Henry James and the Quest for the Holy Grail:

Victorian Medievalism and Modern Criticism

ABSTRACT

This article offers two case studies. The first examines James’s encounters with medieval buildings in his early travel writings. The second takes as its starting point James’s involvement in The Quest of the Holy Grail, a text which accompanied an 1895 exhibition of paintings by Edwin Austin Abbey. Whilst James’s knowledge of medieval architectural forms seems both confident and coherent, his awareness of medieval literary forms seems more tentative and even sketchy. Reasons for this disparity are considered, but medieval romance motifs are nevertheless found to inform James’s conception of criticism from the outset of his career.

**1.**

What did Henry James think of medieval buildings and literary texts, and of attempts on the part of nineteenth-century commentators to interpret those works? What for James was the place of medieval narrative in prose fiction? How did he view the Arthurian quest narrative? And, most urgently: why, given the considerable impact of medieval romance upon contemporaries, did Arthurian materials play so marginal a role in James’s own work? These are the questions which prompt the present article, and readers are likely to have questions of their own, since my title invokes a series of terms—“Victorian,” “medieval,” “modern” and “criticism”—which might merit more commentary than is possible here. The first three are periodizing terms, and as such are inevitably vulnerable to the charge that they depend upon what Fredric Jameson refers to as “facile totalization” (12). Indeed, one of Jameson’s tasks in The Political Unconscious is to make the concept of historical periodization do more than invoke a “unified inner truth” (12). My purpose, as I have already indicated, is not to replay these arguments in the case of James. Yet it is possible to assert, almost from the outset, that exploring the ways in which James’s construction of the medieval accords with or, more frequently, challenges other constructions is repeatedly to reveal, not some fixed core, but instead a complex play of differences. Neither words nor the things they denote are ever fixed, of course. “Victorian,” “medieval:” James knew these terms and made use of them. But so much critical water has flowed beneath these bridges that their full range of meanings cannot now be grasped without reference to subsequent debates. “Modern,” “criticism:” the terms were not only used by James but were precious to him. One of the ultimate purposes of this article, accordingly, is to show that the “Victorian” reception of the “medieval” (and James’s response to that reception) was one of the more important factors in James’s developing conception both of the “modern” (the first volume of Ruskin’s Modern Painters appeared in 1843, the year of James’s birth) and of “criticism” (James’s review of Arnold’s Essays in Criticism appeared in 1865 and was one of his earliest publications). “Modern;” “criticism:” each term was central to James’s emerging understanding of his task as a writer.

My first case study examines James’s encounters with medieval buildings as detailed in travel writings published between 1872 and 1885. The centerpiece of the exhibition is “Florentine Notes” (1874), which describes James’s visit to the castle of Vincigliata and his reflections on the restoration of this medieval fortress by John Temple Leader (1810–1903). I argue that James possessed a well-developed understanding of medieval architecture, and that his reflections produced insights into the social life of the period which called into question associations drawn from chivalric literature. For these reasons, James distanced himself from what he saw as idealizing but (in some respects) ahistorical constructions (or reconstructions) of the medieval world, ones which he associated on a number of occasions with the aesthetic movement.

In the second case study, I explore James’s contribution to The Quest of the Holy Grail, a text initially written to accompany an 1895 exhibition in London of paintings on an Arthurian theme by the American artist Edwin Austin Abbey. This text is one of the most obscure items in the Jamesian canon and even the extent of his authorship remains unclear. Yet, as I argue, the work has important things to tell us about James’s relation to Victorian medievalism. James was well aware of the contemporary artistic interest in medieval themes and, as I will show, this clearly affected his practice as a novelist, albeit as a negative example. In this sense, The Quest of the Holy Grail enables us to evaluate a surprising absence of reference in James’s work to medieval prose narrative in general and, in particular, to the Arthurian legend.

Why is this project important and what does it add to our understanding? Over the last fifty years, numerous commentators have explored Victorian medievalism and, more specifically, the Victorian interest in Arthurian narrative—an interest strongly evident in the literature, social thought and visual arts of the period.1 More recently, we have seen valuable critical work on the presence of the medieval quest narrative in modernist literature.2 There has also been productive discussion of James in relation to a range of Victorian thinkers (for example, Walter Scott, Alfred Tennyson, John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold) whose work might be characterized in terms of its interest in the medieval.3 But although James was familiar with these figures and knew a host of other contemporaries with a pronounced interest in the medieval world (among them George Frederic Watts, Edward Burne-Jones, William Morris and Walter Pater)—although it would be no exaggeration to say that he personally knew every major Victorian medievalist—the medieval period and its cultural productions seems to have left a minimal impression on James’s creative and critical work. There is, perhaps, only so much to be gained from evaluating something that is not there. Nevertheless, it is important to understand the reasons that James remained detached from materials which those circulating within his professional networks found compelling.

In the concluding section of this essay, therefore, I explore the reasons for this relative absence. Initially, I consider the contrast between James’s complex and well-informed response to medieval architecture in the earlier part of his career and his more impressionistic and distant reflections on the Arthurian narrative in literature. In the case of the early travel writings, James took care to separate himself from an approach to medieval architecture which could be associated with aestheticism. He was interested in medieval architecture in itself, and also in attempts to restore medieval buildings. But he felt that such attempts neglected the violent and uncomfortable realities of the past. Such an approach remained evident later on, I argue, whilst other and rather different responses to the medieval came into view. The Quest of the Holy Grail hints that the ingredients of medieval romance are of limited value to contemporary practitioners of fiction, and the implications of that will need to be weighed. But I also want to make a broader point: James’s attitudes were not just formed by independent reflection and judgment. The enterprise of criticism was, for him, a collective one and he looked to others to shape his views both of medieval architecture and prose narrative. I will show that the critical field, at least in Great Britain and the United States, was a less populated one than James would have liked. In the case of a medieval church or castle, there were several eminent exemplars to turn to. With the medieval quest narrative, however, there were fewer critical voices with which to enter into dialogue. Still, the most telling piece of evidence that James had been influenced by medieval narrative traditions is that in 1891 (before he contributed to The Quest of the Holy Grail) James found his best image for the modern critic in the figure of a knight beginning his quest.

**2.**

In “Chartres Portrayed,” an 1876 travel essay later published in Portraits of Places (1883) simply as “Chartres,”4 James suggested that “[t]he impressions produced by architecture lend themselves as little to interpretation by another medium as those produced by music” (CTW1: 679). Nevertheless, James’s encounters with buildings in France, Italy and Great Britain did seem on occasions to offer more authentic testimony than those of other media. For one thing, these encounters often involved a suddenly intensified awareness. In “Lichfield and Warwick” (1872), for example, James’s approach to Haddon Hall in Derbyshire enabled him to feel “the incommunicable spirit of the scene with the last, the right intensity,”5 reviving the life of a former period in an almost ghostly way: “[t]he old life, the old manners, the old figures seemed present again” (CTW2: 74). Such visions were regularly informed by images drawn from other, usually textual, sources.6 In 1874, for example, James pictured the Torre del Mangia in Siena rising “as slender and straight as a pennoned lance planted on the steel-shod toe of a mounted knight” (CTW2: 514). This stock image of knighthood might be said to function as a “pre-figuration:” the term which Beverly Haviland derives from Paul Ricoeur’s Time and Narrative in order to describe what a “meaning-maker” (a traveller or an artist) “brings from previous experience of texts, histories, practices, etc., to bear on the present occasion” (273). A further instance of pre-figuration, drawn again from the literature of chivalry, was to be found when, in an 1876 essay, James encountered Jean Goujon’s monument to Louis de Brézé in Rouen cathedral. He described this nobleman as being “represented in the fulness of life, dressed as for a tournament … riding forth like a Roland or a Galahad” (CTW2: 688–89). James occasionally reflected on the effect of such recollected references. In an 1878 essay, for example, he suggested that “literary associations” added meaning and intensity to a visit to Rheims cathedral (CTW2: 737).7 For Haviland, such pre-figurations contribute to a “configuration,” which refers to the meaning-making that takes place both during the encounter and as part of its subsequent recreation (273).

