

Quest narratives

The American search for the Middle Ages

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Jan Ziolkowski

THE JUGGLER OF NOTRE DAME
AND THE MEDIEVALIZING OF
MODERNITY

Six volumes

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On May 10, 1890 Anatole France, the forty-seven year-old novelist, essayist and librarian to the French Senate, published a short story in the Parisian conservative society daily *Le Gaulois*. France would receive the Nobel Prize for literature in 1921: he is now chiefly remembered as the model for Proust's Bergotte. His story was adapted from a thirteenth-century Old French verse miracle of the Virgin. It tells how an entertainer abandons the world to join a monastery but is suspected of blasphemy after dancing his devotion before a statue of the Madonna in the crypt; he is saved when the statue, delighted by his skill, miraculously comes to life. When asked why he danced he replies "I see everyone serving God in accord with his faculty, and for that reason I wish to celebrate God in accord with mine, as I know how".

In 1904, Henry Adams retold the story of the "Tombeor de Notre Dame" (Our Lady's Tumbler), giving the Old French text, in Chapter Eight of his privately published *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*. His verdict: "Beyond this we need not care to go. If you cannot feel the colour and quality – the union of naiveté and art, the refinement, the infinite delicacy and tenderness – of this little poem, then nothing will matter much to you; and if you can feel it, you can feel, without more assistance, the majesty of Chartres". And he added: "The measure of this devotion, which proves to any religious



"The Juggler" by Glyn Warren Philpot, 1928; from *The Juggler of Notre Dame*, 4

American mind, beyond possible cavil, its serious and practical reality, is the money it cost".

In 1997 the influential conservative TV host William F. Buckley Jr used the story in his autobiography, affirming "if I could juggle, I'd do so for Our Lady". He was echoing Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, Archbishop of Paris from 1981 to 2005, who had also compared himself to the Juggler.

Jan Ziolkowski, the Arthur Kingsley Porter Professor of Medieval Latin at Harvard, has now dedicated six volumes with some 1,500 illustrations to this tale. They can all be downloaded free of charge and they take us to a new kind of scholarship. Like Arthur Kingsley Porter himself, who published a ten-volume study of *Romanesque Sculpture of the Pilgrimage Roads* in 1923, he works on a grand scale. Ziolkowski has edited medieval Latin texts superbly. In 2007 he published *Fairy Tales from Before Fairy Tales: The Medieval Latin past of wonderful lies*, which showed that we have eleventh- and twelfth-century Latin versions of the tales of Red Riding Hood, and the Grimms' stories of the Turnip and the Donkey. The Juggler is another medieval tale which can still move us: in tracing how it was retold, Ziolkowski finds it a key to unlock the experience of the Middle Ages in the USA.

North American medievalists have left the history of their own continent between 400 and 1500 to anthropologists, concentrating chiefly on the history and the literature of Western

Europe, a field they now dominate. Graduate students from all over the world present papers at the International Medieval Congress in Kalamazoo, MI. But after the Charlottesville shootings, medievalists are seen as the natural allies of white supremacists and their enterprise has become a defensive one. George W. Bush's war rhetoric and the neoconservative War on Terror have medieval roots recently traced by Philippe Buc and Bruce Holsinger. The online Public Medievalist has explored Race, Racism and the Middle Ages with articles on Medievalism and the Ku Klux Klan, and a second series on Gender, Sexism and the Middle Ages. (These articles have been challenged by Sierra Lomuto, co-founder of Medievalists of Color, as a "protection of white innocence".) The 2019 54th International Congress on Medieval Studies held at Kalamazoo included sessions on Complicit White Women and the Project of Empire, Confronting Claims to the Past beyond Medievalism, Teaching a Divisive and Inclusive Middle Ages and White Nationalism, Misogyny and Modern Receptions of the Early Medieval Norse Atlantic.

Ziolkowski explores the continuing revival of the story of the Juggler of Notre Dame as evidence of how the Middle Ages have been reinvented. He sees the tale of the Juggler, or Dancer, as "holding out the hope of redemption to those who may feel rough around the edges or unskilled in offering themselves. It tells of a life that its liver considers wasted, and

of a moment of grace that precipitates redemption at the very end. Even more than promising deliverance, the tale invites us to take joy in our talents, such as they may be".

In 1949 the most celebrated postwar Medieval Latinist, Ernst-Robert Curtius, lectured in Colorado on the medieval bases of Western thought. He asserted that:

The American mind might go back to Puritanism or to William Penn, but it lacked that which preceded them; it lacked the Middle Ages. It was in the position of a man who has never known his mother. The American conquest of the Middle Ages has something of that romantic glamor and of that deep sentimental urge which we might expect in a man who should set out to find his lost mother.

