

Chapter 23

STORIES OF AN ANTIQUARY

THE LEGACY OF M. R. JAMES

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I shall from the upset beg to excuse me, for all these that through misluck and an overweening forknowledge of the English speech mistakenhoods may befall me, my good-heart readers. Ever must my plea of an amateur be that I have in my studies of the foresaid only so far as the early twelfth yearhundred's beginning bestrided. And this last, is it from our today's times forgettinghood or our much to be bewailed speechshapelearningness's unwisdomship, is of a nineteenth yearhundred period's togethergatheringreceivingsaloon sad unbefitted.¹

THIS POMPOUS INTRODUCTION by a “Professor Merganser” is the beginning of a *canard* written by a twenty-three-year-old in 1887. It goes on to introduce a hitherto unknown supplement to John Mandeville's travels with a description of the Parthenon, where we read “But treuli to seien these yimages ben al wrought in the wurschipe of Seynt denis Aropagite for because that hethen men of Parisius maad smyte of his hede, therefore han men of Atenys, that is his byshoprike, wroughten his yimage without a hede.”² It is very telling that M. R. James (Montague Rhodes, “Monty” to his friends) enters the scholarly world with a spoof—a genre which has, regretfully, fallen into disuse in periods of publish or perish and peer reviewing. Not only did he produce some witty gems of the genre—he continued to defy the standards of staid, stuffy, sleep-inducing scholarship throughout his life.

James's lasting contribution to manuscript studies in Britain are some thirty manuscript catalogues, published between 1895 and his death in 1936 (five alone in 1905), of collections in Cambridge, Eton, Lambeth, and the John Rylands Library in Manchester;

1 [Montague R. James], “Athens in the Fourteenth Century...by Prof. E. S. Merganser,” in *The Legacy of M. R. James*, ed. Lynda Dennison (Donnington: Shaun Tyas, 2001), 236; cf. Richard William Pfaff, *Montague Rhodes James* (London: Scolar Press, 1980), 79.

2 [James], “Athens,” 238.

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as well as those of private collectors including Henry Yates Thompson and J. P. Morgan. Further, he wrote monographs for members of the Roxburghe Club. His wide-ranging interests included evidence for medieval libraries and biblical illustration, particularly of the Apocalypse. Yet while his scholarly work may even be taken for granted in Britain, its main focus on British subjects makes his name somewhat less familiar to scholarship abroad.

James's name came up, however, when I was tracing the history of the term "historiated initial,"³ an obviously French-derived word,⁴ for which Hanns Swarzenski provided the hint: "historiated initial—as Montague Rhodes James would have said."⁵ Since many earlier catalogues were written in Latin, and the mid-nineteenth-century catalogue of Cambridge University Library mentioned "illuminated" or "grotesque initial letters," some "containing figures or beasts," but not "historiated,"⁶ it seems likely that it was indeed James who casually introduced the term on the first page of his first manuscripts catalogue: "There are a few historiated initials, usually of good exhibition."⁷

James is still a popular figure in the English-speaking world, but not as a scholar. His thirty-odd *Ghost Stories*,⁸ written for annual Christmas Eve readings to students, are very much present in print, radio, TV, even on stage.⁹ In this context, a comparison with another, more famous, scholar-cum-bestseller author comes to mind—for who, given the name J. R. R. Tolkien, would primarily think of the influential Anglicist and *Beowulf* translator? A comparison of the lives and work of James and Tolkien is

3 Christine Jakobi-Mirwald, *Text—Buchstabe—Bild: Studien zur historisierten Initiale im 8. und 9. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Reimer, 1998).

4 First used by Charles Cahier, in Charles Cahier and Arthur Martin, *Nouveaux mélanges d'archéologie, d'histoire et de littérature sur le Moyen-Age*, 4 vols. (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1874), 2:114; cf. Jakobi-Mirwald, *Text—Buchstabe—Bild*, 13–14, no. 23.

5 Hanns Swarzenski, "A Chalice and the Book of Kings," in *De artibus opuscula XL. Essays in Honour of Erwin Panofsky*, ed. Millard Meiss (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 440; cf. Jakobi-Mirwald, *Text—Buchstabe—Bild*, 13, no. 21.