On many occasions, association contributed positively to the process of configuration, and therefore added to the interpretive opportunities which the James of the Chartres essay found lacking in the medium of architecture. Orcagna’s “Last Judgment,” in which “feudal courtiers” and “howling potentates” descend to Hell, seemed in an 1874 piece by James to evoke the past spiritual life of the cathedral at Pisa in a compelling way (CTW2: 572). Some years later, likewise, another vision of the Last Judgment (the wicked “dragged, pushed, hurled, stuffed, crammed, into pits and caldrons of fire”) best expressed the spirit of the Christian past in the cathedral of Bourges (CTW2: 94). The picture spoke to the building then, although in other cases the building seemed to speak for itself. James’s 1877 account of Stokesay Castle in Shropshire featured none of the lurid eschatological visions he had witnessed in Pisa and Bourges. The visit to Stokesay nevertheless involved a similar intensity of communion to James’s experience five years earlier at Haddon Hall. James experienced a “sensation of dropping back personally into the past” and, whilst lying on the grass in the castle courtyard, was able to appreciate the “still definite details of mediæval life” (CTW1: 190–92). For him, one of the “most obvious reflections” in such a context was the thought that the men and women of the thirteenth century “must have lived very much together” (192). There was another thought, too, and one based on a pre-figuration whose source lay in social rather than literary or artistic history. They lived very much together—but this feature of medieval life was amplified by another, which entered the configuration when James noted that the gatehouse at Stokesay (a seventeenth-century addition) and even the “noticeably broad” arrow-slits in the walls of the castle itself indicated that the function of this building was not primarily defensive (192). For James, this fact was “part of the charm of the place:” the people who lived here were beginning “to believe in good intentions” (192).8 Similar reflections on secular social life in the Middle Ages colored the architectural encounters which James presented in A Little Tour in France (1885). James found the facilitation of domestic life in the chateaux of the Loire perhaps the principal characteristic of Renaissance architecture in this region. The design of Chambord, for example, was not constrained by the exigencies of “the days of defence;” likewise, the chateau at Langeais marked “the transition from the architecture of defence to that of elegance” (CTW2: 54, 81).

I have argued that James’s accounts of medieval and Renaissance architecture featured intensities of experience in which the past seemed palpably present, suggesting that these reanimations were frequently assisted by associations derived from literary or historical texts—by pre-figurations drawn from prior reading. In order to make architectural impressions amenable to interpretation, however, the Jamesian configurative process did not rely exclusively on textual or artistic pre-figurations. In some cases, it was necessary to address the architectural practices on display in buildings themselves. This practical understanding was perhaps earliest in evidence in James’s account of Chester. His 1872 essay on this city initially made much of phrases and moods familiar from the travel writings which I have already discussed. Reaching Chester, the “sentimental tourist” experienced the stirrings of “a cloud of sensibility” (CTW1: 52). But James then went on to describe the city in a series of more sharply spatialized and specific observations. Chester was locked by its “ancient wall” within a “stony circle” (54). Physically surrounded by stone, the city also possessed a “substructure” put in place by the Romans, “that race of master-builders” (56). Ramparts, parapets, alleys, arches, steps, towers, courts and alleys: James was the surveyor of the urban space through which he moved, and on this occasion the work of configuration disclosed a truth which was as much social as architectural. As at Stokesay, the inhabitants of medieval Chester must have lived “very much together.” Indeed, their city was filled with “close-pressed” houses and, for James, it was this “delightful element of the crooked, the accidental, the unforeseen” which constituted “the striking feature of European street scenery” (56).

The crooked, the accidental, the unforeseen: this spatial configuration was characteristically “European” but also, for James, medieval. The adjectives were associated with built spaces, but they also enabled James to imagine a way of life, one of whose most pronounced social aspects involved uncomfortably close personal proximity. Some years later, whilst writing the pieces which would be collected in A Little Tour in France, James visited the castle at Loches and found himself once more affected by the enclosing nature of medieval architecture: “dismantled gateways,” “crooked passages,” “winding lanes that lead to postern doors” and, perhaps most notably, the “subterranean mysteries” of two “horrible prisons” (CTW2: 86–88). “Devilish little dungeons” were also powerfully present in James’s evocation of the fortress at Villeneuve-lès-Avignon (CTW2: 239). Here was the past in all its vividness but also its “horror:” what James experienced in this place was a vision of “human beings … rotting in the dark” (239).

Clearly, James configured Villeneuve-lès-Avignon in a very different way to the castles of the Loire: the latter tended to be characterized by brightness and openness, and such features had their social as well as their spatial side. Although darkness and enclosure were, in the case of feudal fortresses, enduring physical realities, the features of a particular building could, as we have seen, provide valuable insights into mechanisms of social subjection which were no longer directly visible. Yet perhaps the most interesting moments of configuration in James’s travel writings occurred when an initially sunny vision suddenly revealed a more sombre side and, on a number of occasions, this shift was precipitated by the collapse of a familiar but misleading pre-figuration. An example of this can be seen in an 1878 travel essay which described a visit to a “picturesque old city” in Italy (CTW2: 396). For a moment, the pleasant evening scene seemed for James to be completed by the appearance of a “romantic” figure who was initially imagined as an “operatic performer” (396). On actual acquaintance, however, this figure turned out to be “an unhappy, underfed, unemployed young man,” a “brooding young radical” rather than “an harmonious little figure in the middle distance” (397). James Buzard has argued that in this and other passages, James’s travel writings repeatedly return “to situations potentially embarrassing to picturesqueness” as they “fretfully test their own discursive mode,” frequently through a sudden encounter with an instance of indigence (39).9 More broadly, Eric Savoy has suggested that the travel writings of Hawthorne and Howells sought, like James, to “undermine the authority of both the gaze itself and its inscription” (288).

Discussing James’s account of Augustus Saint-Gaudens’ Sherman Memorial in New York, Beverly Haviland has shown how, in The American Scene (1907), James was able to identify an extant configuration as “dishonest” and in need of correction (275). A perception of the need for what Haviland calls “refiguration” was also evident in James’s responses to medieval architecture (273). We can see this in the 1872 essay on Chester. Having completed his builder-like modelling of the city—the walls, the foundations, the “close-pressed” buildings and the general crookedness—James then turned to the Rows, which in his view exemplified “mediæval England” (CTW1: 58). He reached initially for a convenient pre-figuration in the notion that medieval domestic life would have been “animated by the children of ‘Merry England’” (60). But this fond fancy simply wouldn’t do: a moment’s reflection compelled James to concede that he was unable to think of Chester’s medieval citizens except as the “victims of dismal Old-World pains and fears” (60). Life in these houses must have been better than for those rotting away in Loches or Villeneuve-lès-Avignon. Socially and spatially “packed away,” however, medieval town-dwellers must have known “scant freedom and … small sweetness” (60).

