

Popular Culture in History: A Look at the Middle Ages

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Opening Sequence

Monty Python's *Holy Grail*, dir. Terry Jones and Terry Gilliam, 1975. 'The Tale of Sir Robin':
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c4SJ0xR2_bQ&feature=Playlist&p=8FA252FCFAF676FE&index=0

William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, dir. Kenneth Brannagh, 1989. Act IV, scene iii:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRj01LShXN8&feature=Playlist&p=8FA252FCFAF676FE&index=4>

and Act IV, scene viii (ending):
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ewbuPY3uGQ4&feature=Playlist&p=8FA252FCFAF676FE&index=5> (first part only)

These excerpts from Monty Python's *Holy Grail* and Shakespeare's *Henry V* (as interpreted by Kenneth Brannagh) play on, and in one case parody, assumptions and knowledge of the Middle Ages. Sir Robin is the solo knight, the centre of attention, Henry is the king leading his army into battle. In their retinues, mostly not doing very much, are people of the lower social orders. The most active of Sir Robin's followers here is the minstrel ('his favourite minstrel'), singing the song of his endeavours. In this character's actions we have a very clever juxtaposition. On the one hand, there is, of course, parody at play: the knight on a solo quest is, well, solo – that was the point, so the very presence of the minstrel is parody in itself. However, for larger movements of knights, most notably war and the crusades, there would have been minstrels on hand to inspire the troops with songs of other glorious battles, and to take home tales of the wonderful deeds of those present. The idea of recounting deeds, in song or in words, is a key element in Henry V's speech to his troops at Agincourt in Shakespeare's play: these scars I had on St Crispin's day. As the audience of course knows at first hand, Henry's promise of the story being told is indeed fulfilled within the play itself; Henry's (imagined) speech has been fulfilled. After overcoming the foe, be it a monstrous representation of inner deficiencies or an enemy of the state, the deed is commemorated in song and in story. 'Brave Sir Robin, he ran away' is not, of course, a story which is usually told.

Shakespeare's later exaggeration of the numbers at Agincourt (which was indeed a devastating defeat for the French by a small English army, however the death toll on the English side was likely more than 25), is much more like it.

Both of these clips play on the two themes which I would like to explore today. The first of these is the distinction between classes: Sir Robin the knight, himself in the service of king Arthur, has a retinue at his disposal; Henry V has his liege-lords and they have their men fighting under them. In both of the clips, the unnamed lower classes are more numerous than their masters. Henry's followers are biddable and loyal, moved by his eloquent words to great deeds, but nevertheless reminiscent of the sheep in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, making only those noises which they have been conditioned to say; indeed, Henry wishes those who are not of the same mind to not be part of the army. Sir Robin's men are more rebellious: under the guise of the victory song, the minstrel mercilessly makes fun of the cowardly knight. Sir Robin's story is quite different from King Henry's.

The second theme which I am going to explore today is the idea of the song, the story, and its survival (or otherwise). The European 'Middle Ages' refers to a wide range of time, approximately one thousand years, spanning from the fall of the Roman Empire to the changes which are commonly known as the Renaissance. These changes, of course, included the invention of the printing press. Throughout all of the time known as the 'Middle Ages', writing was present, yet documents are scarce. As the Middle Ages progress more and more survive, but never to the levels which are attained with the help of printing. Manuscripts, hand-written documents, were prepared by professional scribes, educated by the church. Even at the end of the Middle Ages, when literacy levels were relatively high, personal letters were dictated by their authors and written by secretaries. Of the uneducated classes, virtually nothing survives. Although population numbers are impossible to ascertain, the majority of the population would work the land, or be salaried, and, while not necessarily always unable to read, only in rare cases would be educated and have the means of writing. I am not about to attempt a definition of 'popular culture', for Bruce has amply done that in the first lecture of this series, yet it is clear from this brief overview that the culture of the 'silent majority' must be pieced together from fragments of information found in sources pertaining to others.