6 Charles Hardwick and Henry Richards Luard, ed., *A Catalogue of the Manuscripts Preserved in the Library of the University of Cambridge*, 5 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1856–1867), 3:375: "illuminated" passim, "grotesque" for instance.

7 M. R. James, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Library of Eton College* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1895), 1; Christine Jakobi-Mirwald, "To Find out All that I Could about Various Matters and to Make Friends—Der Wissenschaftler und Geister-Erzähler M. R. James," in *Kunst Kritik Geschichte: Festschrift für Johann Konrad Eberlein*, ed. Johanna Aufreiter et al. (Berlin: Reimer, 2013), 434.

8 The stories were published between 1904 and 1936, for details see Rosemary Pardoe, "A Chronological Listing of M. R. James's Ghost Stories" (last edited 2007), www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~pardos/MRJStories.html, accessed May 15, 2023.

9 Rosemary Pardoe, "M. R. James on TV, Radio and Film" (last edited December 2010), www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~pardos/MediaList.html, accessed May 15, 2023; Wikipedia, "M. R. James: Adaptations" (last edited on 24 October 2022), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M._R._James#Adaptations, accessed May 15, 2023.

revealing, for the generation which separates them witnessed lasting changes in the academic world.¹⁰

James was born in 1862, the son of a country vicar, and grew up at Great Livermere in Suffolk.¹¹ The family had been one of the oldest slave-owner dynasties, running sugar plantations in Jamaica since Cromwell's time, and the abolition of slavery had forced them back to England in the time of James's grandfather.¹² Like all men of the family, he received the highest-standard education at Eton and King's College, Cambridge,¹³ where he was to spend most of his life as a student, fellow, dean (in 1889), provost (in 1905), and university vice chancellor (1913–1915). He had no teaching responsibilities, enjoyed free lodging and a place at High Table, and remained a lifelong bachelor, although at the time the celibacy mandate for fellows had been lifted.¹⁴ For decades, he worked at the Fitzwilliam Museum, beginning as assistant of classical archaeology in 1884 and directing it from 1893 to 1908.¹⁵ The First World War and a campus bereaved of an entire student generation, for whom James had to write eulogies and memorials, turned him away from Cambridge and back to Eton, where he became provost in 1918, and where, in 1930, he was awarded the Order of Merit.¹⁶ In 1936, he died there of cancer aged seventy-three.

An early academic career, in this case at Oxford, also formed the life of Tolkien.¹⁷ Born in 1892 in South Africa and raised and home-schooled in Warwickshire by his widowed mother, he was orphaned at the age of twelve. His precocious linguistic abilities secured him scholarships and after school he read English language and literature at Exeter College, Oxford. Graduating in 1915, he returned to Oxford after five years at Leeds and taught at Pembroke and Merton Colleges from 1925 to his retirement in 1959. He died in 1973 aged eighty-one. Thirty years James's junior, Tolkien was a war

10 Jakobi-Mirwald, "To Find Out All that I Could"; Patrick J. Murphy, *Medieval Studies and the Ghost Stories of M. R. James* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 9, no. 29.

11 For James's biography, see *Alumni Cantabrigienses: A Biographical List of All Known Students, Graduates and Holders of Office at the University of Cambridge*, ed. John Venn and John Archibald Venn, 10 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922–1953), 2/3:547–48; Samuel G. Lubbock, *Memoir of Montague Rhodes James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939); Pfaff, *Montague Rhodes James*, with an exhaustive biography focusing on James's scholarly life; Michael Cox, *M. R. James: An Informal Portrait* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), primarily on the fictional work; Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, attempts "to understand the ghost stories...in conversation with his scholarly work" (185).

12 Pfaff, *Montague Rhodes James*, 1–16; Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 54–56.

13 M. J. James, *Eton and King's: Recollections, mostly Trivial, 1875–1925* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1926); Pfaff, *Montague Rhodes James*, 17–47.

14 Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 12.

15 Pfaff, *Montague Rhodes James*, 92–102, 152–56; cf. Stella Panayotova, *I Turned It into a Palace: Sydney Cockerell and the Fitzwilliam Museum* (Cambridge: Fitzwilliam Museum, 2008), 8–9, 21, 45–49, 56, 111, 148–57.