Yet James’s sense of the “indoor atmosphere” of medievalism was still more forcefully evident in an 1874 evocation of the castle of Vincigliata near Fiesole (CTW2: 546). For Haviland, refiguration is associated with “the reception of t[he] configured object by a collective” (273). In James’s encounter with Vincigliata, what is being questioned, I suggest, is a collective and characteristically Victorian conception of the medieval. Such a frame of reference was immediately intimated in James’s characterization of John Temple Leader’s restoration of the medieval fortress as “a triumph of æsthetic culture” and in his express desire to subject this elaborate and expensive architectural project to “critical overhauling” (CTW2: 545–46).10 Leader had set himself the task of reconstructing Vincigliata with “minute accuracy,” and in James’s view had succeeded in creating “a massive facsimile” (546). The cloister was “charming,” the courtyard “beautiful” and, as James added in a telling instance of literary pre-figuration, the apartments presented “as good a ‘reconstruction’ as a tale of Walter Scott” (perhaps the earliest and most influential nineteenth-century medievalist) (546). Vincigliata was not, at least for James, a misrepresentation of the past.11 Quite the contrary: Leader “forcibly revived” the “in-door atmosphere of mediævalism” in the sense that his fortress was both dark and cold (546). For James, these “crepuscular chambers” posed “a mystery” (547). How did the people who lived in these rooms spend their days? James then vividly reconstructed the rude masculine life of the period.

No wonder men relished a fight and panted for a fray. “Skull-smashers” were sweet, ears ringing with pain and ribs cracking in a tussle were soothing music, compared with the cruel quietude of the dim-windowed castle. When they came back they could only have slept a good deal and eased their dislocated bones on those meagre oaken ledges. Then they woke up and turned about to the table and ate their portion of roasted sheep. They shouted at each other across the board and flung the wooden plates at the serving-men. They jostled and hustled and hooted and bragged; and then, after gorging and boozing and easing their doublets, they squared their elbows one by one on the greasy table and buried their scarred foreheads and dreamed of a good gallop after flying foes. (547)

The only hint of the chivalric in this example of “critical overhauling” lies in the concluding reference to dreams of pursuit on horseback. In their waking lives, however, these men of the fourteenth century have nothing of Roland or Galahad about them. Their life has been conditioned and constrained by violence, and still more by the physical discomfort and the “[d]eadly ennui” of the place in which they live (547).

“And the women?” (547). James’s question is a pointed one in the context of the interpretive activities associated with pre-figuration, configuration and refiguration. Artistic pre-figurations familiar to the Victorians offered stock images of the women of the Middle Ages dressed, as in some Pre-Raphaelite painting, in “their peaked coifs, their falling sleeves and heavily-twisted trains” (548). In his 1909 revision of this essay, James drove home the point that such costumes would “sow the seed of yearning envy” in women of “later generations” (548). Yet the general approach—underlining the discrepancy between the physical and social realities of the past and their contemporary idealization—was clear in the 1874 version of this travel essay. James here reflected that medieval women “must have been strangely simple”—simpler than “any moral archæologist can show us in a learned restoration” (547). He then found himself thinking “with a sigh that, as the poor things turned away with patient looks from the viewless windows,” those imprisoned women “hadn’t even the consolation of knowing” that their clothing would later become fashionable (547). Here was the limit of moral archaeology and learned restoration: “pure æsthetics” knew only so much of “this starving and sinning world” (548). Medieval women could not have known how they would come to be configured. But Victorian medievalists scarcely glimpsed what those women must have endured.

**3.**

James’s earlier travel writings demonstrated a sophisticated grasp of medieval history which was used on occasions to expose the shortcomings of Victorian medievalism. In the concluding section of this article, I will further discuss that cultural phenomenon and James’s relation to it. Before doing that, however, I offer a second and more extended case study which considers James’s involvement with published notes for a major series of paintings on an Arthurian theme. I argue that this work played some part in the development of The Sacred Fount (1901) and The Golden Bowl (1904) and that it also sheds light on James’s knowledge and understanding of medieval romance. At the risk of seeming to make a mountain out of a molehill, my starting-point is that the significance of this second medieval encounter (a specifically Arthurian one) lies precisely in its uniqueness, its lack of significant connections or ramifications in James’s other writings. A fuller assessment of the reasons for and the implications of that absence is reserved for the final section of this essay.

Listed as item B13 in Leon Edel, Dan H. Laurence and James Rambeau’s A Bibliography of Henry James, The Quest of the Holy Grail exists in three distinct versions. The Bibliography records that B13a was published on 19 January 1895 to accompany an exhibition at the Conduit Street Galleries in London of the first five in what would become a series of fifteen paintings by Edwin Austin Abbey (1852–1911). These works, painted in oils on canvas and of the same height (96 inches) although of varying widths, were eventually installed in the Book Delivery Room of Boston Public Library: Panels I–V in April 1895 and the remainder by January 1902.12 B13b, a revised version of the first text, was published in New York by R. H. Russell and Son in June 1895. A second revised text, B13c, was published in London on 28 October 1901 and accompanied an exhibition at the Guildhall Art Gallery of the final ten paintings in Abbey’s series. This text was twice reprinted: first, in a catalogue to accompany an exhibition in December 1901 of Abbey’s paintings at the American Art Galleries in New York; subsequently, as a leaflet for visitors to the Boston Public Library.

None of the three versions of The Quest of the Holy Grail identified James as the author. However, Edel, Laurence and Rambeau argue that, although James’s was “largely the revising, rather than the author’s, hand,” there is “sufficient evidence” to include this work in their bibliography (219). They point out that the title page of a printer’s dummy of B13b contained a pencilled statement to the effect that the “Explanatory Notes” were “By Henry James” (221). Additional evidence with regard to at least partial authorship comes in the form of a 27 April 1895 piece in Publisher’s Weekly which announced that Abbey’s paintings were to be “reproduced in a small volume … written by Mr. and Mrs. Abbey, with the valuable assistance of Henry James” (221). I will consider the extent of James’s authorship of The Quest of the Holy Grail shortly, but three initial observations about the entry for B13 in A Bibliography of Henry James are relevant at this point. First, there is a reprint of B13a which is not recorded by Edel, Laurence and Rambeau. This appeared as a catalogue to accompany an exhibition in early 1895 of the first five paintings in Abbey’s series at the American Art Galleries in New York.13 Not having access to the original version of B13a (“a single unsigned quire of four leaves” of which Edel, Laurence and Rambeau are aware only of a single copy in private ownership), I will in what follows refer to this reprinted text (identified as B13a[R]), noting variations between this text and other versions of B13 as appropriate (218). Second, the relation between B13a and B13b is more distant than that between B13a and B13c; indeed, B13b reads almost as a separate work. As well as reproducing Panels I–V in Abbey’s Grail series, this text (the “small volume” mentioned in Publisher’s Weekly) features a four-page opening section which includes details of the Grail legend not found in B13a or B13c and which places considerable emphasis on the quest narrative as “the peculiar gift of the British race to the world’s literature” (B13b, n.p. [4]). The racial and nationalist assumptions at work here are not typical of James, and his assisting hand is less evident here than in B13a or B13c. Third, although A Bibliography of Henry James notes that the two reprints of B13c (that of the American Art Galleries and the Boston Public Library) are “slightly revised reprints” of B13a, they are not entirely “uniform” and contain possibly significant variations of wording which I note in what follows (221). I have been unable to access B13c in the original Guildhall Art Gallery text of 1901 and my quotations are taken from the American Art Gallery reprint of 1901 (B13c[R1]), although I also note variant readings in the Boston Public Library reprint (B13c[R2]) where appropriate.

