

Patrick J. Murphy, *Medieval Studies and the Ghost Stories of M. R. James*
(University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017)

A genre-defining writer of ghost stories whose fiction has remained in print for over a century, M. R. James's place in the pantheon of great horror and supernatural storytellers has long been assured. Patrick J. Murphy's new monograph study of James's tales is notable on two counts. Firstly, despite James's long-recognised significance in the development of the ghost story, this is the first book-length study wholly dedicated to his supernatural fiction. Secondly, given James's equally celebrated position as an influential bibliographic scholar, whose work on medieval manuscripts is still consulted and widely discussed by modern scholars, Murphy's study is the first sustained attempt to assess the relationship between James's fiction as a whole and the history of 'antiquarianism' – and, more specifically, that particular branch of antiquarian study ('medieval studies') to which James's academic work might be said broadly to belong. As Murphy convincingly demonstrates, not only were James's academic preoccupations intricately entwined with the substance of his ghost stories, but his ghost stories can also be read as interventions in the academic pursuits that characterised his professional career. Indeed, Murphy's contention is that James's fiction and his academic output need to be seen as part of a single body of work, one which reflects an academic career that bore witness to profound changes in what exactly it meant to be an academic and an 'antiquary'.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the increased professionalisation of academic historical studies led to its compartmentalisation into distinct disciplines (most notably the gradual development of a distinction between documentary History and material-focused Archaeology). A demarcation also began to emerge between professional university-educated specialists and an undisciplined polymorphism, perceived as characteristic of the stereotypical amateur antiquary. Throughout Murphy's study, a keen sense of James's need to negotiate this disciplinary shift from undisciplined 'antiquarianism' to professional specialist in one specific discipline is in evidence. As Murphy argues, James's multi-faceted expertise in medieval manuscripts meant that he was well placed to meditate on this developing 'sense that a single professional researcher could no longer be free to wander from one demarcated discipline to another', since '[i]nvestigations into "the wanderings and homes of manuscripts" tended indeed to soften hardening boundaries separating the study of literature, biblical studies, historical linguistics, and art history' (p. 10).

At the same time, in addition to this focus on disciplinary boundaries, Murphy's analyses are also firmly grounded in the historical specificities of the homosocial, male-dominated, collegiate, Oxbridge-orientated world that framed James's understanding of the academic issues at stake. It is with this in mind that Murphy approaches the tales, with a view to 'tracing the coherence and significance of James's antiquarian style' (p. 22), suggesting that the ghost stories' authentic scholarly apparatus and implicitly learned narrator (a scholar addressing other scholars) are at once a reflection of their initial aim of entertaining a select band of fellow academics, and a consequence of James's 'performing a version of his professional self' (p. 23). Time and again, Murphy demonstrates convincingly that an understanding of James's stories is inseparable from an understanding not only of the specific 'antiquarian' issue at stake, but also of how James's own understanding of these very questions was framed and shaped by the social and historical context in which his work was undertaken. Murphy not only elucidates how James's stories function as direct (and often surprising) commentaries on questions of genuine interest to medieval scholarship, but also how they reflect the concerns of a scholar inhabiting a particular academic community, in which questions of disciplinary best practice are always intertwined with (homo)social norms and expectations.

In the first chapter, for example, Murphy examines 'The Treasure of Abbot Thomas' and "'Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad'" (both 1904), in order to gain a clearer picture of how academic 'errancy' — not only in the sense of erroneous interpretation, but in the sense of 'errant' wandering from the established disciplinary path — is linked with other kinds of deviancy, both criminal and sexual. The chapter is a good example of the way in which Murphy's monograph meticulously uncovers a dazzling multiplicity of possible socio-historical lenses and medieval intertexts through which specific tales might be understood, while also offering convincing new insight into the real antiquarian puzzles on which the stories are founded (for example, the mystery of the Templars, or the precise origin and meanings of the runic inscriptions that James only partially elucidates). The second chapter examines how James's stories explore, in Murphy's words, the 'darker pleasures of professionalism' (p. 26). In an effective reading of 'Casting the Runes' (1911), for instance, Murphy sees the story not just as a condemnation of the amateurish polymorphism of its antagonist, Karswell's, fascination with the occult, but also as a dark reflection on the vagaries of a 'freshly constricted academic culture' (p. 26). According to Murphy's reading, the ideal of a community of academic specialists working together towards an objective