16 Pfaff, *Montague Rhodes James*, 244–47, 387–88; Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 19, 165–73.

17 Humphrey Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography* (London: George Allen & Unwin/Houghton Mifflin, 1977); Tom A. Shippey, *J. R. R. Tolkien, Author of the Century* (London: Harper Collins, 2000).

veteran who, unlike many of his school friends, survived a traumatizing half year on the Somme. Unlike James, he had a family with four children and did not live on campus, and unlike James, he was obliged to teach and to grade papers, both of which he did reluctantly. For his character, it is telling that he devoted much time to a tale titled *Leaf by Niggle*.¹⁸ He saw himself as “a pedant devoted to accuracy, even in what may appear to others unimportant matters” and “a hobbit in all but size”¹⁹—his hobbits lead simple, rural lives, enjoy their meals, and smoke pipes. After attaining a chair at the age of thirty-three, his biographer stated that “nothing else really happened.”²⁰

Nevertheless, Tolkien became the subject of a cinema biopic in 2019 and the result, a calmly staged view of pre-First World War student life, was a pleasant surprise.²¹ Similarly, several TV documentaries have presented James and his *Ghost Stories*: in 1995 with actor Christopher Lee,²² who had enrolled at Eton under James as provost, gone on to impersonate him in 2000 for the BBC,²³ and who had met Tolkien. In 2013, Mark Gatiss went beyond the *Ghost Stories* and was even shown manuscripts in the Fitzwilliam Museum by Stella Panayotova.²⁴

Like Tolkien, James led a rather uneventful life, was a member of a society of aspiring writers (the “Chitchat Society” as opposed to Tolkien’s “Tea Club of the Barrovian Society” and “Inklings”), an, albeit less prominent, Anglo-Saxon scholar, and both smoked pipes and were arachnophobes.²⁵ Still, they must have been all but opposites.

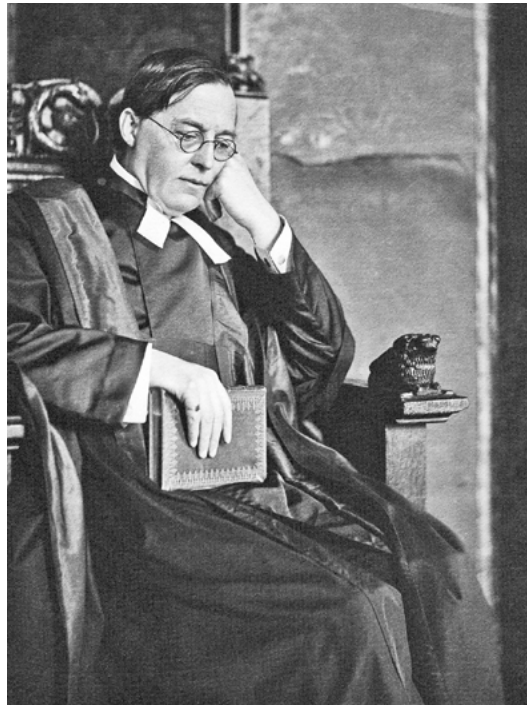


Figure 23.1. Photograph of Montague Rhodes James by Olive Edis, 1910s NPG x6034. © National Portrait Gallery, London. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery.

18 J. R. R. Tolkien, “Leaf by Niggle,” *The Dublin Review* 216, 432 (1945): 46–61, repr. in J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964).

19 J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (London: Allen & Unwin/Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 372, no. 294 (1967), no. 213 (1958), 288–89.

20 Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien*, 111; Shippey, *Tolkien*, x.

21 *Tolkien*, dir. Dome Karukoski (Fox, 2019).

22 *A Pleasant Terror—The Life and Ghosts of M. R. James*, by Michael Cox and Clive Dunn, dir. Clive Dunn (Anglia TV, 1995).

23 *Ghost Stories for Christmas*, dir. Eleanor Yule (BBC1, 2000).

24 *M. R. James—Ghost Writer*, by Mark Gatiss, dir. John Das (BBC2 TV, 2013).

25 Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 9, 12, 21–22, 25, 172–83; Pfaff, *Montague Rhodes James*, 114.