James acknowledged but deprecated the role he had played in the composition of The Quest of the Holy Grail. In his 1921 biography of Abbey, E. V. Lucas quotes a letter probably written in the autumn of 1895 to Mary Gertrude Mead Abbey, Abbey’s wife: “My ‘help’ last winter wasn’t worth any recognition—it was help most lame and inadequate” (II:278). Lucas infers from the reference to “recognition” that James was declining payment (see 221). Edel, Laurence and Rambeau suggest in contrast that James did not wish to be named in the published work. Nevertheless, whether the assistance was “valuable” or “inadequate,” the name of James continued to be associated with The Quest of the Holy Grail. Lucas describes this document as “a composite work of Henry James and Mrs. Abbey” and argues that the description of Abbey’s fifth painting, “The Castle of the Grail,” was “from the pen of Henry James” (I:232–33). Until relatively recently, the website of the Boston Public Library described the leaflet which reprinted the text of B13c as “By Henry James.”14

James undoubtedly offered some kind of “help” in the composition of B13a, which described Panels I–V in Abbey’s series. This contribution may well have survived in B13b and was more distinct in B13c. But it remains unclear whether James had any involvement with the descriptions in B13c of Panels VI–XV. All fifteen descriptions might possibly have been drafted at the start of Abbey’s project, the text for the first five panels being used for 1895 exhibitions in London (and, as we now know, New York) with the text for the remaining ten panels reserved for the exhibitions in 1901. But it seems more likely that the text for Panels VI–XV had not been drafted by 1895 and was never reviewed by James. He probably saw one or more of Abbey’s last ten panels in the artist’s Gloucestershire studio, and Margaret O’Shaughnessy asserts that James was shown Panel XI, which was completed in the autumn of 1900 (see 308). The serpentine history of The Quest of the Holy Grail and uncertainty about the extent of James’s contribution is additionally complicated because the letters which Lucas quotes in his biography of Abbey no longer seem to be extant. In his introduction to the third volume of his edition of James’s letters, Edel mentions a number of “epistolary absences,” specifically mentioning “letters to some of the painters—to Abbey, for example” (III:xx).15

It is nevertheless possible to present a reasonably detailed chronological account of the association between James and Abbey. The Philadelphian artist moved to England in 1878, and James’s friendship with him developed at the same time as that with artists such as George Du Maurier and Edward Burne-Jones. James mentioned having met “dear little Abbey” at a Royal Academy function in a letter to Elizabeth Boott on 11 December 1883 (HJL3 18). In The Letters of Henry James, Percy Lubbock draws upon Edmund Gosse’s recollections of the summer of 1886, during which James visited the Worcestershire village of Broadway. Gosse and James spent their time writing in a “medieval ruin” (the so-called “Priory”) whilst Abbey and another American artist, Frank Millet, painted; also present were John Singer Sargent, Alfred Parsons and Fred Barnet (LHJ1 88). James mentioned this visit in a letter to his brother William on 10 September 1886 (see HJL3 132). On 4 December 1886, James published the first of two articles on Abbey. For him, Abbey’s most striking quality as an artist was his ability to represent eighteenth-century England. Abbey was the product of Harper’s “‘art department’;” his imagination had formed itself amidst “the railway stations and telegraph poles” of New York but had performed “a wide backward journey” in order to “take the air” (CWAD1 406─08). James’s complimentary reference in this essay to Abbey’s illustrations for works by Goldsmith and Herrick seems to have caught the American artist’s attention. Lucas cites a letter in which James thanked the painter for two “wondrous gifts:” Selections from the Poetry of Robert Herrick (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1882) and Goldsmith’s She Stoops to Conquer (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1887), both illustrated by Abbey (I:163–64).16 In a typescript transcript held at Creighton University, this letter is dated by Edel to “Nov. 12 [1887?]”, a date made plausible by James’s reference to his “little article” on Abbey having been written “a year ago.” By this time, James had probably made at least one further visit to Broadway: at the start of October 1887 he told his brother that he was shortly to see “the genial and gifted little Abbey” in Worcestershire (HJL3 199).

Abbey also featured in “Our Artists in Europe,” an essay by James which appeared in the June 1889 issue of Harper’s New Monthly Magazine. In this second critical piece, James mentioned the Broadway group of artists, advising his American readers to “brush away an incongruous association” produced by the name of the village and to picture instead a “wide, long, grass-bordered vista of brownish gray cottages, thatched, latticed, mottled, mended, ivied, immemorial” (CWAD1 435). James again mentioned Abbey’s illustrations to Goldsmith, praising the artist’s ability to bring “the remote near to us” (440). As a “worker in words,” James wanted to discover “the secret of the pictorial, to drink at the same fountain,” to be conducted to “the magic spring” (440). But Abbey’s genius, as James conceded, was such that he could give little account of it in words.

The friendship between artist and novelist was maintained in the years that followed and an 1893 telegram communicating details of James’s impending visit to the Abbeys, now living in Fairford, Gloucestershire, is well-known: “Will alight precipitately at 5.38 from the deliberate 1.50” (HJL4 433). By this stage, James would presumably have been aware that Abbey had for some time been working on a series of paintings which took the Grail quest as their theme. Abbey had discussed plans for the decoration of the Boston Public Library with the architectural firm of McKim, Mead and White as early as 1887. In 1890 Abbey was commissioned to produce a frieze of 1,500 square feet although, as O’Shaughnessy points out, he had at this point completed “only two oil paintings” (299). It is possible that Abbey was helped to the commission by his wife, whose uncle, William Rutherford Mead, was a partner in McKim, Mead and White. While Abbey was working on the early paintings in the series, James continued his visits and repeatedly expressed his appreciation of the eggs produced by the Abbeys’ chickens. At one point, Mary Gertrude Abbey was sending a weekly supply of no less than twenty-six eggs to James in London. In a letter which Lucas dates to late 1894, James informed Mrs Abbey that “the silver cord is loosed and the golden egg is broken:” he was going abroad and would therefore be “eggless for a while” although he did not expect to be away for a lengthy period, in part because “I shall hear the cluck of your hens calling me back” (II:277). B13a (the first version of The Quest of the Holy Grail) was written late in 1894 or very early in 1895 and published on 19 January 1895. Once the exhibition of Abbey’s first five paintings in Conduit Street concluded, these works were shipped to the United States. In a letter of 22 January 1895 to William Dean Howells (whose wife Elinor was Mary Gertrude Abbey’s aunt), James conveyed “messages of affection by dear little ‘Ned’ Abbey, who presently sails for N. Y. laden with the beautiful work he has been doing for the new Boston public library” (HJL3 513). On 4 February 1895, James instructed his brother to “see the Abbeys:” the American artist would soon be travelling to Boston “with his beautiful work for the new Public Library” (519). James did not see this work in situ until December 1904. In The American Scene, he mentioned the “so brave designs” of Abbey (as well as works by Sargent and Puvis de Chavannes) but was equally struck by the sight of schoolchildren in the library on a rainy day, “so many little heads bent over their story-books” (CTW2: 562).