Let us go back to Sir Robin and, more specifically, to his minstrel. The minstrel represents an art, the art of telling stories in song, partly from memory (as in the opening of the clip), and partly spontaneous invention (after the encounter with the giant). This genre, often called *chansons de geste* (an English translation could be 'deed songs'), has survived in manuscript form, and the most famous is the *Chanson de Roland* which tells of the battle of Roncevaux and the betrayal of Roland, Charlemagne's nephew. The betrayal and battle took place in the ninth century, yet the

earliest manuscript preserving a version of the events dates from the twelfth. Given that there is sufficient evidence from other sources to ascertain that the events described did actually take place, what happened in the intervening centuries? Sir Robin's minstrel has the answer.

This transmission of stories, of histories, by singers and storytellers, is generally referred to as 'the oral tradition'. It has been much discussed by scholars of many fields (history, sociology, literature, anthropology), and it is still recognisable in many places in the world today. It is largely thanks to nameless individuals like Sir Robin's minstrel, and messengers like the French herald (whose papers bearing news would mean nothing if he did not deliver them personally), that we gain an insight into life in the Middle Ages, on its battlefields and in its courts of war. However 'fictionalised' the accounts may have become, they are based on events which did take place, and they are 'believable'. Although they vary in the detail, all the manuscript sources tell that Roland was betrayed at Roncevaux by a jealous Ganelon, that Charlemagne's rear guard fought heroically against a foe which greatly outnumbered it. However, the 'human interest', as today's newspapers would call it, differs. The death from grief of Roland's fiancée on the news of her lover's demise is given a few lines in one version, yet is much expanded in another. These details, which make the surviving versions of the story interesting and which were surely embellished and re-embellished at every performance, are seen as evidence of the oral tradition at play, the spontaneous re-invention of the tale at each re-telling. For the same minstrel would not perform the same text twice in an identical manner; he (or she) did not memorise it by rote and spout out identical versions. A tale such as the *Chanson de Roland* would take several days to perform in full, with each day bringing a new instalment. Of course, as it was passed from individual to individual, the tale would change again. The skill lay not in 'sticking to the facts', but in making a well-known legend entertaining, and fresh. This was at the heart of medieval popular entertainment.

Here, however, I would like to take a look at the 'other side', and assess how much the oral tradition was in fact influenced by writing. The very fact that the *chansons de geste* were written down at all, is of course a major influence: the written versions which have come down to us more than likely do not represent a 'transcription' of an oral performance. In fact, these written versions are better understood as 'performances' in their own right, but of a different sort: the scribe (or scribes) at work are retelling the story in their medium, the written word. In some cases of written survivals of oral traditions, such as the various branches of the collection of fictional tales known loosely as the *Roman de Renart* (short fables about the conniving, cunning fox Renart getting the better of most others in the animal kingdom), the variants appear to be regional. In other words, it seems that different versions of the same tales, featuring the same characters and the same range of plots, existed in different areas. In the case of the *Renart*, the relatively high number of surviving manuscripts are invaluable in drawing such conclusions. Whereas the *Renart* is a collection of

short, fictitious stories around a theme, the *Chanson de Roland* is based on historical events, and the variants are less fundamental. The *Renart* stories are a product of the imagination, the *Roland* versions are retellings of history through countless human imaginations bringing life to the tale.

Therefore, as the only form of transmission which has survived, writing forms for us the very heart of what we know about these ‘oral’ traditions. This is often seen as a paradox, but here I would like to argue that it is in fact not as outrageous as it may first appear. Writing, rather, is at the basis of these traditions, despite the fact that until their notation in manuscript, the majority of those who transmitted these tales would have little, or no, recourse to written material.

Writing was an expensive business in the Middle Ages. During the early part of the period, the time which is now known ominously as ‘the Dark Ages’, it seems that very little was written down; certainly very little has survived. As Europe began to re-shape itself after the fallout of the Roman withdrawal, society once again had the means for writing. In times of need, there were simply not the human or monetary resources for the patient preparation of animal skins, the making of the ink, knives, rulers, pens, and of course the lengthy business of writing itself (the planning of manuscript layout, deciding the spacing of individual items, the ruling of the parchment, before forming each letter individually according to the required style). And this does not even take into account manuscript illumination, or music. It is no surprise that working mistrels would rely principally on their training, and their memories.