Unlike Tolkien, whose unimpressive speaking voice is documented in interviews, James had all the jovial self-assurance and eloquence shared by a third scholar-cum-bestseller author: Tolkien's friend C. S. Lewis. Unlike them, James did not teach,²⁶ but he entertained some of his students in breakfast gatherings and in his "Shakespeare Society" with readings and private performances.²⁷ From his early days he acted in staged plays and was attested a remarkable talent.²⁸

The cloistered, sheltered, homosocial life James led resulted in an arrested development of which he himself was aware, and which is reflected in many photos of a seemingly ageless person (Figure 23.1).²⁹ An emotional life strictly kept private has given rise to speculation,³⁰ some of it anachronistic, since very affectionate and caring mentor-student relationships, such as the one with his later illustrator James McBryde, were not extraordinary at the time.³¹ It is also impossible to understand James's stubborn opposition to change outside his social context and time. The same applies to some unfortunate antisemitic and misogynist statements—he vocally opposed women in university careers—and a failure to distance himself from his family history, all of which is troubling from a modern viewpoint.³² As for his position within the humanities, it is interesting to compare James with Tolkien, his junior by three decades. From his childhood years, Tolkien had been a self-professed philologist,³³ who, despite his humanistic formation, developed an exclusive focus on pre-conquest English language and literature, and saw himself as an anti-Romanist with no liking for the Latin (let alone French) language or classical culture. His dismissal of all post-Norman elements in the English language bordered on the obsessive: "For instance I dislike French."³⁴ His slender but enduring scholarly *oeuvre* is dwarfed by an epic epistolary output and, above all, his immensely popular fictional work.³⁵ Yet he saw his fiction as "fundamentally linguistic in inspiration...the invention of languages is the foundation. To me, a name comes first

26 Pfaff, *Montague Rhodes James*, 68.

27 Cox, *M. R. James*, 65–67; Paul R. Quarrie, "M. R. James at Eton," in *The Legacy of M. R. James*, ed. Dennison, 11–22, 19–20; Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 20, 220 (no. 106).

28 Lubbock, *Memoir of Montague Rhodes James*, 40; Pfaff, *Montague Rhodes James*, 53–54; Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 20–21.

29 Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 133: "The truth is I am a very immature creature."

30 See Cox, *M. R. James*, 127–29; Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 12–16, esp. no. 65; cf. Quarrie, "James at Eton," 14; Pfaff, *Montague Rhodes James*, 23.

31 Pfaff, *Montague Rhodes James*, 110–14, 147, 149, 170, 221, 223; Cox, *M. R. James*, 127–29; Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 12–13; "James McBryde: King's own Dr Seuss," *King's College Archive Centre* (May 2012), www.kings.cam.ac.uk/archive-centre/online-resources/online-exhibitions/james-mcbryde-kings-own-dr-seuss, accessed May 15, 2023.

32 Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 151–54, 145–47. The statement that "at one time we possessed 3,160 slaves," cited by Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 55 with no. 20, rather seems to betray a sort of pride.

33 Shippey, *Tolkien*; Peter Gilliver, Jeremy Marshall, and Edmund Weiner, *The Ring of Words: Tolkien and the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), esp. 45–86.

34 Tolkien, *Letters*, no. 213 [1958], 288–89.

35 On his letters: Tolkien, *Letters*; Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien*.

and the story follows.³⁶ A single-minded interest in words and (artificial) languages, fostered by his short term as a collaborator on the *Oxford English Dictionary*, led to the creation of Tolkien's myths, where a name (Earendil) or words like wraith, ent, or, most famously, hobbit, could bring forth entire storylines.³⁷

James also began writing in his teens and was very keen on languages, but his curiosity was far broader in scope:

At this time, in fact, all antique knowledge seemed immensely desirable; and so I did what I called Archaeology, which meant exploring every accessible church in the holidays and writing copious notes on everything I saw. It all sounds dreadfully priggish, and I have no doubt my Divinity papers at Temple Grove and my Sunday Questions at Eton were a sad blend of ignorance and misplaced erudition; but to me it was all fresh and delightful. Nothing could be more inspiring than to discover that St. Livinus had his tongue cut out and was beheaded, or that David's mother was called Nitzeneth.³⁸

Throughout his life, he continued in an almost stubborn refusal to fit into an academic drawer. Within

a remarkable 'middle' period in the history of the humanities often understood today in terms of an undisciplined amateurism yielding to enduring institutions established by university professionals. James himself is a fascinatingly liminal figure in this narrative, and not only on account of his shadow career writing ghost stories.³⁹

As in the case of Tolkien, this "shadow career" was a direct result of his scholarly one. Yet where Tolkien spun worlds from words, James looked for the haunting element within his own world in his books with the telling title *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*.