understanding of their subject is threatened by the vicarious temptation to write off a fellow-scholar's work, a symptom of the material realities of academic publishing practice. This reviewer was particularly taken with the notion that Karswell's warning, 'three months were allowed',¹ might be read as a sinister take on the impersonal language of the peer-review report or the editorial rejection, and that the anonymous runes with which Karswell curses Dunning reflect the anonymous thrashing that Dunning administers during his review of Karswell's proposed academic paper.

In the second half of the chapter, Murphy offers an analysis of 'A View from a Hill' (1925), arguing that the motif of the haunted binoculars that offer a direct window onto the history of the landscape affords James a means through which to reflect on the merits and demerits of the professional medievalist's project, when contrasted with the antiquary's less rigorous, yet also less constricted approach to the study of the past. This is another reading that exemplifies the richness of Murphy's analyses of James's individual tales, elucidating the way in which the pastoral visions of *Piers Plowman* function as a suggestive intertext for the story, while also explaining how the tale can be read in light of the historical-biographical context of James's work with the Royal Commission, established to recommend reforms to the Public Record Office. It is typical of the way in which, throughout the volume, Murphy combines the medievalist's knowledge of literary sources with an awareness of the minutiae of the history of 'antiquarian' methodologies, in order to demonstrate the ways in which the tales expose a fundamental tension at the heart of James's career — a tension between the rigours of professional discipline and the anarchic valances of the more leisurely approach that is the amateur's luxury. While James the professional scholar necessarily strove for the former, his tales often exhibit a vestigial desire for the latter.

A combination of medieval intertext and meticulous grounding in the history of late-Victorian and Edwardian approaches to academic history and archaeology also typify the remaining three chapters. Chapter Three examines James's treatment of cathedral history in 'An Episode of Cathedral History' (1914) and 'The Stalls of Barchester Cathedral' (1911). Murphy's analysis takes in not only the relationship between these tales and medieval poetry, drama, and Biblical literature, but also the real-life restoration of Rochester Cathedral, of which James would have been well aware and which, along with these literary sources, seems to have inspired his fictional 'Episode.'

¹ M. R. James, 'Casting the Runes', in *Count Magnus and Other Ghost Stories* (New York: Penguin, 2005), pp. 158-179 (p. 164).

While Murphy's interlinking of intertext and disciplinary history is strikingly original, the fourth and fifth chapters demonstrate how such a combination can also prove unexpectedly moving. His fourth chapter, which focuses on James's monumental and ultimately unfinished project of cataloguing every medieval manuscript in every library in Cambridge (the volumes he did complete are still consulted, albeit warily, by present-day scholars), considers how his fiction might be read as a melancholic reflection on this kind of work. Murphy draws on recent scholarship by Judith Halberstam and Elizabeth Freeman, which posits a theory of 'queer temporality' — the notion, as Murphy puts it, that heteronormativity 'has a strong temporal dimension, demanding a particular script of expected stages and events' (p. 136). Murphy suggests that James's long association with Eton and King's both empowered his ability to pursue his academic studies, while also ensuring that his entire existence was enshrined in institutions fundamentally medieval, and thus out of step with the present day. Just as queer temporality both supports and subverts heteronormative time, James's career 'both redeemed and shunted awry the track of his antiquarian life', affording a 'temporal luxury', while also conferring 'the taint of scholarly anachronism' (p. 137). While this has implications for James himself, ensconced as he was in decidedly medieval institutions, it also has ramifications for all those engaged in academic research. Knowing as they must that such endeavours will be outdated almost as soon as complete, the professional scholar inhabits a present with no clear teleology, 'an endlessly expanding middle period of transmission' (p. 145). In James's stories, such a situation is most obviously represented by the hollow centre of Mr Humphreys's attempts to map his maze and catalogue his library. Nor is Murphy afraid to critique the troubling implications of James's attempt to redeem the 'temporal bearings of his university' (p. 154) in 'The Tractate Middoth' (1911), which Murphy sees as a problematic attempt to defend the enervating homosocial relationships between the denizens of Eton and King's (white, male) community by figuring it as an alternative temporality, at the expense of women and other races.