Mary Carruthers, in her seminal work *The Book of Memory*, has shown how medieval memorial training and the layout of medieval manuscripts are intrinsically linked. Memorisation was not just a skill, it was a way of life, and such is our dependence on writing today that even the most humble of our medieval forbears would probably beat us hands-down at any kind of memory contest. As Plato observed, writing is at once mnemotechnique and the power of forgetting (paraphrased by Derrida, trans. Spivak, 1998, p. 24). Carruthers (1990) has shown that written artefacts, such as letters or works of literature, were first composed entirely in the mind, so that when they came to be written down, they were merely transcriptions of something that was already fully-formed in the memory, needing only the minimum of adjustment. In other words, the processes of composing something which was to be written used memory as much as preparing a work which was not. In this light, the written artefacts of the *Chanson de Roland* and the *Roman de Renart* discussed above, are not so far removed from the oral processes which they have now come to represent.

Furthermore, we can now question whether any society which knows writing can be considered to be truly ‘oral’. Jacques Derrida, in *Of Grammatology (De la grammatologie)*, invites us to consider that writing is more than marks on the page representing words, but rather also encompasses speech (Derrida, trans. Spivak, 1998, p. 36).

Representation mingles with what it represents, to the point where one speaks as one writes, one thinks as if the represented were nothing more than the shadow or reflection of the representer. A dangerous promiscuity and a nefarious complicity between the reflection and the reflected which lets itself be seduced narcissistically. In this play of representation, the point of origin becomes ungraspable. There are things like reflecting pools, and images, an infinite reference from one to the other, but no longer a source, a spring. There is no longer a simple origin. For what is reflected is split *in itself* and not only as an addition to itself of its image. The reflection, the double, splits what it doubles. The origin of the speculation becomes a difference.

According to Derrida's argument, the 'oral' transmission which we have been looking at here is in fact encompassed within the 'written' tradition which has survived. Or, to put it more practically, the fact that writing existed in medieval society, and that medieval entertainers knew their work would not be written down, influenced their performances, albeit (probably) subconsciously. The reflection, the trace of this, can be seen in the written versions which do survive.

In order to demonstrate this further, I would like to look briefly at today's traditions of musical 'improvisation'. The genres of music with which this is most readily associated are jazz and rock. Both of these genres rely on writing only to a limited extent: chord sheets, for example, song lists, sketches. Many of these musicians claim not to read music, and, indeed, in the traditional 'classical' sense, they probably do not. Yet improvisation nevertheless is influenced by these writings: one plays around a chord structure, which is probably written in letters (G, A, D, etc.) rather than musical notation in the strictest sense. Even if it is not written, it is 'imprinted' in the performer's mind, even if he or she does not consciously refer to it when playing. Even the most self-consciously unconventionally educated rock guitarists will tune their strings according to their letter names, at least if they think in English or one of the Germanic languages; indeed they may even abhor the less literary sol-fa tradition, paradoxically – and incorrectly – seeing it as some preserve of the twee world of *The Sound of Music*. This is by no means 'writing' in the conventional sense, but, since it is born of a tradition of writing which it does not in fact follow, it remains 'writing' in Derrida's terms.

Although here I am but a lowly medievalist swimming in the shark-infested waters of popular music, I dare to remain here a little longer, for I think that there are more parallels that can be drawn. The rejection of formal musical notation in rock and jazz, be it self-conscious or sub-conscious, can be contrasted to those (few remaining) musics and cultures which do not use notation because they are unaware of its existence. It is clear that there is a difference here: one is, ultimately, a choice, the other is not. During the millennium of the Middle Ages, this choice first came into being in West. When music notation was first invented in the 9th century, it was an *aide-mémoire*, designed only for those who already knew the sound it represented, or to be used in conjunction with someone singing it. It was not until the invention of the staff, commonly attributed