An antiquary is what we would today call an antiquarian (originally an adjective).⁴⁰ From the sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth century, antiquaries were wealthy amateurs

36 J. R. R. Tolkien, *Letters*, no. 165 (1955, letter to Houghton Mifflin), 219; cf. Tom A. Shippey: *The Road to Middle-Earth* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1982, repr.); Shippey, *Tolkien*, xiii; Gilliver, Marshall, and Weiner, *Ring of Words*, 49–50; J. R. R. Tolkien, *A Secret Vice: Tolkien on Invented Languages*, ed. Dimitra Fimi and Andrew Higgins (London: Harper Collins, 2016), 24.

37 On Tolkien's contributions to the *OED* see Gilliver, Marshall, and Weiner, *Ring of Words*; J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925); J. R. R. Tolkien, *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary, Together with Sellic Spell*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: Harper Collins, 2014); on Cynwulf, Christ II: *Eala Earendel engla beorhtast ofer middangeard monnum sended*; see Tolkien, *Letters*, no. 297 (1967), 385–86; cf. Gilliver, Marshall, and Weiner, *Ring of Words*, 54–59, 119–21, 142–52; Shippey, *Tolkien*, 121–28.

38 James, *Eton and King's*, 14, quoted after Nicholas Rogers, "Some Curiosa Hagiographica in Cambridge Manuscripts Reconsidered," in *The Legacy of M. R. James*, ed. Dennison, 194.

39 Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 8.

40 Its first occurrence in this sense, according to the *OED*, was in 1586 ("archaeologist" in 1824); cf. the BL blog on "Antiquarianism," www.bl.uk/picturing-places/themes/antiquarianism, accessed

with the leisure to pursue activities concerning “physical remains” in fields which later were to become archaeology, art history, and auxiliary disciplines, as opposed to texts (philology and history). The historical phenomenon today is termed antiquarianism, with the outdated antiquary relegated to society titles (and a whisky brand).⁴¹ The modern noun antiquarian is used either in the context of the ancient book market—or in a derogatory sense for “the type of man who is interested in historical facts without being interested in history.”⁴² However, the patronizing image of well-dressed gentlemen leisurely digging up mounds and villas is every now and then corrected when archaeological digs confirm the careful documentations and interpretations of early antiquaries, such as Edmund Tyrell Artis.⁴³

During James’s time, the new disciplines of the humanities were already in the process of establishing rigid boundaries, and “the paradoxical sense that James was both the quintessential professional and yet also something of an amateur,”⁴⁴ is evidenced by his work—both aspects of it. Academically, he started in archaeology and philology, but his precocious interest in hagiography and local and regional cults gave him a definite edge in dating and localizing manuscripts.⁴⁵ The subjects of his publications range from a Latin Plutarch, apocrypha, apocalypses, hagiographical studies, medieval sculpture, windows and tapestries, organs and organists, translations from the Greek, Latin, and Danish, manuscript monographs, facsimiles, countless reviews, and the manuscript catalogues mentioned above.⁴⁶

In cataloguing, James acquired skills, connoisseurship, and expertise in a very idiosyncratic manner.⁴⁷ However, he was highly discriminating and, if uninspired, would unabashedly say so: the papers of a 1995 symposium in his honour are replete with polite versions of the term “sloppy.”⁴⁸ The most prominent instance is the catalogue of the manuscripts in Cambridge University Library, never published but in progress in

May 15, 2023; Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 54–79; Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 15–18.

41 The Society of Antiquaries, founded in 1707, had 3,300 members in 2020, cf. their online journal SALON www.sal.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/salon/, accessed May 15, 2023.

42 Momigliano, *Classical Foundations*, 54.

43 See Catherine Collins, “Archaeological Test Pit Excavations in Castor, Cambridgeshire, in 2009–2011,” in *Access Cambridge Archaeology* (2018), <https://doi.org/10.5284/1051099>, accessed August 1, 2023.