Ziolkowski quotes this passage, and like Curtius he traces the American search for the Middle Ages back to *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, to Adams's exploration of "the intensity of the vital energy of a given time" identified with the Virgin.

Because Adams's book was published commercially with an introduction by Ralph Adams Cram in 1919, becoming a bestseller, Ziolkowski moves on to Cram's architecture. "To fathom fully the reception of Our Lady's Tumbler and its clan in the United States, we must come to terms with the country's turn to collegiate Gothic during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Gothicization of architecture on campuses was felt to have cultural ramifications that transcended architecture and quarried stone alone." Cram built the US Military Academy at West Point, St John the Divine Cathedral in New York, further cathedrals in Detroit, Havana, Halifax, Toronto, Dodge City, Bryn Athyn and Pittsburgh, university campuses at Rice, Sweet Briar, Princeton and Wheaton, all in a Gothic style. For Cram "Gothic is less a method of construction than it is a mental attitude, the visualising of a spiritual impulse" rather than "the impotence of political and social democracy, popular sovereignty, the Protestant religion of the masses, the technological triumphs that were to emancipate labour and redeem the world, all the multiple manifestations of a free and democratic society". For Woodrow Wilson, President of Princeton before he became President of the United States, "By the very simple device of building our new buildings in the Tudor Gothic style we seem to have added a thousand years to the history of Princeton, by merely putting those lines in our buildings which point every man's imagination to the historical traditions of learning in the English-speaking race". University Gothic offered the spiritual underpinning for the training of the American elite.

The first strand in Ziolkowski's American narrative is the spread of such Gothic architecture. The second is the retelling of the tale of the Juggler, especially as theatre and opera. Jules Massenet wrote an opera with a tenor lead, but it was transformed when Mary Garden, the Sarah Bernhardt of opera, sang the Juggler's role in Europe and America. Ziolkowski decodes her "pert allure" and her self-promotion, and details subsequent dramatizations,

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ballets, operas and constant television and radio retellings of the Juggler's story. From the 1930s it achieved a mass appeal: often sentimental and sanctimonious. Ziolkowski tells how the Jewish coach of the New York Giants made the tale a pep talk for his team in 1963 and how it became a Christmas story broadcast to the nation, narrated by Boris Karloff, acted on the screen by Tony Curtis.

The story was retold in 1999 by the Catholic French medievalist Michel Zink, now a member of the Académie française, as testimony to the experience of "la foi vivante de chaque jour". Like others before him, Zink praised the "childlike simplicity" of the tale. Ziolkowski points to the weakness of such arguments. "The closer they come to the *fin de siècle*, the more wistfully they clutch at the assumption that the Middle Ages were more childlike and innocent times than their own".

The tale of the Juggler offers the promise of redemption: was that the medieval component which America felt that it lacked?

In his 1874 essay on "The Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life", Nietzsche wrote of "the horrid spectacle of the mad collector raking over all the dust heaps of the past". The collector embodied Nietzsche's second category of historian, the antiquarian: "It does not perceive most things at all, and the few things which it does perceive it looks at far too closely and in isolation. It cannot measure it and therefore takes everything as equally important. Thus, for the antiquarian sense each single thing is too important." Has Ziolkowski's assemblage got any further than this?

Through online searches, he has been able to track down almost every reference to the Juggler (even in an interview from 1973 with a US pornographer), every children's book

retelling the story, every opera, song and theatrical production, including a Chilean ballet. He has found references in texts on jurisprudence and architecture. Ziolkowski's volumes include accounts of the status of the medieval *jongleur*, the role of Romance philology in France after 1870, the US reception of Sir Walter Scott, statues of the Madonna, crypts, visions of the Virgin, the Gothic skyscraper, and even Bombay Gothic.

Using the Google books Ngram Viewer, which can show the frequency of usage of a term in those 5 million digitized books published before 2008, Ziolkowski documents the popularity of "troubadour and *jongleur*", and terms such as ivory tower, corporate campus, university campus, Anatole France, Jules Massenet, atone, penance, sin, repent, cynicism, disbelief, vocational learning, art for art's sake and oneness. But his figures are presented as "Vec-

tor art", with minimal commentary. Focusing on mass culture, and exploring the expropriation of a medieval story in a non-academic context, Ziolkowski's volumes document how the medieval pervades the contemporary. But is this more than the "banal medievalism" recently discussed by Andrew Elliott?

In his short story "The Madonna of the Future", Henry James told of an artist who hoped, like Ziolkowski, to revivify the past by bringing a living presence of great art. For Jan Ziolkowski the tale of the Juggler is an enduring if mutable link with a medieval past. Not everyone will share his conviction that it can sustain an investigation of the medievalizing of modernity, especially in an American setting. James wrote that "the soil of American perception is a poor little barren artificial deposit ... we lack the deeper sense, we have neither taste, nor tact, nor force".