Murphy concludes his study with a moving reading of 'A Warning to the Curious' (1925), once again drawing on a combination of medieval intertext (*Beowulf* this time) and the history of the antiquarian disciplines that framed James's life and career — in this case, the tragic emptying of Cambridge University in the wake of the loss of an entire generation in the First World War. In an ingenious and powerful analysis, Murphy sees the tale, which is set in 1917 but never explicitly mentions the war, as embodying an alternative war-less England. Yet, he argues, the way in which the tale ends with the spectacle of the broken body

of the young treasure-hunter Paxton indicates that the war is sublimated rather than completely eschewed. Murphy's proposition is that this tale is no admonition against 'curiosity', but rather a meditation on the futility of 'warning', in which the older scholars who attempt, as Cambridge University dons would have done, to mentor this aspiring young antiquary, completely fail to rescue him from his dark fate. In fact, in the light of the war, the tale might be read as 'a restless *requiescat in pace* for those who, like Paxton, fell well outside the reach of sound advice, sufficient warning, or the capacity of the present to make decent and lasting sense of the past' (p. 173). Ultimately, the possibility that 'the particular advice that might have been delivered is impossible to formulate even in retrospect, is perhaps precisely where the tale locates its most indelible horror' (p. 183)

As this summary illustrates, although focusing on the way in which James's fiction reflects both the history of medieval studies and their author's fluctuating position in relation to that history, Murphy's monograph holds back from formulating one all-encompassing position for James within that history — largely because Murphy also avoids portraying that history as itself a cohesive narrative. Murphy anchors his analyses in specific episodes in James's career, or in a particular medieval intertext, while also deploying a range of theoretical ideas about the relationship between present-day readers and scholars, and the texts that they consume. Yet Murphy also extends this understanding of what it means to interpret the past (and to write about the past) to his own readings of James's fiction. Indeed, Murphy's book is almost a celebration of scholarship itself, as a means by which complexities, rather than answers, are endlessly revealed, as new readers reinterpret the past through new, often intensely personal encounters with its material and textual remains. As such, while offering new and sometimes startlingly original readings, Murphy always eschews the need to reject other, apparently conflicting interpretations of James's fiction by previous critics. These are reviewed and critiqued, but are also held up as valuable alternative readings of stories which are fascinatingly elusive, their 'medievalizing complexity' demonstrating nothing if not the 'compelling and difficult' way in which they refuse to be 'reduce[d] to a single message, moral, or "warning"' (p. 167).

Until comparatively recently, the prevailing critical consensus on James's fiction could be characterised by Julia Briggs's insistence that, though masterfully entertaining and obviously the work of a learned scholar, his tales were superficial edifices with little to offer

the serious literary critic.² Perhaps paradoxically, in resolutely laying bare the sheer elusiveness of James's fictions — their absolute refusal to settle into one final 'meaning' — Murphy has fashioned a rich, allusive study, which demonstrates just how fertile a field for theoretical and historical enquiry these endlessly fascinating tales can be.

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² Julia Briggs, *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977), pp. 124-41. Briggs reiterates the point in 'The Ghost Story', in *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. by David Punter (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) pp. 122-31.