to Guido in the 10th century, that music could be transmitted without the need for sound. At first the province of the educated and the church, we have no way of knowing when awareness of this knowledge and technique seeped into secular society, and came to the attention of the likes of Sir Robin's minstrel, no doubt coupled with the rise in secular literacy at that time. It was, however, surely present when songs in the vernacular began to be notated in manuscript in the 12th century, and, as these things never happen all of a sudden, had no doubt been known for some time before. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the compilers of the versions of the *Chanson de Roland* in the 12th century knew that they were not notating the music; indeed, as the music is thought to be so repetitive, it may well have been a conscious decision not to. In addition, it is probable that the minstrels at work at that time were aware of the growing importance of writing both the song and the story. Their consequent rejection of it, therefore, speaks of an acknowledgment of an 'other', in the same way that musicians today who are classified by those devious terms of 'classical' and 'popular' are aware of each other even when they claim ignorance. (As a personal aside, it is my opinion that the ipod is a great leveller: I am quite proud of the fact that Daft Punk sit alongside Debussy on mine.)

Thus we return once again to Derrida, who says that once writing has entered a society's consciousness, it engulfs speech, which then becomes part of writing.

Now from the moment that one considers the totality of determined signs, spoken, and a fortiori written, as unmotivated institutions, one must exclude any relationship of natural subordination, any natural hierarchy among signifiers or orders of signifiers. If 'writing' signifies inscription and especially the durable inscription of a sign (and that is the only irreducible kernel of the concept of writing), writing in general covers the entire field of linguistic signs. In that field a certain sort of instituted signifiers may then appear, 'graphic' in the narrow and derivative sense of the word, ordered by a certain relationship with other instituted – hence 'written', even if they are 'phonic' – signifiers. The very idea of institution – hence of the arbitrariness of the sign – is unthinkable before the possibility of writing and outside of its horizon. Quite simply, that is, outside of the horizon itself, outside of the world as space of inscription, as the opening to the emission and to the spatial *distribution* of signs, to the *regulated play* of their differences, even if they are 'phonic'.

(Derrida, trans. Spivak, 1998, p. 44)

Derrida ultimately rejects Levi-Strauss's opinion that writing first appears as a 'violence' inflicted upon those who were otherwise innocent of it. Instead he prefers a model of writing as 'Arch-writing', present behind the speech, of which the sounding word forms but a part. This Arch-writing is present long before the pen is actually lifted; one could say that it has to be present before one can even imagine lifting the pen. Whether we agree with Derrida or not, for it is not obligatory,

his theory is useful in helping us to understand why the notation of music, particularly instrumental music, took so long to come to fruition. It was some five hundred years after music for words began to be notated that music for instruments followed the same path. Until that point there had been plenty of instances of untexted musical parts within songs, but no indication of whether these were to be sung or played on instruments, or indeed whether it mattered. Thus, like the majority of the medieval population, medieval instruments today are silent. They exist in images, and in archeology, but nothing survives of what they played. Nevertheless, they form part of the Arch-writing, the background, the hum, if you like, of society. Used by all classes for entertainment, perhaps even used in religious contexts, it is only through the concept of Arch-writing that they can retain their sonic quality.

‘Pop songs and comics and such’, that is the comment Bruce said that he often hears about popular culture (Johnson, 2010). Our ‘comics’ here are illuminated manuscripts – whose miniatures are unashamedly the highlight of the page, since no self-respecting giver of a presentation manuscript would offer one containing text alone: who’d want to read that when you can hear it recited to you? No, there’s got to be something interesting to look at as well. Medieval ‘comics’, therefore, were for the privileged few. As for pop songs, well, a few have survived, and of these, we wonder why they were written down at all. For the majority that have not, we are left with only their trace, with the knowledge that they existed. We have seen that there is a strong connection between writing and thought, therefore what survives in writing can give us clues as to what has been lost, what was part of the ‘Arch-writing’. This argument may seem circular: since what survives only does so in and because of writing, it is natural to see writing at the heart of everything we know about the period. However, I hope to have shown that there is much more to it than that, and that writing affected medieval popular culture in more ways than has been previously imagined. We can’t use this to restore lost information, but perhaps this analysis of Sir Robin’s minstrel can help us to understand the culture of the silent majority in King Henry’s army.

References

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