages often tend to include its very own portrayal of what chivalry mean to society during this time. So, of course, *Holy Grail* features a series of knights. King Arthur’s knights are often seen exchanging dialogues that appear to be completely absurd or that do not seem to fit well in the context, such as the witch trial scene, in which Sir Bedevere and Arthur argue that a woman is a witch because she weights as much as a duck (*Holy Grail* 00:17:22-00:21:26), or their encounters with the Knights of Ni (*Holy Grail* 00:44:45-00:46:33), who terrify an entire village by saying “Ni!” and refuse to let Arthur and his knights pass a spot in the forest unless they bring them a shrubbery. Murrell (1998) argues that the Monty Python troupe use dialogues and arguments that are completely ridiculous in order to disrupt any hint of reliability in the story that they are telling, even if the context of the scene is serious or formal (56-57). The most relevant example that can be found in the film to illustrate this is the encounter between King Arthur and The Black Knight (*Holy Grail* 00:12:11-00:16:35). In this scene, parodying medieval chivalric romances, Arthur fights a knight so that he will be able to cross a bridge over a river. Arthur assumes that the fight is over when he cuts The Black Knight’s arm off, however, the dispute goes on until the knight has no limbs left and Arthur, along with Patsy, abandon him despite the knight’s insistence on continuing the fight. In this scene, it can be seen how even King Arthur finds this situation to be completely ridiculous and senseless. This kind of completely absurd moments that appear throughout the film reminds the viewers that what they are watching should not be taken seriously, as

Bishop (1990) defends, but they are also a new interpretation of King Arthur and his knights, as argued by Murrell (1998). To add up to this, D'Arcens (2014) states that the encounter between King Arthur and The Black Knight is also meant to match the expectations the viewers of the film may have on the Middle Ages and the interactions between this kind of characters. It can be argued that this scene opposes the one of Sir Robin and the three-headed knight as, according to D'Arcens (2014), the featuring of a knight that does not face a small danger "violates the narrative expectations of medieval knight-errantry tales" (125).

Terry Jones's *Medieval Lives* (2004) introduces medieval knights as violent men who were only focused on killing people, making money and achieving fame while staying loyal to their lord and to God, often using their good ideals and intentions to perpetuate war and violence against people. According to Terry Jones (2004), this extreme violence that medieval knights seemed to enjoy was also their main source of money and fame, so they could get rich by being cruel to others rather than being the heroic men that we usually picture. This, similarly to the monks' situation, does not resemble the life of Christian values they were supposed to defend. Because, as suggested by Terry Jones (2004), the Church was highly involved in the knights' affairs and disapproved of their violent ways unless it was against the enemies of this institution. This means that, thanks to the approval and support of the Church, knights could continue to be violent and to kill people in the name of God. He also argues that medieval knights due to their close relationship with religion and their links with the Church, had the task to control peasants through the use of their power and their faith. This suggests that religion and the Christian faith were imposed through fear and used as another element of oppression against the lower classes. This would also mean that medieval knights were just another tool to reinforce the power of the Church in the Middle Ages.

After having taken all of this into consideration, it can be said that both the representation of knights in *Holy Grail* and the one that appears in *Medieval Lives* (2004) share many common elements. Regarding the relationship between knights and other characters, such as peasants, it can be observed how it is similar in both cases but that it differs in some elements, as the film does not present the knights as agents of control of the behaviour of the lower classes like Terry Jones (2004) does. It can be concluded that the most similar point between *Medieval Lives*' knights and those that are featured in *Holy Grail* is their use of violence to achieve their goals. However, it is necessary to consider that violence in the film is exaggerated with the aim of ridiculing the situations.

3. Conclusions

The Middle Ages have been the setting of many modern pieces of art that go from paintings to Hollywood productions, but these representations have not always been faithful to the actual Middle Ages, turning this historical period into a compilation of stereotypes that often influence the way people look at it. The origin of these stereotypes can be found in the Victorian era, when the romanticizing of the Middle Ages was an extremely popular artistic subject. Despite the popularity of the Middle Ages in modern and contemporary art, humour is not often included in this kind of representations. This is also a consequence of the nature of humour, as it is not something that can be easily analysed, explained or considered as an academic subject of study. In order to discuss the concerns of this project, it was necessary to briefly study and understand humour in the Middle Ages and its evolution thorough different periods of history. As carnivalesque humour was the most representative form of comedy in the Middle Ages, it became the starting point of this project. However, it is usually considered to have lost popularity in the Renaissance, when most of the elements that characterised the medieval era were discarded and despised. But following the evolution of this form of humour, it can be observed how the Monty Python troupe introduced this form of humour in their work in the twentieth century, which leads to the main concern of this project: the analysis of the 1975 film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* in terms of humour and its representation of the Middle Ages to prove that this historical period is not only present in the characters and settings of the film but on the humour and the tone through which these characters are depicted.

Inspired by the Arthurian legend and Terry Jones' aim of creating a film that could provide a comic and different approach to the Middle Ages, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* features a series of medieval characters in absurd and comic situations that often start from medieval archetypes to then become completely surreal and grotesque. Due to the tone and context in which these characters are depicted, it cannot be said that they are historically accurate but that they are parodies of medieval characters. This effect was achieved through the combination of different elements that help with the creation of a comic story, such as references and characters from other periods of history or the ridiculing of recurrent medieval archetypes such as the damsel in distress. The duality and contrast between reality and fiction that is present thorough the entire film is another element that helps with the construction of comedy, but it is also a very relevant element in terms of reliability as, thanks to this, the spectators are always aware of the fact that what they are watching is not real nor aims to be so and that it should not be taken seriously. The combination of these elements, along with the carnivalesque humour, which was not only very relevant and important in medieval society but that also characterised Monty Python's work, result in a completely new approach to the Middle Ages through comedy that implied the revival and reintroduction of medieval carnival in popular culture.

By contrast, *Medieval Lives*' depiction of medieval society is done through a historiographic point of view, therefore each social group is presented in a realistic and historically accurate manner with the aim of educating the audience. This is why it can be concluded that there are many differences between *Holy Grail*

and *Medieval Lives* in terms of characterization and tone: while *Medieval Lives* debunks myths about medieval society, *Holy Grail* depicts those same characters in a comic, grotesque way through satire and irony as its aim is to cause laughter, not to educate the viewers.

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