44 Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 8.

45 Rogers, “Curiosa Hagiographica,” 195.

46 Nicholas Rogers, “Bibliography,” in *The Legacy of M. R. James*, ed. Dennison, 239–67 (440 entries).

47 Richard William Pfaff, “M. R. James and the Liturgical Manuscripts of Cambridge,” in *The Legacy of M. R. James*, ed. Dennison, 175: “he was learning—that is, teaching himself—to catalogue manuscripts”; cf. Richard William Pfaff: “M. R. James on the Cataloguing of Manuscripts: A Draft Essay of 1906,” *Scriptorium* 31.1 (1977): 103–18.

48 Pfaff, “M. R. James,” 181, 192.

1926–1930.⁴⁹ In this period, some 1,100–1,200 manuscripts were sent to James’s home at Eton, in batches of ten to twenty at a time, each book accompanied by a form sheet with shelf mark, title, language, size, support, number of leaves, columns, and lines already filled in.⁵⁰ Books he did not like he would simply label “not described by me.”⁵¹ If he did so against his will (“I may be said to have finished that lot—very nasty scrubby little things, too, many of them”), he provided acerbic comments (“You thought you had downed me with that little lot—horrid books of astronomy and Augustine—I sometimes tell my friends I feel more inclined to call him Disgustin”).⁵² After James’s death, the catalogues remained unfinished, but available to scholars,⁵³ who at first “are delighted that there is an unpublished description by James which they can look at. Somehow, the evident rush of enthusiasm is not sustained, and the description is soon handed back to the counter, without comment.”⁵⁴ Still, we must not forget that he was then in his sixties and one unfinished catalogue is balanced by some thirty finished ones. Even if James’s scholarly work has been described as wanting, modern expectations of discipline specialization have skewed that image.⁵⁵ His knowledgeable, well-written articles have not aged poorly,⁵⁶ nor has his casual, engaging style,⁵⁷ which he put to good use in his fiction.

James’s stories are part of a tradition of ghosts in literature, which goes back to the beginning of writing, even if he set new standards.⁵⁸ Tolkien’s fiction was even more influential, unwittingly generating the new “fantasy” genre in the wake of the *Lord of the Rings*, a genre with mostly escapist-esoteric worlds which he did not care for, since he “did not think that he was entirely making it up. He was ‘reconstructing’...an imaginative world which he believed had once really existed, at least in a collective imagination.”⁵⁹ As for the ghost stories, they came into their own in the Victorian age after the rise of the hugely popular, though not respectable Gothic novel in the eighteenth century.⁶⁰ Sheri-

49 Pfaff, *Montague Rhodes James*, 325–30; Jayne Ringrose, “The Legacy of M. R. James in Cambridge University Library,” in *The Legacy of M. R. James*, ed. Dennison, 23–36.

50 Ringrose, “Legacy of M. R. James,” 26–29.

51 Ringrose, “Legacy of M. R. James,” 31.

52 Ringrose, “Legacy of M. R. James,” 29–31.

53 Ringrose, “Legacy of M. R. James,” 35–36; Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 125–29.

54 Ringrose, “Legacy of M. R. James,” 23.

55 Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 1–9.

56 See M. R. James: *The Wanderings and Homes of Manuscripts* (London: The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge/Macmillan, 1919): even taking some nationalist slurs (12) and the recommended use of chemical reagents into account (61): the latter also applies to the draft manuscript edited by Pfaff, “M. R. James on the Cataloguing of Manuscripts,” 107).

57 A tradition successfully continued by Christopher de Hamel, most recently in *The Posthumous Papers of the Manuscripts Club* (London: Allen Lane, 2022).

58 Irving L. Finkel, *The First Ghosts: Most Ancient of Legacies* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2021).

59 Shippey, *Tolkien*, xv.

60 Jane Austen, whose posthumously published *Northanger Abbey* (1818) is a sparkling parody of the genre, attests that this applied to novels in general.

dan Le Fanu's collection *In a Glass Darkly* (1871) markedly influenced James's stories,⁶¹ and their reading at Christmastime may be a tradition started by Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843).