By the mid-1890s, James was so distinctive a stylist that one might expect to identify his contributions to The Quest of the Holy Grail with a degree of certainty. The possibility that James did not contribute to the notes on Panels VI–XV is strengthened by the fact that these descriptions contain nothing which is indisputably Jamesian. There is, however, an occasional phrase which leaves open an outside possibility that James played some part in the process of composition. Of Panel VI, for example, the American Art Galleries reprint of B13c makes reference to a lady “once beautiful in form and features,” now “noble still in form, but hideous in feature” (B13c[R1], 9). In the Boston Public Library reprint of B13c (though not in the American Art Galleries version), the imprisoned ladies shown in Panel IX welcome Galahad with “shy delight” (B13c[R2]). In this text, there is a similarly Jamesian ring in the idea, represented in Panel X, of Galahad’s eyes being unsealed by “[a] new-born knowledge” (B13c[R2]).

There can, however, be little doubt that it is only in the preamble to The Quest of the Holy Grail and in the text which describes Panels I–V that James’s contributory hand can be confidently identified. The first paragraph of the preamble expresses some typically Jamesian considerations with regard to the process of composition, emphasizing the way in which Abbey had considered the “question of selection” and introduced “[c]ertain simplifications and compressions” in his pictorial narrative (B13a[R], 3; not in B13b). A still more definite authorial note is struck when the revelation of the Grail is described as “the proof and recompense of the highest knightly purity, the perfection constituting its possessor the type of the knightly character; so that the highest conceivable emprise for the companions of the Round Table was to attain to such a consecration” (B13a[R], 4; not in B13b). Finally, as Lucas justifiably argues, the account of Panel V shows James’s rhythm and tone distinctly. The Fisher King, Amfortas, and all the inmates of his castle are said to suffer from a “strange perpetuation of ineffectual life” (B13a[R], 7). Galahad sees the bearer of the Grail, “the damsel with the Golden Dish,” and the objects carried in the procession which she leads (7). But, presumptuously believing himself to be capable of interpreting the scene which is presented to him, he does not inquire into its meaning. Galahad’s failure in this duty means that he loses “the glory of redeeming from this paralysis of centuries the old monarch and his hollow-eyed court, forever dying and never dead, whom he leaves folded in their dreadful doom” (7). This again has the James hallmark.

I suggested at the start of this section that James’s work on B13 sheds light on both his knowledge and his understanding of Arthurian romance. The preamble to The Quest of the Holy Grail alludes to the Christian and folkloric sources drawn on by the “12th century storytellers:” “Walter Mapes in England, Chrétien de Troyes in France, Wolfram of Eschenbach in Germany” (B13a[R], 3). Walter Mapes, more usually referred to as Walter “Map” or “Mapp,” is mentioned in the Vulgate cycle of Arthurian romances (early thirteenth century) but is no longer identified with Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford, whose work Geoffrey of Monmouth cites as his source in Historia Regum Brittainiae (c. 1123–1129). Chrétien de Troyes was the author of several Arthurian romances, of which Abbey drew most extensively on Perceval, ou le Conte du Graal (written in the late twelfth century). Abbey retained the figures of Blanchefleur and Gornemant from that work but attributed the story of Perceval to the central figure in his frieze: Galahad. This knight made his first appearance not in Chrétien but in the Vulgate cycle, being later and perhaps most famously depicted in Thomas Malory’s Le Morte d’Arthur (printed at Westminster by Caxton in 1485). The description of Abbey’s first panel refers to “Gornemanz” rather than “Gornemant,” and this character is drawn from the third named source in the preamble, Wolfram of Eschenbach, whose Parzifal (written in the early thirteenth century) was based on Chrétien. However, although the Fisher King appears in Chrétien, it is only in Parzifal that he acquires the name Anfortas. Yet the spelling “Amfortas” in The Quest of the Holy Grail suggests a contemporary reference (not mentioned in the preamble) to Parsifal (1882), the opera composed by Richard Wagner.17

Edel and Tintner’s catalogue of James’s library is incomplete but does not list any of the authors referenced in the preamble to B13. Nor does it list Le Morte d’Arthur. James does not seem to have mentioned any of the medieval authors elsewhere in his critical writings. It therefore seems reasonable to suppose that the medieval scholarship which informed the Quest of the Holy Grail paintings was exclusively the work of the Abbeys. Yet it is possible that references to Tennyson in The Quest of the Holy Grail (to Victorian rather than to medieval Arthurianism, therefore) have a different source. In Panel III, the “Seat Perilous” is described as being “‘Fashioned by Merlin ere he passed away’” and in Panel IV, Galahad is referred to as “the ‘bright boy-knight’ of Tennyson” (B13a[R], 5–6; not in B13b). These quotations from The Idylls of the King might well have been supplied by James, who was, as Philip Horne has observed, “saturated in Tennyson’s poetry” (73). In summary, then, it would be fair on the evidence presented here to conclude that James’s literary-historical knowledge of the Grail story was less deep than his emotional and artistic understanding of it. In those phrases which seem most distinctively Jamesian in The Quest of the Holy Grail there is a strong sense of solemnity and of sacrifice. Vigil, quest and revelation are presented as parts of a great subjective adventure. Two passages in this work also hint at a negative judgement of medieval romance, and may therefore have their source in the views of James rather than the Abbeys. First, in the description of Panel III, Joseph of Arimathea’s centuries-long survival is said to be “one of the most artless features of the romance” (B13a[R], 6; not in B13b). Second, in the account of Panel V, it is noted (with some acuity) that “the asking of a question on which everything depends” is a common occurrence in “primitive romance” (7). In the final section of this article, I will return to the idea that James’s estimation of medieval prose narrative was, like his sense of Victorian medievalism, a critical one.

How should one assess the significance of The Quest of the Holy Grail for James’s writing in general? It is not impossible that the perceptive and sympathetic painter who appears in The Sacred Fount (Ford Obert, R. A.) has some connection with Edwin Abbey, who became a Royal Academician in 1898. Certainly, James’s musings on the mysteries of the visual arts in 1889—his desire to “drink at the same fountain” as Abbey and to find “the magic spring”—anticipate the central motif of the novel he wrote more than a decade later. It might further be suggested that James’s work on B13a in late 1894 or early 1895 formed part of the imaginative germination of The Sacred Fount. In the description of Panel V, the idea that Amfortas is doomed to a “strange perpetuation of ineffectual life” somewhat resembles the situation of Guy Brissenden and May Server in The Sacred Fount. As I mentioned above, the spelling of the name Amfortas is derived from a composition by Wagner, and this composer is─unusually for James─directly mentioned in the novel (see TSF 162). Other motifs in The Sacred Fount—in particular the reference in a central scene to a “castle of enchantment” (TSF 76)—may also have their source in James’s memory of Abbey’s Grail paintings. Yet such connections fall short of any claim that The Quest of the Holy Grail (or the medieval quest narrative more generally) played a major role in James’s creative output.