As Peter Coss writes in his introduction to this *Companion*, there is a wide difference in the approaches of francophone and anglophone historians to the origins and diffusion of chivalry. French scholars emphasize early developments, such as the rise of the "milites", the so-called mutation around 1000 (when the power of feudal lords began to replace that of the state) and the twelfth-century creation of a closed nobility and knighthood. In anglophone writing, by contrast, the focus of investigation is very different. Partly because in England chivalry was an alien import, an innovation of the Normans after 1066, anglophone scholars have concentrated more on later developments such as the rules governing chivalric conduct in war, the dissemination of heraldic devices, and the thirteenth-century shrinkage in the number of knights. A major preoccupation of anglophone scholarship has been the broadening of the chivalric elite to embrace the squirearchy, a uniquely English phenomenon of the fourteenth century.

The emphasis in this essay collection is firmly anglophone. No French-speaking scholar is represented among the contributors, who are without exception either British or North American. Moreover, the range of subject matter covered shows a distinct leaning towards the British Isles. Although chivalry was a European phenomenon, and there is discussion of Southern Europe and the internationally organized Crusading Orders, many of the authors draw the bulk of their evidence from Britain. This at least makes for a collection with thematic and tonal continuity.

The quality of the contributions is on the whole very high. Especially noteworthy are David Simpkin's analysis of how monarchs made the solidarities of chivalry between knights work for, rather than against, them, and Robert Jones's complementary study of chivalric organization in war. Equally informative are two essays which turn the spotlight on the cultural side of chivalry: Louise Wilkinson's study of women – "gendered chivalry", as she calls it – which shows how the growing identification of nobility with virtue helped secure women a place in chivalric society, and Joanna Bellis and Megan Leitch's survey of literature, which highlights the richness and variety of the writing spawned by chivalry. The decline of chivalric culture is approached from a highly original perspective by Matthew Woodcock, who argues that decline was

"immanent not imminent", arguments about decline being found in every century of chivalry. Offering an insight into the broadening of chivalric investigation in recent years is Oliver Creighton's excellent essay on chivalric landscapes, which shows how space as well as literature and personal behaviour could be moulded to reflect chivalric values.

A major debate in chivalric studies currently centres on the extent to which chivalry either encouraged or restrained aggressive knightly behaviour in society. Chivalry was by its nature an honour-based code which lionized valour and prowess, the knights of romance seeking renown by performing brave deeds for their ladies. At the same time, however, chivalry contained at its heart an ethic of restraint which made for moderation in war and substituted a regime of ransoming for the mass slaughter of opponents. On the face of it, two opposing forces were in conflict, and it is not immediately apparent which gained the upper hand.

The argument offered by two of the contributors here, Peter Sposato and Samuel Claussen, is that it was the tendency to aggression which triumphed. Through an examination of the romance literature of two Southern European societies, Florence and Castile, the co-authors seek to show that the values articulated in the romances validated a culture of real-life honour-based violence. The story of El Cid, in particular, the co-authors argue, legitimated routinely violent behaviour by which a knight could secure royal favour.

The question raised by the co-authors' approach is whether we can deduce real-life behaviour quite so mechanistically from what we read in the romances. Knightly audiences might have enjoyed, perhaps even admired, the knockabout tales they read or heard about

Romantic notions

Knightly culture in the medieval period

NIGEL SAUL

Robert W. Jones and Peter Coss, editors

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in romance. But that does not necessarily mean that they then acted out the same behaviour in their everyday lives. In the fifteenth century the Norfolk knight Sir Miles Stapleton owned a copy of the tale of Armory and Cleopes, a story of manhood and "chivalry" adapted from Ovid's Pyramus and Thisbe narrative. There is no evidence, however, that he based his own largely peaceable behaviour on what he read there.

If the case for chivalry as a malign influence

is to be proved, it needs to draw on the evidence of record sources and chronicles as well as that of the romances, and it is that sort of evidence which is lacking here. It may be the case, as the co-authors argue, that the chivalric virtue of honour encouraged revenge attacks and tit-for-tat warfare between rivals. It needs to be remembered, however, that simultaneously chivalric behaviour internalized an ethic of restraint which limited the tendency to social explosiveness. Chivalry laid emphasis on qualities of courtesy, benevolence, magnanimity and compassion. Disputes between knights might often be concluded by a display of conciliatory gestures by the two sides. Without displays of this sort the arts of peace, which are also a feature of the age of chivalry, would never have flourished.

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