With his ironic take on the "prefabricated Gothic chills,"⁶² James's stories can in many ways be seen as quintessentially "medieval" ghost stories, even if they are not set in a remote past or location. The English, French, and Scandinavian towns, abbeys, universities, and libraries, which James knew from his travels, mostly by bicycle, provide the settings where, as a rule, a more or less autobiographical protagonist cannot resist the allures of an invented or real medieval object or artefact such as a text, crown, book, or stained-glass window.⁶³ The stories are infused by James's knowledge and medieval images like the Codex Gigas devil influenced his hairy and spiky rather than sheer and sheeted ghosts.⁶⁴ Even today, the stories evoke the feeling of "if I am not very careful, something of this kind may happen to me,"⁶⁵ despite their setting in a largely bygone world. Although James's demurred, "as for the fragments of ostensible erudition which are scattered about my pages, hardly anything in them is not pure invention,"⁶⁶ they owe a considerable part of their appeal to the amount of detail, knowledge, and involvement which went into them.

One of James's stories provides "a remarkable example of medievalism that outpaces both in publication date and in its imaginative enthusiasm the committed scholarship upon which it is based."⁶⁷ The stained-glass windows at Ashridge Park, which he was able to attribute to Steinfeld Abbey in Germany, set the scene for *The Treasure of Abbot Thomas* (printed in 1904), two years before he published an article on the subject. The article was described by Murphy, with obvious glee, as "hardly uncharacteristic of James's prodigious, meticulous academic output: the reticent notations, the restrained lack of speculation or theoretical excess, the discipline of bland identification and stone-faced observation, each entry neatly divided with a plastered space of antiseptic white."⁶⁸ And he could not resist adding that "none rejoiced more than James when a printer's error made Abbot Thomas von Eschenhausen...put up a painted *widow* in the south aisle of his abbey church."⁶⁹

61 Pfaff, *Montague Rhodes James*, 417; Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 4.

62 Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 2, 22.

63 BL, Harley MS 3589 appears in: *Casting the Runes (More Ghost Stories)*, 1911; cf. Andrew Dunning, "The Medieval Cartulary behind a Ghost Story," BL, *Medieval Manuscripts Blog* (27 August 2017), <https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2017/08/index.html>, accessed May 15, 2023.

64 Stockholm, National Library of Sweden, A 148 (Bohemia, thirteenth century), fol. 289r; cf. Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 5.

65 M. R. James, preface to *More Ghost Stories* (London: Edward Arnold, 1911), quoted after Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 185.

66 M. R. James, preface to *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (London: Edward Arnold, 1904), 3.

67 Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 32.

68 Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 39–40.

69 Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 37, quoting Nicholas Barker, "After M. R. James," *The Book Collector*

James's earliest story, *Canon Alberic's Scrapbook*,⁷⁰ written in 1894, features a manuscript cuttings album bought by an "Englishman (let us call him Dennistoun)"—the name of a real collector notorious for the practice of cutting up manuscripts which the narrator condemns.⁷¹ The following excerpt highlights James's brilliant language, as well as two cardinal virtues he displayed in his scholarly, as well as his fictional work: curiosity and close observation.

The...sacristan [was] an unexpectedly interesting object of study. It was not in the personal appearance of the little, dry, wizened old man that the interest lay, for he was precisely like dozens of other church-guardians in France, but in a curious furtive, or rather hunted and oppressed, air which he had. He was perpetually half glancing behind him; the muscles of his back and shoulders seemed to be hunched in a continual nervous contraction, as if he were expecting every moment to find himself in the clutch of an enemy. The Englishman hardly knew whether to put him down as a man haunted by a fixed delusion, or as one oppressed by a guilty conscience, or as an unbearably henpecked husband. The probabilities, when reckoned up, certainly pointed to the last idea; but, still, the impression conveyed was that of a more formidable persecutor even than a termagant wife.⁷²

Conclusion

Roughly three generations have passed since James's death and one generation since the 1995 conference in his honour, when Jayne Ringrose stated, somewhat defensively: "M. R. James's descriptions remind us of a world where a gentler scholarship prevailed."⁷³ In today's even less gentle academic world, a new inspection of his legacy can be inspiring—starting with the careful observation and curiosity he recommended.⁷⁴ It goes without saying that curiosity is preferable to affected knowledge or an unwillingness to admit to ignorance.