Lyndall Gordon has suggested that the purity of Milly Theale in The Wings of the Dove (1902) was in part inspired by Panel X of Abbey’s work, which depicts Galahad’s wife Blanchefleur (see 311). I would argue that James’s contributions to the text for Panel V played a more definite (albeit minor) role in the development of The Golden Bowl. The most obvious point of contact lies in that reference to “the damsel with the Golden Dish.” A golden dish might perhaps be described as a golden bowl, though James did not at any point, in the novel which he published almost a decade after working on The Quest of the Holy Grail, describe his golden bowl as a dish. Yet the relationship with the Abbeys does seem to have played some part in the gestation of James’s ideas. The initial notebook entry for The Golden Bowl was made on 28 November 1892, with a further entry added on 21 December 1895. Between these two dates—in late 1894, in fact—James’s humorous reference to Ecclesiastes 12:6 (“the silver cord is loosed and the golden egg is broken”) in his letter to Mary Gertrude Abbey suggests that the title for this later work and perhaps its deeper symbolic structure was already in process of formation. Yet the idea that The Golden Bowl is (as Jonathan Ullyot has argued) James’s “own unique version of the Grail story” is unconvincing (19). As has been argued elsewhere (see Lustig 2021), the parallels which Ullyot claims to detect between the Grail narrative and The Golden Bowl seem forced, perhaps because Ullyot overstates James’s role in the production of B13. For Ullyot, James may not have written the entirety of this text but seems “to have sufficiently revised it to not mind the sole attribution” in what is “his catalogue” (19, my emphasis). Yet, as I have demonstrated, the extent to which B13 was “his” is doubtful; “sole attribution” in the Boston Public Library reprint of B13c was something which James was probably unaware of and would almost certainly have disclaimed. It is not the fact that The Golden Bowl is a “version” of the Grail narrative that is significant, then, but the fact that it is not. Yet why should the evidence that James responded in any complex way to medieval prose narrative seem so lacking when at an earlier point in his career he was clearly able to produce sophisticated assessments of medieval architecture? A preliminary response to this question must now be essayed.

**4.**

As we have seen, my case studies have revealed some surprising differences between James’s response to medieval architecture and his reflections on Arthurian literature. In the case of the early travel writings, James engaged with contemporary intellectual concerns (“æsthetic culture,” “pure æsthetics”) but suggested that the scholarly virtues of these approaches were offset by a tendency to idealize the medieval world and to ignore its stark physical and mental constraints. Indeed, on occasions James was compelled to correct such tendencies on his own part. The exceptional status of The Quest of the Holy Grail underlines James’s relative absence of engagement with Arthurian themes. He nowhere denied the potential of the quest narrative as a subject for painting, but he appears to have had a limited knowledge of medieval romance and to have entertained reservations (“artless,” “primitive”) about its merits. In this final section, my second pair of keywords─”modern” and “criticism”─take on a greater role, although I should again emphasize that it is not part of my purpose to consider the wider history and usage of these terms, either in James’s writing or more generally.

Before embarking on these concluding topics, however, it is worth briefly considering an alternative way to assess the impact of medieval prose narrative on James. I have already expressed doubts about Jonathan Ullyot’s identification of quest motifs in The Golden Bowl, yet evidence might also be drawn from earlier fictional works. In The American (1875), Christopher Newman befriends a young Unitarian minister named Babcock, one of whose acquaintances is a student of architecture called Percival. This modern-day Arthurian knight, mentioned in a single scene, has “had a love affair with a young woman who did not expect him to marry her” (HJN1: 578). There are other references to Arthurian materials in The American, for Newman is also acquainted with Tom Tristram, an American who seems more familiar with the seamier side of Paris than with the Louvre and who, on first meeting Newman, proposes a trip to the Palais Royale, where it is possible to smoke a cigar. In Washington Square (1880), Morris Townshend makes Catherine Sloper think of “a young knight in a poem,” although his talk, as James notes, is “not particularly knightly” (HJN2: 32). Horace “Knight” (“A Most Extraordinary Case,” 1868); “Lancelot” Mallow (“The Tree of Knowledge,” 1900): Arthurian or romance references undoubtedly featured in James’s vast repository of character names, but neither these nor the moments in The American and Washington Square suggest that James’s debts to medieval prose narrative amounted to more than glancing references. A “glancing” reference is not an insignificant one, of course: all these examples have a pronounced ironic effect in that they refer to the medieval world only to explode any illusion that its modern representatives exemplify the ideals of chivalry. Indeed, in their distinctly earthly appetites, James’s Tristram and his Percival more closely resemble the boozy inhabitants of Vincigliata than Abbey’s saintly Galahad.

I previously expressed a concern that I was making a mountain out of that molehill, The Quest of the Holy Grail. Yet even on its own, this text makes the absence of reference to medieval narrative in James a relative rather than an absolute one, and therefore susceptible to critical assessment. As I have indicated, the key question for me is why James remained so little affected by themes which obsessed (the word is not too strong) many of his contemporaries. The suggestion that James reached the critical point in his imaginative development during a lull in the Arthurian revival is only partially persuasive. He was 14 in 1857, reaching this age later than eminent medievalists and Arthurian enthusiasts such as Tennyson (1823), Ruskin (1832), Burne-Jones (1847) and Morris (1848). James was possibly too old to have been influenced by a second wave of Arthurianism which began with Edward Strachey’s edition of the Morte (1868) and was followed by numerous children’s versions of Malory including those by Sidney Lanier (1880) and Mary Macleod (1900). Yet this slight dip was offset by a far stronger and more continuous source of exposure and influence in Tennyson, whose Idylls of the King began with the publication of “Enid” in 1857, when James was 14, and concluded with “Balin and Balan” (1885).

The relative absence of Arthurian references in James might therefore need to be related to critical rather than creative exemplars. Even in his twenties, James was well-equipped to comment on the buildings of medieval Europe, and in particular those of Italy. He came to Venice, in the words of Tony Tanner, “with Ruskin in his pocket” (157). Indeed, James may have read Ruskin even before he became acquainted with Charles Eliot Norton, whose Notes of Travel and Study in Italy (1860) must have been another important early source, not least in its opening contention that “the Middle Ages still possess Italy” (3). Norton was James’s entrée to the Ruskin circle, and it was through him that James came to hear Ruskin lecture at University College and to visit him at Denmark Hill. If Ruskin was an established reference point during James’s first adult trip to Europe in 1869, how much more familiar a critical voice he must have been on James’s travels to Italy in 1872 and 1873─journeys during which James wrote the pieces collected in Transatlantic Sketches. Yet readers who come to James’s Italian travel writings through Italian Hours (1909) may be led by the placing of “Venice” (first published in 1882) and “The Grand Canal” (first published in 1892) as the two first pieces in this collection to think that James’s position on Ruskin was consistently negative. Published almost a decade before the opening essay in Italian Hours, the third piece in the collection─“Venice: An Early Impression” (1873)─noted that Ruskin had “very properly” distinguished “between the old and the new approach” to Venice (CTW2: 336). This seeming endorsement was quietly undercut by the information that James had arrived in Venice by rail rather than by gondola, finding himself aesthetically unharmed by the “new approach.” It was only later, then, that James’s response to Ruskin became one of open dissent. In “Venice,” Ruskin’s fixed “principles of form” were said by James to have led him into “scolding people for departing from them” (CTW2: 288). James made it clear that he was thinking not of the earlier but of the later Ruskin, the author of Mornings in Florence (1875–77) and St Mark’s Rest (1877–84). But in “Italy Revisited” (originally published in two parts in 1883), we seem only to see the later Ruskin. James described the world of art presented by Ruskin in Mornings in Florence as “a sort of assize court, in perpetual session” (CTW2: 408). Yet although Ruskin was not mentioned by name, James’s 1874 remarks about Vincigliata might be seen as an early sign that his attitude to Ruskin was changing. The “minute accuracy” which characterized Leader’s version of “æsthetic culture” did not involve scolding, but in James’s view it did involve an exaggerated insistence on formal principles which was unaccompanied by an understanding of medieval social life (546).

