This 15th century manuscript mentions a Monty Python-esque killer rabbit

Enlarge / Scholar: The 15th century “Heege manuscript” could be a rare written record of a live minstrel performance. YouTube/University of Cambridge

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One of many standout scenes in the 1975 classic *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* features King Arthur and his knights facing down the Killer Rabbit of Caerbannog, a seemingly innocuous bunny who soon proves to be a devastating adversary, forcing the knights to retreat (“Run away! Run away!”). Killer rabbits are a kind of mainstay of medieval literature, featuring prominently in marginal illustrations, as well as a mention in Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*. In fact, the Python crew drew inspiration for their version from a scene on the facade of Notre Dame in Paris, depicting a knight fleeing a rabbit.

Killer rabbits might even have been a common trope among traveling minstrels, according to one scholar’s discovery of a written record of a live performance preserved in a 15th century manuscript, which also includes one of the earliest recorded uses of the phrase “red herring.” Cambridge University’s James Wade, author of a recent paper published in The Review of English Studies, stumbled across the manuscript while doing research in the National Library of Scotland.

The scribe identified himself in the text as Richard Heege, a

household cleric and tutor to the Sherbrooke family of Derbyshire. Heege's manuscript, with its inclusion of low-brow nonsense verse, a mock sermon, and a burlesque romance, "gives us the rarest glimpse of a medieval world rich in oral storytelling and popular entertainments," said Wade.

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Enlarge / Scribe's note: "By me, Richard Heege, because I was at that feast and did not have a drink."
National Library of Scotland
Minstrels in the Middle Ages traveled from town to town,

amusing the people in baronial halls, taverns, and fairs with their performances. Fictional minstrels are frequently mentioned in medieval literature, but according to Wade, it's rare to find a reference to a real minstrel, and there are few, if any, written records of them. Most are records of payments made to minstrels, listed by their first names and instruments played.

While there are many medieval works with "oral" or "minstrel" tags, per Wade, "No single text survives that we can confidently tether to a medieval minstrel, as composer, owner, or performer." Wade is careful to emphasize that he is not claiming the discovery of a manuscript actually *written* by a medieval minstrel. But he thinks the Heege manuscript was either a transcript of a live minstrel performance or copied from a minstrel's now-lost written notes (an *aide-memoire*). Among the evidence Wade cites is the note scrawled on the bottom of one page that reads, "By me, Richard Heege, because I was at that feast and did not have a drink"—implying that Heege was sober enough to write about a minstrel's performance at said feast.

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