Next, there is the "secret vice" of storytelling.⁷⁵ A comparison with Tolkien highlights the differences between polymath and philology specialist. Yet, James and Tolkien have

19 (1970): 7–20 at 8.

70 James, *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, 3–28.

71 James, *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, 5. On James Dennistoun, see Pfaff, *Montague Rhodes James*, 114; Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 9 and nos. 25–26; cf. Janet Backhouse, "Manuscripts on Display: Some Landmarks in the Exhibition and Popular Publication of Illuminated Books," in *The Legacy of M. R. James*, ed. Dennison, 38–39.

72 James, *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, 4–5.

73 Ringrose, "Legacy of M. R. James," 36.

74 James's address to the assembly at Shrewsbury School in 1918: "I commend to you the virtue of inquisitiveness, of curiosity"; Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 165 with no. 1.

75 This title of a famous talk of Tolkien on invented languages (held in 1931, see Tolkien, *A Secret Vice*) may be borrowed to describe another medievalist's "byproducts."

in common that their highly successful, brilliantly written creative works are firmly rooted in their scholarly work—with no detriment to the latter. Quite the contrary: skilful storytellers are arguably among the most compelling representatives of their disciplines, as evidenced by the Assyriologist Irving Finkel today.⁷⁶ Coincidentally, his recent book also deals with ghosts.⁷⁷

Then there is James's disarming honesty. I have argued elsewhere that the pretence of disinterest, a result of the nineteenth-century separation of medieval studies as an academic discipline from amateurish medievalism, is not always conducive to serious research, and that honestly stating one's interests results in more transparency.⁷⁸ By largely refusing to conform to academic rules, James managed to marry his "medievalist" enthusiasm to his medieval studies—nonchalantly coining the term "historiated initial" on the way.

It is this position within a transitory time within the humanities which appears to be his most pertinent legacy today, again arguably a transitory moment.⁷⁹ Consider the following quote:

Yet the manuscript studies that most interested James...also tended to encourage forays into a number of increasingly self-enclosed fields as well as to consider subjects not tamely residing in any one domain. Investigations into 'the wanderings and homes of manuscripts' tended to soften hardening boundaries separating the study of literature, biblical studies, historical linguistics, and art history (as well as requiring great skill in ancillary arts such as palaeography and codicology). Beyond this, there was the material fact of the medieval manuscript itself. James was fascinated by books in every dimension—their place in time, their space on the shelf, the way the sheepskin codex engages senses other than sight.⁸⁰

Much of this summary reads like a funding application for an interdisciplinary research project in the humanities. In these times, the "ancillary" arts can only survive if the strictly divided disciplines, already defied by James, unite in collaboration.

Today's (loosely) Tolkien-based fandom little realizes that the Oxford scholar derived the original model for his escapist worlds from the early medieval culture of the languages he was researching and then creating. Similarly, the horror genre is generally

76 For instance: Irving L. Finkel, *The Lewis Chessmen and What Happened to Them* (London: British Museum, 1995); and Irving L. Finkel, *The Ark Before Noah: Decoding the Story of the Flood* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2014).

77 Finkel, *First Ghosts*.

78 Jakobi-Mirwald, *Text—Buchstabe—Bild*, 153–63; Jakobi-Mirwald, "To Find Out All that I Could," 435–36, concerning the relabelling of two groups of manuscripts at the court of Charlemagne ("Adagruppe" to "Hofschule" and "Palastschule" to "Group of the Coronation Gospels") supposedly neutral, in fact the expression of a personal predilection, which resulted in a decided, but never openly admitted, shift in scholarly attention; Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 1–8, 15–18, 30, 39.

79 Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 8.

80 Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 10.

oblivious of the strictly antiquarian approach of one of its role models, who created a very distinct brand of medievalism in his *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*. With them, and with his idiosyncratic medieval studies, James had a decisive and lasting impact on the image of the Middle Ages. His curiosity, close observation, personal involvement, broad and largely self-taught knowledge, and enviable way with words are timeless qualities and today's scholars can do worse than take a leaf out of his book: "I believe there never was a time when I have had more of a programme than to find out all that I could about various matters and to make friends."⁸¹

81 Pfaff, *Montague Rhodes James*, vii; Pfaff, "M. R. James," 193; Murphy, *Medieval Studies*, 134 with no. 31.