For James, the figure of Ruskin (like that of Pater) was both nutritive and admonitory. In general, the Italian travel writings attempted to maintain a playful yet reflective distance from the extremes of aestheticism, neither wanting to be restricted by rules nor to dissolve them altogether, neither fetishizing objective historical fidelity nor valuing subjective experience above all else.18 But what similar context informed James’s encounter with medieval narrative forms? There was Tennyson and Scott, of course, but in the English-speaking world there were few serious literary critics, let alone critics of medieval narrative. In an 1868 piece for the North American Review, James described Ruskin as the “single eminent representative” in England of “the profession of art-critic” (CWAD1: 1). In his “exact and extensive knowledge,” Charles Eliot Norton was by contrast an “art-scholar”─this from the title of an essay published in 1909, at the other end of James’s career (CWAD1: 528). A single “art-critic” and a solitary “art-scholar:” for James, it had been enough. But where might one find a medieval “literature-critic” or “literature-scholar?

There is evidence that James felt this absence of reference. Forced back upon his own resources, he seems to have seen a deep division between medieval and modern narrative. From the outset of his career, however, he seems also to have believed that the task of understanding this division belonged to the function of criticism. The note first struck in James’s review of Nassau W. Senior’s Essays on Fiction (his earliest review, published anonymously in the October 1864 issue of the North American Review) was one of disappointment. The volume was not a “critical treatise” at all and made no “attempt to codify” or to define the art of fiction (LC 1196). For the young James, the dearth of English-language criticism was to some extent addressed with the publication of Essays in Criticism (1865). James’s review of this collection noted that Arnold’s “supreme virtue” as a critic was that he spoke “seriously” (LC 719). Even here, however, neither the literature-critic nor the literature-scholar had yet emerged, for (as James noted in his 1884 essay on Arnold) the author of “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” was a “general critic” rather than a literary one: his preeminent subject was not literary texts but “English life” (LC 727).

James may not have been able to point to critical sources, but the idea that medieval romance was “artless” or “primitive” was not unparalleled. In Mimesis, Erich Auerbach’s remarks on Chrétien “Yvain”─that the narrative “prattles,” that it has a “touching naïveté and childishness”─construct medieval narrative in a way that is not dissimilar to that of James. Of course, James couldn’t possibly be aware of a work which wasn’t yet written. But he might have known that Tennyson found the Morte “strung together without art” and that Morris found it an “ill-digested collection of fragments” (Lustig 113). He might have been aware of what Robert Southey said of the Morte in 1817:

Adventure produces adventure in infinite series; not like a tree, whose boughs and branches bearing a necessary relation and due proportion to each other, combine into one beautiful form, but resembling such plants as the prickly pear, where one joint grows upon another, all equal in size and alike in shape … making a formless and misshapen mass. (Lustig 112)

Southey “others” medieval romance: for him, it lacks the formal integrity and proportionality of a native tree and is instead an exotic plant whose difference amounts to deformity. Yet aspects of his critique strongly anticipate James’s response to medieval buildings, where the “crooked,” the “accidental” and the “unforeseen” were the dominant impressions. James was not saying that medieval buildings were “misshapen:” he was instead suggesting that those confining structures damaged the lives of their inhabitants. But when James (possibly, in B13a) wrote that the medieval quest narrative had “artless” or “primitive” features, he did not cite Southey, Morris or Tennyson and therefore seems not to have been easily able to draw on a body of past commentary. In the final decade of the nineteenth century, James seems also partially unaware of newly emerging critical approaches to Arthurian narrative.

The Arthurian revival had established a body of work in the field of the visual arts and, as we have seen, aspects of that work were beginning to be understood in nationalistic or racial terms, as in the reference in B13b (in wording which was probably not drafted or even reviewed by James) to the Grail narrative as “the peculiar gift of the British race to the world’s literature” (B13b, n.p. [4]). Similar assessments of medieval prose narrative, and in particular of the Morte d’Arthur, were beginning to enter the critical literature at just this point in time, and although they too invoked nation and race as key terms, they also for the first time gave Malory’s work a central place in a literary tradition conceived of in terms of continuity between the present and the past. In 1891, for example, Strachey described the Morte as “our first great work of English prose” (Lustig 114). In 1894 (the year in which James contributed to The Quest of the Holy Grail), Walter Raleigh claimed that Malory had given the Arthurian legends “their supreme place in English prose literature” (114). The academic canonization of Malory now for the first time mounted a claim for the narrative unity of the Morte and for its author’s artistry. Having returned to the Morte over a period of thirty years, George Saintsbury concluded in The English Novel (1913) that Malory had crafted diverse materials into “one story, and one book” (114).

Had he known of the work of Strachey, Raleigh or Saintsbury (as Abbey and his wife may well have done, on the evidence of B13b), it is possible that James’s attitude to the Grail narrative and to medieval romance in general might have been affected, with references to the “artless” and “primitive” either modified or more fully developed. But even though the reference points were few and fragile, there is evidence that James’s conception of the modern novel and of modern criticism was influenced from the outset by a deep understanding of Arthurian motifs. When he reviewed Essays on Fiction, James took Senior’s extended commentary on the novels of Sir Walter Scott as an opportunity to reflect on the contribution which the Waverley novels had made to the history of fiction. For him, Scott─not Malory─ was “the first English prose story-teller” (LC 1201). Scott’s predecessors (Richardson, Fielding and Smollett—not Malory) were “moralists” rather than “irresponsible” story-tellers (1201–2). However, novelistic “irresponsibility” (a duty to show “nothing but facts”) had its limits (1202). Scott knew—there is an anticipation of James’s experience at Vincigliata here—that there was “a vast deal that was gross and ignoble in bygone times” (1203). His strategy, in James’s view, was simply to ignore all that. For James, this “reticence” was typically the province of poetry rather than of prose, and became most pronounced in the case of Tennyson, whose Idylls were, as James expressed it, “far more one-sided … than anything of Scott’s” (1203). But what then, he wondered, would be the predicament of a modern historical novelist who wanted to deal with medieval materials? “[W]hat disclosures we should have if Mr. Charles Reade were to take it into his head to write a novel about King Arthur and his times” (1203).

In writing such a fiction, Reade might well have chosen to avoid the “artless” and the “primitive” features of medieval romance─the reliance, mentioned in B13a, on the miraculous and the formulaic─but, if he intended to be a modern, “irresponsible” storyteller, “disclosures” would surely follow. One might assume that these revelations would have a sexual nature, and there would be some truth to this. Charles Reade (1814–1884) was the author of The Cloister and the Hearth (1861), a historical novel whose plot was based on the supposed illegitimacy of Erasmus. Still more transgressive stories were part and parcel of the Arthurian narrative─plot elements which the Victorians tended to treat with pronounced reticence. When Tennyson’s Arthur declares that he has no kinship with Mordred, he erases the act of incest which many readers see as the Arthurian narrative’s genetic moment. Abbey’s treatment of the Arthurian materials was also oblique, since although Panels III and IV of “The Quest of the Holy Grail” depicted King Arthur and his court, there was no reference to Guenever’s adultery. Yet alongside sexual transgression, it is likely that James’s sense of what was “gross and ignoble” in medieval life included everyday social realities—coldness and discomfort, fighting and boozing, being bored to extinction—powerfully imagined in his account of the fortress at Vincigliata.

In its insistence on the duty of the novelist to show “nothing but facts,” the 1864 review of Senior sowed seeds which flowered later, when, in “The Art of Fiction” (1884), James wrote of that “solidity of specification” which created the “air of reality” (LC 53). The dilemma for the novelist was how to avoid the reticence of the poet without being left with only the gross and ignoble. That dilemma is neatly captured in the title of Allon White’s The Uses of Obscurity: The Fiction of Early Modernism and also in Fredric Jameson’s account, in The Political Unconscious, of the way in which “older magical content” survived in literary modernism as “a determinate, marked absence at the heart of the secular world” (121). But there was a role here for the critic as well as the novelist, and in an 1891 essay, James transformed the Arthurian references which had preoccupied him in the 1864 review. Published just months after Abbey received his commission from the Boston Public Library, “The Science of Criticism” features James’s most elaborate and striking use of an image and a type drawn from medieval romance, and one which is no longer deployed for purposes of irony or as an illustration of the artless and primitive. James acknowledged the existence of “too many small school-masters” (echoes here of a Ruskinian insistence upon rules) but held out nevertheless for “the high utility of criticism” (LC 98). If the part played by the critic proceeded from “deep sources,” he wrote, “from the efficient combination of experience and perception,” then this figure could be “the real helper of the artist, a torch-bearing outrider” (98). It was here─carried away, perhaps, by a high sense of mission and of sacrifice─that James turned to the resources of medieval romance to make his point. The critic was inevitably an Arnoldian to a degree, but “free work” required a certain “outfit:”

and when one considers the noble figure completely equipped—armed cap-à-pie in curiosity and sympathy—one falls in love with the apparition. It certainly represents the knight who has knelt through his long vigil and who has the piety of his office. (LC 98).

NOTES

Parts of the third section of this article were presented at the Henry James and Memory conference (British Library, April 2016). A version of the second section of this article was presented at the Modern Language Association convention (January 2021). I am grateful to the audience and respondents at both these events.

1See, for example, Chandler, Girouard, Taylor and Brewer, Mancoff (1990, 1995 and 2014), Boos, Bryden, Holloway and Palmgren, Alexander, and Parker and Wagner.

2See Alexander (227–43), Ullyot, and Marshall and Cusack.

3On Scott, see Herford. On Tennyson, see Horne. On Ruskin, see Parkes, Follini, Finnerty and Manolescu-Oancea. On Arnold, See Lustig (2008) and Stainer. On James’s relation to key figures in Victorian medievalism including Burne-Jones, Morris, Pater, Rossetti and Ruskin, see Ellmann, Freedman, Savoy, Graham, Casteras and Salmoni (2008).

4References to James’s travel writings are to the Library of America editions (CTW1 and CTW2). All quotations have been checked against the earliest available version and significant differences of wording are noted.

5In TS, the final phrase reads: “with almost painful intensity” (26).

6At least since Butor’s 1974 observation that “books are at the origin of the trip,” critics have drawn attention to the way in which representations of particular places are mediated by prior written accounts (14). See also Savoy (287) and Salmoni (2008: 220).

7On James’s notion of association, see Savoy (289) and Haviland (272).

8In the original periodical version of this essay, James wrote that the occupants of Stokesay at the period when the gatehouse was constructed had begun “to feel comfortable” (AC, 439). The idea that they were “beginning to believe in good intentions” was introduced in PP (282).

9For Buzard, the 1878 encounter with the supposed “operatic performer” shows James actively “smashing” his own “picturesque fantasies” (40). See also Salmoni (2005: 280), Finnerty (115) and Salter (240).

10In the 1875 version of this essay, the “critical overhauling” had been referred to in a telling phrase as “modern criticism” (TS 284).

11Other commentators would disagree with James’s assessment. For Campbell, Leader’s work represents a triumph of “romance over scholarship” (121).

12For further information and images of Abbey’s work, see: <https://www.bpl.org/mckim-points-of-interest/#abbey_room> (accessed 17 August 2021).

13“CATALOGUE | OF | WORKS IN OIL AND PASTEL | BY | EDWIN A. ABBEY | INCLUDING THE FIRST HALF OF THE SERIES OF PAINTINGS FOR | THE DECORATION OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY OF BOSTON | “THE QUEST OF THE HOLY GRAIL” | ON EXHIBITION UNTIL MARCH 17, INCLUSIVE | WEEK DAYS, 9 A.M. TO 6 P.M. | SUNDAYS, 2 TO 6 P.M. | THE AMERICAN ART GALLERIES | (MADISON SQUARE SOUTH) | 1895

14“The Quest and Achievement of the Holy Grail.” www.bpl.org/central/abbey.htm (accessed 11 March 2016).

15I am grateful to Prof. Greg W. Zacharias, Director of the Center for Henry James Studies at Creighton University, for permission to inspect digital copies of the typed transcriptions of letters from James to Abbey taken by Leon Edel from E. V. Lucas’s biography of Abbey.

16The second of these works is listed in Edel and Tintner’s catalogue of James’s book collection (171).

17On Abbey’s medieval literary sources, see Hirshler (43) and O’Shaughnessy (302–4).

18My sense of James’s response to Ruskin follows that of Tanner (see 169) and Parkes.

WORKS BY HENRY JAMES

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B13b─The Quest of the Holy Grail: A Series of Paintings Done for the Decoration of the Delivery Room in the Public Library of the City of Boston by Edwin A. Abbey. R. H. Russell and Son, 1895.

B13c[R1]─Exhibition at the American Art Galleries Madison Square South of the Second Half of the Series of Paintings presenting “The Quest of the Holy Grail” Done for the Decoration of the Public Library of Boston by Edwin A. Abbey, R. A. The American Art Galleries, 1901.

B13c[R2]─The Quest and Achievement of the Holy Grail: Wall Paintings in the Boston Public Library installed in 1895 by Edwin Austin Abbey, R.A. An Outline of this Version of the Legend by Henry James. www.bpl.org/central/abbey.htm (accessed 11 March 2016).

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